In a Corner of My Soul

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/2194809.

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In a Corner of My Soul

by DragonsPhoenix

Summary

Giles as the Big Bad of Season 1

Notes
image by Restfield.

Thanks to everyone who helped me out was listed on LJ but I deleted my account. ;-(

The Council's motto is taken from Matthew 16:18

Nominated for The Dark Age Award and The Rather British Award in the 2015 Headline Awards.

Nominated at Round 32 of the SunnyD Awards for Best Alternate Universe, Best Gen Fic, Best Plot, Best Unfinished Fic, and Best Characterization.
“In a corner of my soul there hides a tiny frightened child, who is frightened by a corner where there lingers something wild.” — Shaun Hick, *The Army of Five Men*

There are two techniques by which discarnate demons, pure or, more accurately, impure spirits, may obtain influence within the human realm. The first and more common technique, one I expect every student in this class is already familiar with, involves the possession of a human body by a demonic spirit, for example as in vampirism.

The second technique is known as domination. Unlike possession, in which a demon takes over a human host, domination entails the creation of a psychic bond between the demon and its host. The demon does not inhabit the host but is, instead, connected to the host’s mind. Think of a boat tied to a dock. Like the boat, which remains in the sea, the demon continues to be discarnate, existing in a non-material plane, but a persistent connection between the demon and its human host remains. It may sound trivial. I assure you, it is not. The demon is, in effect, always in the back of the host’s mind, whispering directly into the host’s thoughts, always exerting its pernicious influence.

The greatest challenge of domination is detecting the presence of the discarnate demon. Unlike possession, domination does not create physical changes in the human host. There are no fangs or claws to reveal the demon's presence. Psychological changes are, however, inevitable under domination. The presence of a demon in the host's mind generates tremendous mental pressure. In every case of which we are aware, the human host has undergone a significant personality transformation. The effects are not dissimilar to psychological trauma. An ignorant host, one uninitiated in demon lore and hence unaware of what is occurring, may well end up in a mental institution. Such a situation, while serious, is not our worst-case scenario. Detecting domination becomes a true challenge when the host is cognizant of demon lore. In an astute host, one shrewd enough to avoid detection, domination allows the discarnate demon free-reign within the human realm.

The bond forged under domination, once created, cannot be broken. The human host is forever corrupted. Much like the host who embodies, say, a vampire, the human victim of domination cannot be saved.

from Advanced Demonology 305, Watcher's Council Lecture Series

The heavy stone walls of the church were more appropriate to a fort than to a temple of God. Rupert needed it to be both but knew that, for him, it couldn't be either. He found a seat at the back before the service was due to begin without stopping to sign the registry. His clothes, the tweed he'd returned to after rejoining the Council, wouldn't raise a second glance. Nothing identified him as Randall's wild, bohemian friend. Nothing identified him as Randall's killer.

Mozart's Requiem charmed the air as the church filled. Rupert mused over the parallels, certain that no one else here would appreciate them: a gifted young man, misunderstood by those who'd raised him, who'd died tragically and far too young. The music, instead of celebrating Randall's life, invoked memories of his death, memories not of Randall but of the demon he'd become, memories of Eyghon breaking free of the circle, memories of the spell Rupert had cast to destroy the demon, and memories of what had come after. Wrenching his thoughts off that track, Rupert closed his eyes and focused on the music. His mind wouldn't still. He wondered who had selected the Requiem. It was an unlikely choice for Randall's working-class parents. Perhaps the priest had made the selection for
them as a kindness, not forcing more choices on the family in their time of grief.

Randall's parents walked down the aisle slowly, painfully, as if their very bones ached. The mother's head was turned toward her husband, and Rupert could see little more of her than a babushka and what was likely her best coat. He felt vaguely relieved he couldn't see her face. He wasn't sure he could stand her grief. The father's anger was easier to handle. The man's eyes were red from crying but fury blazed from his brow. The one time Rupert had seen a bullfight, the bull, wounded by a half-dozen lances, had tried but failed to rise. Rupert saw that same look on the old man's face, not an acceptance of impossible odds, but a hopeless raging in the face of them.

Over the priest's consoling tones, Rupert heard a sound like that of water dripping from a faucet. It was quite persistent, drowning out even the words of the service. Rupert scanned the church, searching for the source. He stopped, staring at the altar. Blood flowed down from the cross, the tiny drops giving way to a trickle, a stream, and finally to a flowing river. The blood, stinking and coppery sweet, poured through the nave, splashing in waves over the pews. It flowed over him, past him, and then every trace of blood was gone. Rupert could hear the service again but what he saw was something quite different. Randall's mother had fallen backward onto the pew. Blood spurted from a gash in her throat. The father sat, staring straight ahead, covered in gore. The priest, still speaking, looked as if he'd just taken the worst beating of his life. His face, black and blue, was swollen beyond recognition. “Oh God no.” Rupert didn't bother to close his eyes. Eyghon had been forcing such images into his mind, replacing Rupert's day-to-day life with vision of gore and blood and pain ever since the night that Randall had been killed. A woman sitting in the pew before him turned and shushed Rupert. Her blue eyes glared at Rupert, admonishing him from behind the bleached bones of her skull. Rupert dug his hands into his legs as he forced himself to stillness.

“You can't make me flee,” he told the demon in his mind. “If I do run, screaming, from this funeral, the Council will find me, they'll tie me to Randall's death, and they'll kill me. You'll lose your only anchor to this world.”

Rupert forced himself to sit through the service. Bolting wouldn't do any good. He couldn't run from what was in his head. But still, the moment the service had ended, Rupert found himself fleeing the church. Keeping his steps down to a fast walk, he strode between the roily water of the Thames to his left and a sooty industrial park to his right. Five blocks and one bridge fell behind before Rupert stopped to lean heavily against a chain link fence. Rupert looked down, expecting to see his hands dripping with gore, but that was one illusion Eyghon had never given him even though, or perhaps because, that was the one illusion that would have truth to it.

“My priest.” Rupert shuddered as Eyghon's guttural voice filled his mind. Eyghon's words brought forth images of unholy and forbidden rites, of himself laughing as the demon crawled under his skin.

“I'm. Not. Yours.”

Eyghon's laughter thundered through his thoughts. “You were. You are. You always shall be.”

I'm not yours. The words, unspoken this time, had lost their force. He had dedicated himself to the demon. They all had. He'd never expected that Eyghon would get loose. He'd been so stupid. He should have known that Eyghon would escape. He hadn't even prepared for the eventuality. He'd created a spell on the spot, one that had destroyed the host and had driven Eyghon from the physical plane. Against all expectations, the spell had worked, but it'd had one unforeseen side-effect. It had left Rupert open. The demon had forged a connection between them. It was always there now, in the back of his mind, manipulating and scheming. Rupert had tried dozens of banishing spells. Nothing had worked. Nothing could work. Nothing could ever dislodge Eyghon from his mind.

He'd returned to the Council in desperation, hoping they'd have some method of banishing the
demon. It wasn't until that final moment, when he'd been on his way to confess his sins, when he'd been climbing the weighty stone steps leading up to Council HQ, that he'd remembered what the Council did to humans infected by a demon. Death, in comparison, would have been a blessed relief. He'd rejoined the Council but had kept his secret to himself.

Eyghon's mocking laughter brought Rupert back to the present. The woven wire of the fence felt cold against his hands. “I could still tell them about you,” he snarled. “It is my duty.” He'd taken the afternoon off to attend the funeral, but the Council never closed. He could go now.

They would keep him alive to study the link, extracting data with spells, with sharp and bright instruments. They wouldn't sedate him. It might mar the data. Once they were satisfied they'd gotten everything they could, they'd dissect him, leaving him lying there on the table, helpless, feeling them tearing away his life, inch-by-inch.

“Tomorrow,” he told the demon. “First thing.”

Eyghon laughed in the back of his mind.

The depictions of demons in the ancient texts, particularly in those associated with the Etruscan civilization, had always fascinated Rupert. He should have been hanging onto the professor's every word. Instead he could barely hear the lecture over the screaming. He knew the other students were focused on the lecture but Eyghon was showing Rupert something different: maggots eating through rotting flesh, bones piercing through human skin, eyeballs melting down faces, and more. He'd sat through the same hell in over a dozen lectures but finally it became too much. Rupert bolted to his feet, shoved his way through the narrow passage of writing desks and knees, and sprinted out the door as if the hordes of hell were chasing after.

He never did recall how he made it back to his own rooms. Sprawled on the floor as if he'd tripped or been shoved, Rupert's pounding fist sounded hollow and weak against the aged wood. “Please, please stop.”

Release me. A face flashed through Rupert's mind, that of a very bad man, one the world could well do without.

“No, I won't hurt anyone, not even him.”

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Rupert saw Ethan. His skull had been smashed in. The brains had spattered across the carpet. Ethan's lips moved. Release me.

“I won't. You can't touch him, not while you're only in my head.”

“Ripper, please, help me.” It was Ethan's voice, but he knew it wasn't Ethan. “Please.”

Rupert's eyes dragged behind, glancing backward out of his periphery, as he head swung around to face Ethan. He snapped his eyes forward. Maggots were weaving through a hole in Ethan's cheek. It didn't matter that it wasn't Ethan. Rupert couldn't stand it, not any longer. “Alright, but lose the visions,” he told Eyghon. “I can't think and I can't plan, not like this.”

Despite his caution, Rupert stepped over the threshold, two nights later, with a sense of nostalgia. Ethan, upon hearing that the pub's name referred to a temple of Janus, had claimed it as their new watering hole. Rupert suspected that Ethan had been put off by how much of a dive the bar had
actually turned out to be, but if so he hadn't let it show. Ethan's enthusiasm, whether feigned or real, had dragged their circle back to The Portae Belli at least twice a week.

George had been a regular then and Rupert was willing to bet he still was. It was a bet Rupert would have won. Only a scattering of the tables were occupied. Men sat together, in groups of three or four, to get down to the serious business of drinking. George, scrawny and disheveled, sat alone at the bar. Even these dregs would have nothing to do with him. Rupert could wish that his own friends had been either more principled or less naive but that was behind him now. For this job, George was exactly what he needed.

Rupert settled down next to George and grabbed the bartender's attention. “Bottle of Jack and another of what he's having.” Glancing over, Rupert saw George was drinking a Stiff Tart and hid his disgust. Paint remover tasted better. “And a Guinness.”

“I'll take a Guinness,” George interrupted, “if you're buying,” Rupert nodded and they sat in silence as they waited for the drinks. Rupert took his time pouring the Jack out into two shot glasses, aware of George's unwavering gaze. George downed the offered shot in a flash as if afraid it'd be taken away. “What do you want?”

Rupert pushed the second shot over, picking up his Guinness and the empty shot glass as George downed the Jack. “Not here,” Rupert said gesturing toward an empty corner. Once settled at the table, Rupert poured out another shot and pushed it over toward George. “I need someone who can fit through a window.”

With the shot glass just shy of his lips, George paused. “A job?”

“Something like that.” Rupert watched as George downed the shot. “Too many ears here but there's no rush. Let's have a few more rounds and then we'll find somewhere quiet to talk.”

He sat, watching George drink more than drinking himself, until the pressure from his bladder told Rupert he'd had more than the one beer. Damn. That hadn't been part of the plan. He slapped his hands on the bar as he got to his feet. “Back in a bit.”

“S'not my fault.” George's words were slurred. “The guy came outta nowhere.”

“The mishap at the bank? Could have happened to anyone.”

“No one'll work with me. My fault they say.” Leaning onto the table, he looked over one shoulder and stared up at Rupert. “How come you wanna work with me?”

Damn. “Because no one else will. I'll get to keep more of the dosh with you than with someone else.”

George looked more resigned than happy with Rupert's response.

“Buck up,” Rupert said. “Time to head round to yours and work out the details.”

Rupert waited until they were alone in an alley. One sharp kick to George's ribs and the git was already crying. Rupert kicked him, again and again, lost in the fierce joy of making someone else bleed until the crying stopped. Rupert dropped down, close to the body. The pulse was strong and steady if a bit on the quick side. Good. Rupert cast a spell to keep him that way, alive but unconscious, until Rupert was ready.
Finding the Thundercat had been easy. Back before Rupert had run off to play at being Ripper, Robson's uncle had taken them racing about the Bristol Channel. The boat was still in place. Hauling George onto the powerboat had been more problematic. Rupert had a spell that could make the man invisible but not any lighter. However the water had been calm and pulling the inflatable boat onto the beach had been simple enough. The island was small, too small for anyone to live on, but that meant Rupert didn't have to hide, even if it was a good hour until sunset, as he pulled George out of the boat. Rupert used magic to paralyze George before dropping the spell that had kept him knocked out. “Georgie porgie, pudding and pie, kissed the girls and made them cry. Wakey, wakey.”

“I can't move. Why can't I move?”

“Can't have you squirming, old chum. The Mark has to be perfect.”

“Mark? What mark? What the hell is this?”

Rupert ignored the question. “If I were a true traditionalist, it would be tattooed on, but you won't be around long enough for that to make a difference. A marker will do well enough.”

“You can’t get away with this. I have friends.”

Rupert raised the marker up from George's arm. “No, you really don't.”

“Lamont, he saw us at the pub.”

“Nobody saw us and nobody will care when you're gone.”

“Gone? You mean dead gone?” Ah, he finally understood.

Rupert started in on the Mark again. “I suppose you want to know why.”

“Help. Help.”

Rupert squatted down and put a hand over George's mouth. “It's no use shouting. No one can hear you. And, if you are interested, the bank job.”

“What? Ripper, man, there wasn't supposed to be anyone there. The bank was supposed to be empty. We had to kill him, man. It was that or the slammer. And anyway, I wasn't the one who killed him. That was Butler, man, he did it.”

“Perhaps,” Ripper said as he finished sketching out the edges of Eyghon's Mark. “But you were the one stupid enough to brag about it. Killed a copper, you said. It's not, in the final analysis, that you're evil. You're merely too stupid to live. Looked at the right way, I'm doing the world a favor.”

The sun had set but there was still light to see by when Rupert finished the tattoo. He'd given up cigs but paused for one last smoke. It wasn't as if lung cancer would be killing him, now was it. The island was empty. There was no one else for Eyghon to kill. It would be messy and it would be painful but soon it would be over.

The ritual went without a hitch. The demon's energy tore through the spell, releasing the body. Where George had been bound, Eyghon rose to his feet. “Where am I?”

Rupert wasn't sure why he grinned. Eyghon, still in his head, would know how terrified he was. “A small island in the Bristol Channel. I'm afraid there's no one else about.”

The demon's fist hit his jaw. Rupert stumbled back but kept to his feet for three more strikes. As he
hit the ground, darkness grabbed ahold of him. Rupert smiled. It had been an easier death than he'd expected.

Rupert came to wondering if the Greek myths about Charon were true. He remembered a loud buzzing and a sense of movement, but after that he'd felt as if he were in a boat being propelled forward by waves. He seemed to by lying in water although that didn't discount a boat, not if water had splashed over the edges, but the surface below him was stable now. He opened his eyes, half expecting to see a ferryman demanding his fee, but Rupert was alone and he recognized the boat. It was the Thundercat he'd stolen.

Rupert sat up. "Oh Good Lord." The small island he'd picked was gone. Here he could see, by the light of a few solitary bulbs, a dock, a boathouse, and a road. Eyghon hadn't killed him. Eyghon had found other victims.

There were a couple of oars, one hooked on to each side of the boat. Rupert grabbed one and took a couple of swings. The damned thing was aluminum, lighter than he'd prefer for a weapon. It would have to. He paused to listen but the island was quiet outside of the waves lapping against the shore. Not knowing where Eyghon had gone, Rupert chose to follow the road. If he couldn't find the demon, perhaps he could warn the occupants although how he was going to explain this …

The cliffs, which had been back far beyond the boathouse, angled in toward the road until they towered over Rupert as he jogged forward. The night was darker here but the road glowed, a pale white against the vegetation to one side and the darker shadows rising above on the other. By the time Rupert cleared the cliffs, his eyes had adjusted to the darkness. He could clearly see the girl. She was seven or eight at most, sitting in the center of the road with her knees pulled up to her chest. She seemed unharmed. Her nightgown wasn't torn and her ash-blonde hair was pulled back in a tidy pigtail. Rupert put down the oar. He didn't want to frighten her. "Are you alright?"

She didn't move. She didn't even flinch.

"Hello?" He called out again. Still no response. "Can I take you home? Where are your parents?"

"Dead." Her voice was flat, devoid of emotion.

He held out a hand. "Come with me." He'd put her in the boat and send her out onto the water. She'd be safe there.

She looked more fae than human, almost ethereal as if she didn't belong to this world. When she turned her head toward him, her expression wasn't anything that belonged on the face of a child. "I've been very naughty. I deserve a terrible spanking."

Rupert held very still. "I know you've seen terrible things, but none of them are your fault."

"Gods, Ripper. You just don't change, do you?"

Ripper? How had she know his … Good Lord. No.


Rupert stepped back. He was close enough to grab the oar but, no, he couldn't. Eyghon had taken over Randall and he'd killed it then. Eyghon had taken over this child. No, he couldn't. Not again.
Not to a child.

“What's the matter, Ripper? Not man enough to take me on?”

Rupert couldn't. He couldn't beat a child to death even if Eyghon had taken her over. Rupert couldn't, but Giles could. He reached down for the oar, grabbing it tightly, both hands at the ready. “You won't get past me, demon. I've killed you before and I can do it again, no matter what form you take.”

The demon rose to the child's feet. “How often do you think you can kill me? You can kill a child but can you kill your mother? Your lover? Rupert's weak. He can't stand the pain. He'll free me again.”

“You won't get near him again.” Giles swung the oar but didn't hit the demon. “Not if I bash you into a pulp.”

Eyghon's laughter ran eerily out of the child's throat. “You can't stop me. I'm in his head. You can't reach me there, but I can reach Rupert. I can tie him up in knots. And you, you're as weak as Rupert. Can't even bring yourself to hit me.”

Giles shut his eyes against the child and listened to the demon. Eyghon wasn't right but he wasn't wrong either. Giles could, probably, hit the girl but beating a child to death, even the thought made him ill, but there was another way. “I don't have to hit you,” he told Eyghon. “I'm not Rupert's only guardian.”

Ripper swung the oar hard and fast. It smashed against the demon's head. Blood splattered into the air, hanging like fireworks for one frozen moment. The oar swung around again. Blood streaked red in the ash-blonde hair. When it was done, Ripper dropped the oar and stepped back from the green ooze that had been a child's body. Giles stepped carefully around the gunk as he scanned the island. It was unlikely that Eyghon had left anyone alive, but Giles had to be sure. There couldn't be any witnesses.

Ethan opened his eyes and winced against the sunlight. “Alright,” he shouted toward the door. “Just give me a moment.” The pounding, it actually sounded as if the door was being kicked in, if anything grew louder. Just as he'd thrown on a t-shirt, the door flew open. The words, do you know how hard it was to get that lock on in the first place, died on his lips. Ripper stood in the doorway.

He wasn't wearing the wife-beater Ethan was used to seeing him in or even the tweed he'd donned after he'd left. The dark pullover and jeans looked good on him, but then again pretty much anything did. Ripper pulled a cigarette from his lips and blew out the smoke. “Do you know how much trouble it was to find you?”

Ethan faked a nonchalance he didn't feel, one he could never feel in Ripper's presence. “You never wanted to see me again. Why should I make it easy?”

Ripper tossed his cigarette to the floor. As Ripper's eyes raked over him, Ethan wished he'd had time to don more than a t-shirt and underwear. “Aw, you didn't have to dress just for me.”

“Well, yes, perhaps if I'd known who was bashing through my door …”

Before he could finish, Ripper came at him, shoving him back, and Ethan found himself stumbling until he hit the wall. Ripper pinned him. “You're mine. Always will be. Never make me hunt you down again.” Ripper's lips were on his before Ethan could reply, pushing against his hard, so hard he
knew they'd bruise. He pushed back, kissing Ripper with everything he had.

Ripper had never been a gentle lover but this, it was like being held by a hurricane, like being fucked by by a tidal wave. It was almost, but not quite, too much. When Ripper shuddered and fell on him, Ethan thought that neither of them would be able to even think about moving for hours. He was wrong.

A hand landed on his face, moving about as if exploring his features. Well, if this was how it was going to be. Ethan licked along the palm of the hand. “Come on, Ripper, if you're gonna …”

Ripper pushed himself up and off of Ethan so fast that he fell backward onto the floor. “How did you get here?”

Not this again. Ethan's words were cold and sharper than he'd intended. “I live here. You came looking for me, remember?”

“No, no, I don't.”

“Don't what? Want me? One good fuck and you're done?”

“Don't remember. How did I get here?”

Ethan watched as Ripper's eyes turned cold.

Ripper's arm came down on Ethan's throat, pinning him to the bed. “Get out.”

“It's my flat,” Ethan choked out. “You came looking for me.”

Ripper scrambled to his feet, putting on the pants he'd grabbed as he'd risen from the bed. “Don't let me in again.”

Ethan sat up, raising his legs and twisting his body into a ball. He raised a hand to his throat. “It's not as if I let you in this time. I don't suppose you're about to pay for the broken lock?”

Ripper grabbed his boots in one hand. “Leave London. Go someplace I'd never think to look for you.”

“Damn it, Ripper, what's wrong? Tell me this time. Don't just run the fuck off again.”

“Better you don't know.”

“I won't stop until I've worked it out.”

“Leave it, Ethan. If you want to live, leave it.”

“Tell me what's going on.”

“No.” Ripper, his boots still in his hands, bolted out the door on bare feet.

Ethan looked out the window until Ripper appeared in the street. He looked up, saw Ethan watching, and dashed off. Ethan fell back onto the bed. What the hell had that been?

Rupert found himself in his flat, sitting on the couch and blowing smoke toward the window. He stared at the cigarette for a moment before dropping it into a mug on the side table. There were a
half-dozen butts in the mug. He'd given up smoking months before, shortly after he'd returned to the Council. He couldn't recall smoking any of them. In fact, the last thing he remembered he'd been in London. He didn't know why he'd been there. He didn't even remember going there. He had memories of Ethan, naked and well fucked, but in a room Rupert had never seen before. He wouldn't have gone to Ethan. With Eyghon in his head, Rupert was too great a danger. He wouldn't have exposed Ethan to that danger. He wouldn't have.

The dishes from at least one meal had been left out on the table. Rupert hadn't left dishes dirty since he'd come back to the Council. Cleaning up after himself had been part of bearing the yoke again. In fact, the only time Rupert had left the dishes out … Rupert dropped to a chair. First Ethan and now this. What the hell?

Across the far side of the table he saw a newspaper with his glasses planted firmly in the center. He absentmindedly rubbed the glasses before putting them on. There didn't seem to be anything unusual in the paper. No, wait. The date. This was the Sunday paper. It couldn't be. Just last night had been Friday. Rupert looked at the date again. It hadn't changed.

It couldn't be. He'd lost a whole day. How had he lost a whole day?

No explanations were forthcoming. Rupert let the problem mull in the back of his mind as he washed up the dishes and fixed himself tea. Losing a day, he had no idea what to do with that. Rupert took his tea to his desk. He'd already been behind on his studies. That at least he could work at.

He was fully engrossed in his paper, Dark Lords: A Study of Near Eastern Religions and the Appropriation of Power by Krnashath Demons, when the doorbell rang. Damn, just as the work was getting interesting. Rupert popped his head out the window to see if he could get rid of the annoyance quickly. Or not. “Ethan?”

“Hello, Ripper.”

Rupert stared. Ethan. Of course. Ethan had been in London. Ethan had stolen the day from him. He grabbed Ethan, dragged him into the house, and threw him against the wall.

“Oh, this is better, although you should shut the door. Unless you do want to give the neighbors a show that is.”

Rupert pressed his forearm against Ethan's throat. “What the hell did you do?”

“You'll have to be more specific. I've done so many things.”

Rupert pressed down harder with his arm.


Rupert loosened the arm until Ethan started gasping for breath. “I lost a day. What did you do?”

Grief ran like a shadow across Ethan's face. “Yesterday then, I take it. I should have known better.”

“Better than to mess with me? Yes, you should have.”

Ethan grabbed Rupert's forearm with both hands and pulled down. Rupert let the arm drop. “Better as in nothing with you can be that simple. You came to me, Ripper. Whatever happened, I didn't do it.”

But that meant … Eyghon. No. The demon could force hallucinations on him but it couldn't steal his
memories. It couldn't force him to lose time. Rupert shrank back.

Giles stepped forward and punched a shot straight into Ethan's gut. As Ethan fell forward, Giles struck his elbow across the side of Ethan's face. Then he backed off. Rupert cared about the git. Giles couldn't hurt him too much. “Get out. Leave London. Don't look back.”

Ethan pressed a hand to his jaw and winced but held his ground. “Something's wrong. Tell me what.”

Giles shoved him out the door and looked down on at Ethan sprawled on the sidewalk. “If I ever see your face again, I'll break every bone in your body.”

I'll break him.

Oh bloody wonderful. Eyghon had woken up. Giles slammed the door shut on Ethan.

He'll die screaming.

“If you hadn't noticed,” Giles said, “I don't particularly care.”

Rupert does.

“I can keep you from Rupert.”

No. You can't.

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose. “What do you want?”

Give me the Slayers.

Giles closed his eyes and let his head bang against the wall. “I'm a student. I don't have access to a Slayer.” Images of Ethan, broken and dying, flashed across his mind.

He'll see this. Every time you let him out, he'll see this.

Meaning Rupert would see the images. Eyghon would force them on him. Giles thought it through. Rupert's duty was to guide a Slayer, assuming he was given the opportunity. Giles' duty was to protect Rupert, but he couldn't keep Eyghon away from Rupert. They shared the same head. “It's possible I can get Rupert assigned to one of the Slayers.”

All of them.

Giles shook his head. “There's only one.”

An image formed in Giles' mind, a weapon with a stake at one end and a blade at the other. “What is it?”

A way to get all of them.

If Merrick's Slayer had been called in London, the Council would have arranged for facilities. In any of the other cities he was truly familiar with, Merrick would have rented a warehouse. In Los Angeles he found houses, and affordable ones at that, with rooms large enough to train in, however training seemed to have been taken off the agenda. He watched her from behind the curtains of the second floor window. Buffy had stopped at the bottom the walkway to the house.
Disappointment settled in his chest. Her attire was completely inappropriate. Oh, the blue jeans weren't entirely unsuited for fighting but that blouse would get her killed in a heartbeat. It might have been passable had it been buttoned up to the neck and tucked in but no, instead she'd left all the buttons undone and had tied her shirt tails together into a large knot at her waist creating more handholds for an enemy to grab onto than Merrick cared to think about.

She turned and walked away as Merrick watched, and he honestly couldn't understand why she was leaving. She'd fought off two vampires the night before. She'd been having the nightmares. She knew she'd been chosen, but it seemed she'd rather play at being a cheerleader than live up to her calling as a Slayer. He let the curtain drop. He couldn't confront her here, out on the street, but it wasn't difficult to predict where she was heading.

The bright orange of the lockers made the pale green walls look even dingier than they were. Merrick was, as usual, amazed at how unaware people could be. Neither of the two girls gossiping by their lockers noticed him as he slipped in. “Oh, hi. Wow, you're late,” one of them said as Buffy came in through the doors.

Buffy waved. “I'm going to practice.”

“Cool, see you later.” The girls left and the door fell closed behind them. He and Buffy were alone.

Merrick waited until she'd opened her locker before stepping into view. She didn't notice him for a moment. He could have killed her in that moment if he'd been a demon. She jumped when she saw him. “What are you doing here?” She ducked behind the open door of her locker. “This is a naked place.” He wasn't sure why she'd bothered to point that out, given that she was fully dressed.

“You were supposed to meet me an hour ago.”

Apparently he wasn't as imposing as he'd hoped. She came back around and started rummaging through her locker. “I told you that I had practice.” She threw two pom poms on top of the locker.

“And I told you to skip it.” The last Slayer had been identified when she was five. He could have had a girl who'd already been trained but no, he had to make do with this American.

“Listen, I think there's been a big mistake. Alright, I mean, I appreciate that there are real vampires and that you're on this big, holy mission but obviously somebody read their tea leaves wrong ’cause I'm not your girl. I don't think I'm up to it. And just between you and me, neither do you.”

Hmm, perhaps she was more perceptive than he'd first given her credit for. “It is true that you have missed years of training.”

“See?”

Still that didn't mean he could go easy on her. “And you are undisciplined, frivolous.”

“Don't I know it.”

“You are, quite probably, the most vacuous Slayer …”

“Okay, okay,” she interrupted. “I think we both get the point.”

He waited. She was going to tell him to go but he could tell she wasn't entirely confident she'd made the right choice. She wanted him to convince her.

“Then I don't think there's anything more for us to say,” she added.
He decided to agree. It would put her off her guard and make the demonstration that much more effective. “I guess not.” He took one step away to vanish behind a row of lockers.

“Good luck and all,” she called out.

Oh, yes, she did want convincing. He stepped back into view but she was staring into her locker. “There is one thing.”

“What?” She looked ready to tear into him as she turned back. Aggressiveness was, of course, a positive attribute in a Slayer but it was far too easy to rile her up. He’d have to train that out of her.

“This.” He gave her only one moment to identify the knife before throwing it at her.

She caught it, one handed, mere inches from her face. She hadn't moved; she hadn't even blinked. Her reflexes were quite remarkable.

He clapped once. “Bravo.”

Her gaze bounced between him and the knife as he stepped toward her. “Y-you threw a knife at my head.”

“Yes. I had to show you.”

She gestured toward her head as she spoke as if the emphasis would tell him something new. “But … you threw a knife at my head.”

“And you caught it. Only the chosen one could have caught it.” That should have settled the argument. It didn't.

“Well, I don't want it.”

He paused, only for a moment, to think about the Slayer he could have had, the Slayer he would have had if Buffy had been identified at a proper age, before jumping back into the fray. He would make her see that she was born to be the Slayer. It was his duty and he would not fail.

Twenty years of his life, spent working on three degrees and playing Council politics, had all led to this one moment. Rupert sat outside of Quentin's office. The carpet here was new and the walls free of scuff-marks, unlike the halls where the rank and file worked. Mrs. Livingston, an old gargoyle of a woman, guarded the entrance. She'd been part and parcel of the Council as far back as Rupert could recall. He amused himself thinking that she was a construct, an entity created ages ago to protect the Council Head from interlopers hoping to gain access to his time. It was highly unlikely. The Council didn't use magic for mundane purposes. At some signal that Rupert hadn't seen, she told him that he could go in.

Quentin rose from his desk at the far side of the room, but Rupert took a moment to appreciate the office. The walls were filled with fine art, many of them from the Romantic period, images of vampires and demons falling at the hands of men, but they couldn't hold his attention, not when the Council's seal lay before him. The rug's gray background was just pale enough to enhance the image of the familiar double-headed black eagle holding a pen in one golden claw and a sword in the other. Feeling the thrill of being in the Council's inner sanctum for the first time, Rupert read the motto spelled out at the edge of the rug. “Et portae inferi non praevalebunt.”

“The gates of Hell shall not prevail.” Quentin crossed the room to shake Rupert's hand but didn't
offer his congratulations yet. He gestured toward a chair, one of two placed just past the seal.
“Would you care for a drink?”

“Whisky if you have it.”

Quentin handed over the drink as he sat across from Rupert. “You, of course, know why you're here.”

“I would hardly dare to presume.” The modesty of Rupert's words were belied by his next question. “I take it the new Slayer isn't expected to live long?”

The shake of Quentin's head was more purposeful than regretful. “Merrick doesn't expect much of her. She wasn't identified as a Potential and has no training, no discipline. He'll do his best to keep her going, of course but, no, we don't expect her to last long.” Quentin sipped at his drink. “The next Slayer goes to Roderick Ashworth,” he added unnecessarily. Every Watcher knew who was in waiting for the next Slayer.

“But the Slayer after Ashworth’s?”

“Hopefully Ashworth's girl will be longer lived but the Council prefers to prepare for the worst-case scenario.”

“Of course,” Rupert agreed. “Still, I can't imagine I was a popular choice.”

“I won't deny there was more than a little debate. Your early rebellion did give a number of members pause.” Giles held back a snicker. Trust Quentin to refer to abandoning the Council and invoking demons with as mild a term as rebellion. Of course Quentin didn't know about Eyghon. “But a good many believe your little stint with the dark side has enhanced your qualifications, has given you a better idea of what you'll be facing. They brought the others around.”

They damned well better have, Giles thought. The bribes he'd paid out had been more than he'd expected, personal favors rather than money, but those favors had cost him.

In its heyday the building, abandoned now, had been an asylum, a dumping ground for the unwanted: the insane, the old, and the merely inconvenient. The gray stone of the walls was made even dingier by the scraps of white paint that hadn't completely peeled away. The upper levels had contained suites where the wealthier clients had been locked away in relative comfort. The poverty stricken unwanted, some of them lunatics but some of them merely unlucky, had been locked in cages in the basement. The stone was thick and there weren't even windows to let light in. It suited Giles' needs perfectly.

When Rupert had invoked Eyghon, he'd called the demon into an acquaintance, into someone who could be tied back to him. Giles wasn't about to make the same mistake. He'd sent Ripper out to bring back a couple of drifters, men who wouldn't be missed. It didn't matter whom they were as long as they both remained unconscious.

Ripper had left both men outside the cage. By the light of the KingCamp lantern, Rupert chose to leave the lanky, middle-aged man where Ripper had dumped him. The older man, whose untamed graying beard fell halfway down his chest, was shorter than the other but hefty enough that dragging him into the cage was something of a chore. Branding him with Eyghon's mark was simple in comparison and took little time. Giles closed the cage door, locking the man in before chanting the spell to invoke Eyghon. As the demon stood and stretched his arms out to the side, Giles watched
and wondered if he's succeeded.

Eyghon threw himself against the cage. The bars held. “What is this?”

“I can't have you jumping bodies and rampaging about London. The Council would track you down and then they'd connect you to me. You'd never gain access to the Slayer line.” Part of the experiment had worked. Even with Eyghon's access to his mind, Giles had kept his plans hidden from the demon.

Eyghon's body fell to the ground and dissolved into a pile of green goo. Interesting. Nothing in Giles' research had suggested the demon could break his tie to a body at will. Giles moved closer to the edge of the room. If Eyghon got free of the cage, the door would contain the demon.

The goo spread out toward the second body. Giles waited. Eyghon did not rise again.

*What did you do?*

“I told you. I can't afford to allow you to jump bodies. It's to your best interests as well.”

Giles fell to the floor as knives stabbed in just behind his eyeballs. He clutched at his head, more in a vain attempt to stop the pain than to confirm there were no knives. The solitary lantern, which had lit the room dimly up until then, became so bright that it hurt Giles even even through his closed eyes. Curled up on the floor, he clenched at his head, not moving because moving brought more pain, until a blessed darkness took him.

The walls were screaming in a thousand voices all telling her to get out. Liz stood with her back to the heavy stone walls with her eyes turned toward the door. She shouldn’t of followed but the bad man, he'd beat up Doc and then he'd beat up Billy and he'd left their bags as if they wouldn't need them anymore. She couldn't of gone for help. They'd have been gone, vanished, by the time she'd come back, and that was only if she could of gotten help at all. She heard a scream, louder than the thousand voices. Risking a peek back into the dungeon, she saw the monster stabbing knives into the bad man's head but the monster was in his head now. It had been in Doc before but Doc was gone. Billy was still there though, past the bad man, at the far end of the room.

The bad man had stopped screaming. Even the inside of his head was silent. Maybe he was faking. The walls were still shrieking, “Get out! Get out! Get out!” She stepped into the dungeon. The bad man didn't move. She took another step forward, watching him carefully. The bad man still wasn't moving, but as she inched forward she went far around him. She didn't want him between her and the door but she couldn't leave Billy there. She inched past the bad man and then scuttled backward, keeping her eyes on the bad man the whole time. He still wasn't moving. She shook Billy. He wasn't moving either. The room was screaming at her to get out, that it wasn't just her life on the line. The bad man was the boogey man, the candy man, the devil himself and he'd steal her soul if he got her. Oh, this was bad, bad, bad. She grabbed Billy by the arms and started dragging him toward the door.

Rupert woke to cement and stone, cement underneath him and stone walls around him. The only light came from a camping lantern. He could see that his pants were of a very fine weave, finer than anything he usually wore and he could feel the scratch of a turtleneck against his skin. Rupert sighed. When he'd first found the clothes sitting out in the open toward the front of his closet, clothes that weren't his, clothes that fit him to a T, he'd taken to throwing them away. He'd even burned a set on one memorable occasion. It had been a futile gesture. New clothes had appeared, clothes that had
been billed to him. They served as a reminder that Eyghon could mess with him at will. Rupert had chosen to ignore them as best he could.

_Release me!_

And as if on cue, the demon spoke up, the Hyde to his Jekyll. Rupert didn't know how the demon could erase his memories—nothing in the literature suggested such a thing was possible—but he'd never been called in by either the Council or the police. Whatever he'd missed, it couldn't be too horrific. Eyghon wasn't one for subtlety. He would have left a trail a mile wide if he'd done any damage whatsoever.

_Release me!_

The voice brought back memories of blinding pain, Rupert held his hands to his head, shutting his eyes against pain more imagined than real. Giles, opening his eyes, dropped his hands back down to his sides. The second drifter, the one he'd left outside the cage, was gone. Escaped. Giles cursed the demon.

_Release me!_

“I will,” he told the demon, “but now I need to think.” He'd have to let Ripper hunt the drifter down, but that could wait. First he needed to vanish before any cops showed up. Then Ripper could have his fun, and after that … “I will let you free, on one condition.”

Giles felt pain welling in the back of his head.

“There will be no conditions.”

“There will be,” Giles replied. “I've found no information on this Scythe of yours in the Council texts. If I'm going to learn anything, I'll need access to the Slayer but there's a Watcher in the queue ahead of me. The next Slayer is his if he's alive. I need you to kill him.”

The chuckling in Giles' mind was assent enough.

“His name is Ashworth, Roderick Travers Ashworth.” Giles brought the image to mind, an older man, one who'd sported a walrus mustache ever since he'd been assigned to India as a youth. Roderick was a year or two older than his cousin Quentin, balding where Quentin had a full head of hair, but getting slightly chubby, just as Quentin was, from sitting at a desk all day. “I'll set it up. You'll be released near his London home.”

_And then I kill._

Giles knew better than to ask Eyghon to stop at one death. Limiting Eyghon to one body would limit the damage. His human form could only last so long. With any luck he'd have dissolved back to the ethereal plane before the Council found his trail.

_And then?_

“After Ashworth is dead?” Giles felt more than heard the demon's assent. “Then I ensure that a new Slayer is called.”

Quentin remained seated at his desk, putting his pen down reluctantly as Cecil entered the room. He'd rather considered not giving the lad the time of day but Cecil had been rife with wild conspiracy theories ever since Roderick's death. Perhaps it was time to have a quiet chat with cousin Antonia about her son's behavior. A certain amount of grief could be tolerated but when one started ranting
like a common street preacher, well, that was simply taking things too far. “Cecil, what is it that can't wait until the next meeting of the Council?”

At the center of the room, three feet out from Quentin's desk, the Seal of the Council was depicted on a rug. It was ignored for the most part, except for the more ritualistic Council traditions. Cecil walked up to the rug and bowed. Oh Good Lord, he wasn't about to . . . And then Cecil Dabney Ashworth stepped onto the center of the rug, crossed his arms over his chest, and said, “Our son has lifted his heel against us. I accuse Rupert Edmund Giles of betraying our brotherhood. He has murdered my uncle and your cousin Roderick Travers Ashworth.”

Quentin considered stabbing his letter opener through the young fool's heart, but no, Antonia would never forgive him. At least the imbecile had invoked the ritual when they were alone. If there had been witnesses Quentin would have had no choice but to act.

A worried frown crossed Cecil's face as Quentin stepped around the desk, violating the ritual. Quentin yanked him off the rug. This had to be nipped in the bud and quickly. Rupert Giles had far too many allies for a member of Quentin's own family to be seen leading an attack against him. “If the family were not in mourning, I would have you debarred from the Council. As it is you are taking a leave of absence, a year and a day, in honor of the deceased. You will spend this time indexing the demonology texts in the Ashworth family library. The resulting document will be dedicated to Roderick.”

“But Giles killed him. Honor demands . . .”

“Honor?” Quentin slapped him. “Your honor belongs to the Council. Your duty is to the Council. The deaths have been investigated. Some young fool invoked a demon for fun. He paid the price, as did a number of others.”

“Cui bono,” Cecil said.

“What?”

“Who benefits.”

Quentin wished he'd slapped Cecil harder. “I know what it means, you fool.”

“Rupert Giles benefits from uncle's death. He is now next in line for a Slayer.”

“He was already in the queue. All he had to do was be patient. Miss Summers can't last much longer. Roderick's Slayer might have been one of the longer lived ones, but that doesn't matter. Being a Watcher is a burden, not a picnic in the park.”

“The man isn't what you think he is,” Cecil said. “He's ruthless. He's . . .”

“Enough.” Of course he's ruthless, Quentin thought. You don't get assigned to a Slayer if you aren't ruthless. “A year and a day, Cecil. I expect to be obeyed. In fact, I'm driving you to the manor myself this evening.” He would speak with Antonia that night and in person. The boy was getting out of hand. Even grief didn't excuse such behavior. Attacking Rupert Giles. Quentin felt himself shudder. Did the idiot want to ruin the family's good name?

The church had been deconsecrated so long ago that even the Council had forgotten its ancient purpose and the secret passage that provided access into the sacristy. Rupert, finding an interesting reference in an ancient tome, had worked out the history of this place. Giles stood in the passage just
outside the sacristy. He could hear the vampires. By their undisciplined chattering, they had to be minions. He'd have to step into the church to learn if their master had accepted his invitation.

The cross had long since been removed from the apse but still the vampires waited below in the nave. They stood grouped together like a pack of animals and not at all like a disciplined fighting team. Once Giles stepped into view, one strode through them, heading straight for Giles, but stopped at the end of the nave. His hair, long enough to hang down to his shoulders, was unkempt and wild as if he were trying to project the image of a feral beast. Taking in what was almost certainly a red velvet shirt under the leather jacket, Giles suppressed a shudder and ran a thumb over his own jacket, grounding himself in the silky feel of the vicuna. The vampire raised one arm out in a grand gesture.

“My master awaits. Will you not come?”

Giles grinned. “I do believe I'd prefer it if he came to me.”

The vampires growled in response. Giles knew they couldn’t approach, that they were kept back by an ancient warding. Giles had strengthened the spell himself before sending out the invitation.

Based on ancient descriptions, the vampire before him could have only one name. “Amilyn, call your master or we are done here.”

“And why should he come to your beckoning?”

“Perhaps he's curious?”

“Perhaps he is.” The minions stepped back, fading into the darkness, as another vampire stepped forward. Giles recognized the face from an old sketch, one that was surprisingly accurate. The black greatcoat swelled dramatically as Lothos raised his arms and bowed. “A parley and after so many centuries.” He scanned the apse. “And you came alone, Mr. Giles. How unusual. Don't you, as your predecessors did, fear your petty magic will fail you at a crucial moment?”

“Not particularly.”

“Or perhaps your associates aren't aware of our meeting.”

“If you aren't interested in what I have to say.” Giles let the rest of the sentence hang unspoken.

“I'm here, aren't I? What paltry offering are you planning to serve?”

“The Slayer.”

Lothos grinned. “And what would I want with your toy doll?”

“For centuries you were the only vampire to have killed two Slayers.” Lothos' face darkened. “I don't have to continue, now do I.”

“Why would the Council's dog give me the Slayer?”

“My reasons are my own. Do you want her or should I meet with Spike?”

Lothos studied him as if looking for the trap. “Tell me.”

“She's in California, Los Angeles to be specific.”

Lothos turned with a dramatic flourish of his greatcoat. The minions scrambled after.

“That went about as well as could be expected.” It shouldn't take long for Lothos to kill the girl. She
was untrained after all.

_The Slayers will be mine._

“There’s a further need for patience,” Giles replied to Eyghon. “Only with this Scythe of yours, which I still don’t know how to locate, can we tie your essence to the Slayer line. Only then will the Slayers, each and every one called, be yours.”
Welcome to the Harvest

Chapter Notes

Since it's been four months since the previous chapter, a few reminders:

- Unlike possession, in which a demon takes over a human host, domination entails the creation of a psychic bond between the demon and its host. The demon does not inhabit the host but is, instead, connected to the host’s mind. Think of a boat tied to a dock. Like the boat, which remains in the sea, the demon continues to be discarnate, existing in a non-material plane, but a persistent connection between the demon and its human host remains. It may sound trivial. I assure you, it is not. The demon is, in effect, always in the back of the host’s mind, whispering directly into the host’s thoughts, always exerting its pernicious influence.

- Because of Eyghon's influence in the back of his mind, Rupert's personality has split into Giles, Rupert, and Ripper.

- Giles has found a way to invoke Eyhgon into human form that does not allow Eyhgon to shift bodies. He used this to kill a previous Watcher so he could move up the queue and be assigned a Slayer sooner.

- Cecil Ashworth, Quentin's nephew, is convinced Giles has killed his uncle (the Watcher killed by Eyghon). For bringing this to Quentin's attention in a flamboyant manner, Cecil has been assigned to index demonology texts for a year.

- Giles, thinking it would get the Slayer killed and get him assigned to the next one all the sooner, told Lothos how to find Buffy.

    ab ovo usque ad mala: “From the egg to the apples” meaning everything, the full meal

Rupert hadn't expected the delivery. “That's twenty percent tip. Special delivery to the library. You agreed on the phone.” He didn't remember calling but handed over another five just the same and waited until he was alone to glance down at the menu. Gourmet Thai. He’d noted the dive when he'd driven through town to orient himself the previous night. It hadn't appeared to be worth even one Michelin star, and yet here was the bag, heavy in his hand. Rupert sighed and hoped the food wasn't too terribly atrocious.

Based on the weight and bulk of the bag, it held food enough for two, which was disconcerting. If he hadn't been expecting company, why order so much? Well, that would resolve itself. He'd already decided to eat at the library's main table. It was large enough and it didn't seem to be used, ever, by the students, at least based on the dearth of youngsters he'd seen that morning. There had only been his Slayer, and she hadn't stayed long. He put that thought away. Lunch first, and then he could decide how to handle his recalcitrant Slayer.

As Rupert opened the first container, the scent of pork satay wafted up. He stood, holding the container in both hands, and inhaled. Gods that smelled good, much better than he would have expected to come out of that little hole in the wall. When he'd opened all the containers, he had a full meal spread out on the table, ab ovo usque ad mala if by egg one meant a shredded crab salad and by apple one meant sticky rice with mangoes. The meal featured a red curry with roasted duck and pineapple. Rupert didn't bother resisting the temptation to taste. He picked a bit of duck up between
two fingers and popped it in his mouth. He closed his eyes as the taste hit his tongue. Some moments were too sacred to profane with visions of the mundane.

It was, though, more food than he could eat alone. He'd been right about that. He wondered, briefly, if he should expect company but didn't let the thought bother him. He had enough to worry about with his Slayer … No, he would think about that later.

He'd have preferred a more elegant place setting but paper plates and bowls did provide a convenience that a more formal setting definitely lacked. At least the napkins were real cloth and not some flimsy imitation.

The satay was exquisite, almost as good as he could get in London. Rupert, eyes closed, was delighting in the flavor when he heard a small noise. He looked over to see a girl, a student, standing by the door. Gods, nothing all morning and now, when he was trying to enjoy his lunch, a student had to barge in. “Shouldn't you be in class?”

“I am! I mean, I was, well not at class but at lunch, but Jesse was going on and on about Cordelia and Xander was being all the gang’s all here with the ‘Cordelia is hot even if she's mean' talk and I … sometimes I come and sit here, in the library that is, during lunch which you'd know if you were the regular librarian, I mean not that you aren't because you're probably the new guy, I guess, since our old librarian disappeared.”

Rupert hadn't, quite, followed all of that but he wasn't about to turn away the first – and possibly only – student in this benighted school who actually wanted to spend time in the library. “Ah, I see.” He gestured at the table. “Please, make yourself comfortable.”

“But you're eating. I don't want to be a bother.”

With a sense of regret for his abrupt words, Rupert tried to make amends. “No trouble. This is your library after all. Unfortunately there's no assistant to take my place during lunch. Principal Flutie was apologetic about my lack of break – there were some legal concerns – but I honestly would rather eat here than in, say, the school cafeteria.” Rupert glanced at the clock and saw that only ten minutes had passed since the bell. “And I'm rambling on. Please do forgive me. I'm guessing you haven't eaten? I seem to have ordered more than I can eat. Would you care to join me?”

“Well, I did leave my lunch out, uh …” She may have misplaced her lunch but, given the heft of her bag, that same carelessness didn't apply to her books. He may very well have found a kindred soul. “I couldn't …”

“Please.” Rupert retrieved another place setting. “It would be pleasant to have company. The library does not seem to be a popular, ah I believe the term is hang out?”

“A lot of students are wigged by the library, uh, I mean it makes them uncomfortable, but I love it though.” As she sat down across from him, Rupert saw a flash of light, almost visible and almost not, a shifting of rainbow colors rather like that of an oil slick on water.

As Rupert lost track of her words, Giles dropped the paper plate onto the table. He sank, easily after years of practice, into a light trance. Looking at the girl, Giles let his vision go wide. A nimbus shone around her, a halo that glowed brighter and brighter until Giles had to raise an arm to shield his eyes.

“Are you okay?”

Gods, did this child honestly have that much power? Giles brushed a hand over his hair as if he'd meant to neaten it all along. “Ah, I've been shelving books all morning and it just occurred to me I
might not be presentable for company. You were saying?” Looking down at the two place settings, he added a third.

“Saying?”

“About the library.”

“Oh, pretty much what I’d said. Other kids don't like the vibes or something.”

Did that mean the library repelled other students but drew this girl to it? What could do such a thing? Giles nodded and gestured toward the containers in a help yourself motion. While she was busy with the food, he weakened his shields, allowing himself to feel the energy around them. Gods, the floor was almost humming with demonic power.

Before he could think through what that might mean, the library door swung open. “Well Rupert, I hope the food's …”

“Hey Miss Mansfield,” the girl said.

“Willow.” Kris had paused just this side of the doors. Damn but she had terrible timing. He'd invited her to lunch on a whim, one he was beginning to regret. She'd been flirting with him but Rupert, the git, had been ignoring her. Honestly, if he left it up to Rupert, he wouldn't have a sex life at all. He'd thought it would be amusing to watch Rupert flummox about when she showed up unexpectedly but instead it was Giles who was caught off guard. Still she was a delightful distraction. While she was shorter than Giles' usual, she was quite curvacious, so much so that she'd be too plump for even a second look in about a decade but for now it looked good on her. Her hair, a brighter red than Willow's, wasn't quite a shade found in nature. Her clothes suggested she shopped at Mayfairs or whatever these bloody Colonials thought was up to par in its place. Granted she probably shopped at the discount rack on a secretary's wage, but she did what she could to keep up appearances. It was a quality Giles appreciated.

“Kris, I hope you don't mind. I asked …” He turned to the girl. “We haven't been properly introduced. Apparently you're Willow. I'm Mr. Giles.” He didn't give her his first name. It wouldn't do to be too informal with the students while Kris was watching.

“Willow, yeah, I mean, that's me.” She looked like a rabbit caught by headlights. “But I should go.” She'd bolted out the door before he could call her back.

“You invited a student to join us?” Kris didn't move from the door.

Willow hadn't touched her food but Kris wouldn't appreciate eating food the girl had served for herself. Giles tossed the plate and bowl. “Do you know how few students actually use the library? I wasn't about to encourage her to leave, not when she'd given up her lunch period to come here.”

Kris' shrug conceded the point but as she approached the table she noted the dent he'd made in his satay. Giles suppressed a sigh. He'd been so looking forward to watching Rupert squirm under her glare. “I'm afraid I started without you. Missed breakfast. You'll have to suggest a few more restaurants. You were right. This one is delightful.”

As he gestured toward a chair, Giles thought about the demonic energy. A Hellmouth. It had to be. He looked over as Kris started speaking. She hadn't taken the seat he'd offered. “Recommend more restaurants? Why? Do you want to invite other students to join us for lunch?”

“Ah, no, I was thinking of, um, dinner. Friday perhaps. We could make a night of it. Just the two of us, I promise.”
As she smiled, shaking her head slightly as if she couldn’t quite believe his audacity, Giles stepped around the table to pull out her chair. It's a bit of a trick, holding the chair, one that impresses the hell out of women whose class isn't quite up to his own. She was, as he'd expected, suitably impressed. The lunch was going so well that he should have expected disaster but, still, he was caught unawares when Buffy barged through the door. “Okay, what's the sitch?”

Buffy’s forward momentum brought her halfway across the room before she stopped. Obviously a student. Obviously more familiar than she should be. “Ah, Miss Summers,” he said as he rose to his feet. “I'm afraid I misplaced the list naming the textbooks you required. If you could perhaps write them down for me again I'd be happy to pull them for you.”

He pulled her over to the book checkout counter and smiled back at Kris as he handed Buffy a pen and paper. “Are you hitting on the principal's secretary?” Buffy sounded disgusted.

“Is there some purpose to your visit or are you merely here to ruin my afternoon?”


“Are you saying there was a vampire attack, here in the school?”

“Yes.” She glanced back at Kris who was obviously beginning to suspect something odd was going on. “I can't talk about it with her here.”

“Well I can’t get rid of her,” Giles hissed back. “After Willow's visit, she's already suspicious.”

“Huh?”

“Look, just come back next period. She'll be back at the office by then.”

“I have class!”

“Buffy, vampires are more important…”

“Nuh uh, if you can't talk because you're on a date, I'm not missing class.”

“Fine.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “After school then.”

“Don't forget about your date.” The Slayer's tone didn't hold even an ounce of respect but he could scarcely admonish her with Kris in the room.

“Don t you forget our appointment,” he called back. She was almost to the door when she raised her hand in a half-wave, whatever that was supposed to mean.

“I ah…” He turned to find Kris skimming book titles. As Bob's assistant, she must have been aware of the occult nature of his collection. The permissions had gone through the principal's office after all. The agreement had somehow warped into the idea that he would teach a class on the worldview that had allowed people to believe in demons and witches. Fortunately none of the other instructors were willing to cover the library while he was in a classroom and so the idea had been discarded. “I apologize,” he said, gesturing toward the doors which had already swung shut.

Giles felt unexpectedly lighter as Kris turned from the books. “I've read her file.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“From her previous high-school. She's …” Kris shook her head. “I can't go into details, but that girl is bad news. I hope she doesn't give you too much trouble.”
Ah, good, at least she didn't think he was kidnapping the girl and hauling her off to Tribulation or some such nonsense, but of course she didn't. Such victims weren't dragged into sex clubs, or even S&M clubs, at least not public ones. They were taken into the home or some other secured and private location. But all that was beside the point. Watchers, working so closely with teenage girls, had to avoid even the appearance of impropriety. That sort of rumor, once it started making the rounds, was almost impossible to squelch. “I believe I can handle her.”

* * *

Giles' office was empty outside of the furniture that had come with it and the boxes he was about to unpack. He'd had to box up the previous librarian's belongings himself. Nobody had come for them yet which suggested nobody was going to. He'd stored them in the cage for the time being.

The first box he opened held the brass statue of Vishnu. It was wrapped to protect it during shipping, but the silhouette was unmistakable. Pulling away the wrapping revealed the image of Vishnu encircled by flames and dancing on a coiled serpent. The image, too popular now to serve such a purpose, had once been used to identify Watchers because Vishnu, manifesting in avatars across various ages to save humanity for demons, stood within the Council as a representation of the Slayer.

Coming from the library's main room, he could hear a scraping, rather like the sound of a table being shoved across the floor. He stepped out to find the table askew, confirming his suspicion, and three boys shoving a fourth into the card catalog. “What do you think you're doing?”

One, a big bruiser of a lad, put his arm around the skinny one – all lean angles and dark hair – they'd been shoving about. “We're just messing around, having fun. No problemo sir.”

Another, just as big as the first but with darker hair and an attitude, sneered as he spoke. “What's it to you, old man?”

Giles gave them one of Ripper's grins, the one that said I'd like nothing better than to tear you to pieces … slowly. The three boys ran, leaving the fourth behind. He looked as if he'd like to sneer himself but was too cautious to try it. He stammered as he spoke. “I just, I need a book … for my English class.”

The boy's bloody nose gave lie to his words, but it wasn't Giles' concern. “Of course, Mr.?”

“Wells. Uh, Tucker Wells.”

Giles waited until Tucker had vanished into the stacks before turning his attention back to work. There was much yet to be done. He'd filed his books away but still had to update the card catalog. By the time the next bell rang, Giles had forgotten about the boy. It gave him a bit of a start, seeing the boy emerge from the stacks. The boy seemed startled as well and as he left, presumably for his next class, he gave Giles an odd look.

* * *

As the sun set, Giles lit a fire, more for the atmosphere than from a sense of chill. It didn't get cold here in California or at least what they considered cold was nothing compared to the chill of England. He dropped onto his couch, leather and the most comfortable Sunnydale had to offer, and sipped at his Armagnac as he considered how he should start his Watcher's Journal. An accurate assessment of how Merrick had mismanaged the Slayer would be considered bad form. It would appear that he, expecting to fail, had chosen to lay the blame at her previous Watcher's feet.

Still, the man had definitely mismanaged the Slayer. Giles could still hear her words ringing out,
tolling like a death knell. “Prepare me for what? For getting kicked out of school? For losing all of my friends? For having to spend all of my time fighting for my life and never getting to tell anyone because I might endanger them? Go ahead! Prepare me.”

The crackling fire drew Giles’ gaze, distracting him from the Slayer’s words. He'd meant for Lothos to kill the Slayer but instead the vampire had killed Merrick. The death had stirred up the Council like a fox stirred up the chickens in a hen house. Not one of them was comfortable with the reminder that the Watcher’s field position wasn’t a safe one. Still the situation had advantages. Merrick hadn’t maintained his detachment. The younger Watchers tended to worship those Watchers who’d trained a Slayer. If Merrick had survived and returned to the Council, he would have been a corrupting influence on the next generation of Watchers. Giles put the Journal away. Merrick had already corrupted the Slayer, but that couldn't be allowed to stand. A proper Watcher did not allow his Slayer to reject her duty. He would find Buffy and he would convince her. Buffy would start Slaying again and the question of Merrick's incompetence would become moot.

Sunnydale's scene did include some interesting clubs but Buffy's youth would prevent her from gaining access. Hell, most of them wouldn't even open the door to her. Giles imagined that her idea of nightlife was rather tame. He'd probably find her at the Bronze.

As the music hit him, Giles stumbled back a step and half-fell against a wall. Noises were louder in his ears than they once had been. His vision had improved as well. These were recent changes, presumably a result of his connection to Eyghon. These changes should be impossible. All of the literature stated that domination, a non-physical connection, could not cause the physical transformation of a human host. Giles could only conclude that the Council had only ever captured a host whose domination had been of short duration. It made sense actually. The longer the connection existed, the better the host would become at avoiding detection.

“A guy with a sense of style at the Bronze? Hell must have frozen over.”

Giles turned and allowed his gaze to censure the speaker. Her dress left much to be desired. The fabric, while above and beyond what most teenagers would wear, didn't sit well on her frame and the color, pale blue, didn't suit her. With that complexion and dark hair, she could carry off a more vibrant shade. “I beg your pardon?” He allowed his lips to tilt up at her obvious dismay. She at least had the sense to know when she was outclassed.

“Cordelia.” The name, hissed from the sideline, released the girl, Cordelia, from his gaze.

“Who invited the geezer?” But she looked back, caught his eye, and blushed as she turned away.

At the foot of the spiral staircase, he caught something about a sugar daddy but he had neither the time nor the interest to accommodate adolescent fantasies. Gazing down from the upper level, he scanned the crowd for his Slayer. He couldn't be certain she'd come but if that rebellious streak he'd seen was any indication, she'd have no difficulties finding the local hangout.

When he saw the Slayer climbing the stairs, Giles blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected her to spot him first. Of course he should have. Slayers were more primal, more physically oriented than ordinary humans. Naturally her baser instincts would give her an advantage.

“So, you like to party with the students. Isn't that kinda skanky?” Giles' heart pounded heavily in his chest, thumping faster than it should. She knew. She sensed the demon. As he parsed her words, his panic abated. She didn't know. She was accusing him of a more human sin.

His own reply was angrier than he'd intended. “Oh, right, this is me having fun. Watching … clown hair prance about is hardly my idea of a party. I'd much rather be …” Back in London, Giles had a
favorite sub, not overly tall, lean, rather like Ethan had looked back in the day. He pictured the sub, bound at his feet and sucking his cock. “… at home with a cup of Bovril and a good book.”

“You need a personality, stat!”

Eyghon stirred in the back of his mind like a dark Charybdis drowning Giles' calm in a sea of rage. He took a deep breath. He was in control. He would speak and the Slayer would listen. “This is a perfect breeding ground for vampire activity. It's dark, it's crowded … Besides, I knew you were likely to show up, and I have to make you understand …”

“That the Harvest is coming. I know, your friend told me.”

“Harvest?” Giles grabbed onto the word that had awoken his dark demon. “Who told you this?” Stop growling and tell me what it is.

“This … guy. Dark, gorgeous in an annoying sort of way. I figured you two were buds.”

A chance for an enemy to rise.

An enemy? What enemy? Rupert felt Eyghon retreating. Damned demon. Always showing up just long enough to raise an issue and then buggering off. What had the girl said? Something about buds? “The Harvest. Did he say anything else?”

“Something about the mouth of Hell. I *really* didn't like him.”

Giles dropped his head as if watching the crowd and thought quickly. Obviously the Slayer knew nothing about this Harvest. Perhaps his own books would be of some use. When he looked up, she was leaning over the railing, ignoring him. She wasn't allowed to ignore him. He stepped around her and leaned in over her shoulder, a guardian angel advising and protecting. “Look at them, throwing themselves about, completely unaware of the danger that surrounds them.”

“Lucky them.”

“Or perhaps you're right. Perhaps there is no trouble coming; the signs could be wrong. It's not as though you've been having the nightmares.” She didn't reply. Good, he'd made his point. He waited, wielding his silence like a weapon, forcing her to speak.

“I didn't say I'd never slay another vampire. It's not like I have all these fluffy-bunny feelings for them. I'm just not gonna get way extracurricular with it. You know, if I see one, sure I’ll--”

Now, while she's on the defensive. “Will you be ready? There's so much you don't know about them, about your own powers. A vampire appears to be completely normal until the feed is upon them, only then do they reveal their true demonic visage.”

“You're like a textbook with arms. I know this.”

“The point is, a Slayer should be able to see them anyway. Without looking, without thinking. Can you tell me if there's a vampire in this building?”

“Maybe …”

“You should know. Even through this mass and this … din, you should be able to sense them. Well, try! Reach out with your mind. You have to hone your senses, focus until the energy washes over you, until you, you feel every particle of … of …”
As Buffy scanned the ground floor, Giles questioned his approach. Training his Slayer to sense demons when he himself had a connection to ... well, less than clever didn't even begin to cover it. If she sensed his connection to Eyghon, allowing her to live would be problematic at best, but he certainly couldn't kill her here. Someone would be bound to see.

"There's one."

"W-where?"

"Right there, talking to that girl."

"You don't know ..." She hadn't honed but did he honestly want her to? He needed her alive but if she did manage to detect Eyghon he'd have to find a way to disable her without alerting the Council.

"Oh, please! Look at his jacket. He's got the sleeves rolled up, and the shirt! Deal with that outfit for a moment."

Ah, he could see her point. "Not all vampires will wear ..." Wait. There was something about the girl. Giles, stretching out his senses, looking past the mundane, almost winced as the power flashed into his awareness. "Good Lord. Willow."

"What?" Buffy leaned over the railing. "Oh no."

Giles wanted to chase after Buffy, to help save Willow, but Eyghon obviously saw the Harvest as a threat. Giles thought of Mary, dead and buried. There was no one left for Eyghon to kill. There was no one left that Giles cared for. Go ahead, he thought as if egging on the demon, take Kris. All my loves are long gone. He chased after Buffy and found her coming back into the club. "That was quick. Well done! I take it Willow is unharmed?"

"I didn't find them."

He grabbed her by the arm, wrenching her around until they stood face-to-face. "You lost her? She could already be dead."

"She's not dead." The Slayer sounded uncertain. "I'll find her. I'll save her."

The Harvest. Bloody wonderful. He'd been assigned an incompetent Slayer and now Eyghon had awoken. "You'd better. Report to me in the morning, before classes."

* * *

Giles noted in passing that the high-school's parking lot was empty but his mind was on the informant, the stranger showing an interest in his Slayer. He wished he'd gotten more information. Her description – guy, dark, and gorgeous – didn't give him anything to work with. He'd have to focus on this Harvest she'd mentioned and deal with her informant later.

The lights were on in the library, but the rest of the high-school was dark. Giles grabbed a short sword out of the trunk. The halls were lit only by the light shining through the small glass windows in the library doors. It was enough to navigate by. Stopping at the door, Giles looked through the window. A boy, one of the students, that Wells lad, had his grubby paws all over one of Giles' tomes. "I suppose I should be grateful the little bugger didn't steal the text."

Light glinted off the blade as he parried in an impressive if less than lethal display. Still it did have the desired effect. The lad's chair fell over as he leaped to his feet. Giles steadied the blade, pointing it straight at the young man. "You are aware, I presume, that the library, indeed the entire school, is
now closed.”

The lad took a slight step toward the stairs.

“I wouldn't move if I were you, Mr. Wells. Tucker, wasn't it?” Lowering the sword to his side as he crossed the room, Giles flipped the book closed. “Burningham's *Introduction to Demonic Breeds*?”

“I was just messing with it,” Tucker said.

“Messing with it.” Giles tone was as dry as a glass of Albariño.

“Not messing with the book. I mean, I was, uh, just reading it. But …”

“You broke into the school library to read a demonology text at eleven in the evening on a school night. That's your idea of messing about? Think carefully on your answer. I know exactly how dry that text is.”

Tucker glanced about as if trying to find a way out. Giles waited for him to speak. “Look, I know that demons are real, okay? I just hadn't seen any books on 'em until today.”

“And why are you interested in demons?”

“I live in a town full of them.” Interesting. According to the Council, Hellmouths induced a selective amnesia in the uninitiated, erasing any memories of demons.

“What about your friends? Are they interested in demons?” Giles watched carefully. Tucker almost winced at the word friends. So, he had none. That could be useful. “It might be better if you didn't review demonology tomes in the school library.” This one might make a decent acolyte for Eyghon, but only if the Slayer shouldn't know Giles was training him. “I could teach you. Twice a week perhaps? When my other duties allow.”

“What other duties?”

“Do you know any languages other than English?”

“German.”

Giles pulled out a tome. “Read that.” The accent was horrendous but the lad did seem to understand what he was reading. Giles added a half-dozen books to the pile. “Look for the Harvest. Related terms would include reaping, culling, gleaning, winnowing.” Giles waited to see if Tucker would rebel but the lad took one look at the sword and dove into the research.

More than two hours had passed before Tucker brought the passage to Giles' attention. Giles read aloud as he translated. “On the night of the crescent moon, the first past the solstice, will come the Harvest.” He turned the page, revealing an image of a wood cut, one showing a transfer of power between a demonic figure and what looked like a man. Eyghon growled in the back of Giles' mind. Yes, this was it.

“Mr. Giles?” The lad sounded apologetic. “I have to be home before my Dad gets back. The bars close at two.”

It was almost a quarter of. “Of course. I'll drive you. The streets aren't safe after dark.”

They were in the parking lot before Tucker spoke again. “Woah. This is yours? All the guys have been jonesing this baby.”
Giles ran an appreciative hand over his Volante. The white roadster almost glowed in the dim light of
the parking lot. Wincing as Tucker stroked a hand along the hood, Giles added, “Let's get you
home.” He made a note to check, later, for scratches.

Giles tore through the parking lot, as much to impress the lad as to please himself. They'd pulled up
to Tucker's home before the lad spoke again. “You said you might teach me?”

“It's possible but I'll need to find a place where we can meet, someplace out of the way. Are there
any houses that are currently empty and not close to their neighbors?”

“There are some places but they're more abandoned than empty,” Giles made an encouraging noise.
Abandoned would be perfect although he wasn't about to share that with Tucker. Abandoned meant
nobody could track the house back to him if things went badly. “A bunch of us got stuck in one,”
Tucker continued, “trapped. Something is living there. I barely got out.”

Giles noted what Tucker hadn't said. The friends hadn't made it out of the house. “Perfect. Bring me
the address tomorrow.”

Tucker leaned into the side door. “You don't want that house. Look, I'll bring you a list, other
houses. Ones that aren't …” He stopped abruptly as if unable to find words to describe the horror.


Tucker nodded as he scrambled out of the car. Giles drove off immediately, not waiting to see
Tucker enter the house. His thoughts had turned longingly toward sleep, but this Harvest was
obviously too important. He returned to the library.

* * *

The thought that she might arrive late to the office made Bob anxious. Kris could tell because every
morning when she slipped in just under the wire, she found him standing inside his office, anxiously
glancing between her desk and the clock. She wasn't certain how he'd handle her arriving before he
did, especially since it was never going to happen again.

She put her jacket and bag away before making her way to the library and tried to walk confidently
so she didn't seem to be sneaking. As Bob's administrative assistant, she had every right to be here
after all. The library door squeaked, just enough for her to cringe at the sound, but not enough
awaken the room's unexpected occupant.

Rupert's head, shoulders, and arms were sprawled over the library's table. It looked like he'd pushed
his books out of the way just enough to lay his head down before falling asleep. Noting the wrinkles
in his suit, the same one he'd worn yesterday, Kris made a mental note to avoid both him and the
library for the remainder of the day. She could imagine how grumpy he'd be if he found himself at a
disadvantage and he was the kind to consider a wrinkled suit a disadvantage. She'd bet money on it.

She took off her shoes before crossing the room and watched him carefully as she picked up one of
the tomes from the table. Breathing in the dusty scent of old books, Kris glanced over the familiar
squiggles. As Rupert snorted and stirred in his sleep, Kris froze until he'd settled down again. She put
the book back exactly as she'd found it and didn't don her shoes again until she was safely tucked
away in her own office.

Rupert had been put off by her flirting. It had hurt at first, but yesterday, when she'd glanced over his
books, she'd thought she might understand why, and now she was certain. A field Watcher wouldn't
have time for liaisons. No wonder he'd been so discomfited when she'd found him with Willow. The
girl must be his Slayer. Of course he'd also been uncomfortable around that new girl, Buffy Summers, but Buffy couldn't be the Slayer. Kris had seen the girl's record from Henley high: cutting classes, fighting, burning down a gym. The Council would never stand for that kind of behavior from one of their own.

* * *

As a sharp clacking echoed in his head, Rupert bolted up, almost exploding out of his chair. Ah, shoes, Buffy's shoes clacking against the floor. He was in the library. He'd been at home, about to start his Watcher's Journal. Damn. What had brought him to the library? Scanning the books strewn across the table, he saw the notes and glanced up sharply. Buffy wasn't alone. She'd brought Willow and some young man along. He briefly questioned the wisdom of leaving his notes out in the open. If Willow learned of demons, the fear might drive her toward an authority figure for protection. It could create a rapport between them. On the other hand, it might send her running for the hills. He pulled a book over the notes, only glancing at the title after it was in place: *On Rituals of the Undead*. Oh yes, well done. That wouldn't draw attention, not at all.

As he blinked, wondering why he wanted to create a rapport with Willow, the boy spoke. “You were asleep?”

“Xander.” At least Willow had the sense to reprimand the boy, even if it was a weak censure.

“They got Jesse. Who knows what they're doing to him.” Xander waved a hand towards Rupert. “This guy is supposed to help? We should go back to the cemetery.”

“Xander, we've already been all over the cemetery.”

Rupert glanced at his watch. Wonderful. Not even a quarter after eight and already his world was falling apart. “Would someone please fill me in?”

“Our friend was grabbed. By Vampires. Vampires!”

Rupert sank into his chair in relief. They didn't expect him to already know what they were referring to. Then the sense of the boy's words hit him. He sat back up. “Vampires?” Gods, what did these children already know?

“Relax,” Buffy said. “They know I'm the Slayer.”

Rupert rose to his feet, telling himself that shaking the girl senseless would only exacerbate the situation. “They know what?”

“Hey. Xander already knew and Willow was being dragged off by a vamp. You were there. You remember. Willow. Vamp. I ran off to save. Of course she knows.”

Willow had been attacked by a vampire? At least Buffy seemed to have saved her, but Buffy expected him to know, which meant he'd seen her last night. “Well, now you know,” he said to the other two. “Don't tell anyone. If you don't mind, Buffy and I have business to attend to.”

“But we want to help,” Willow said.

“They've got Jesse. We're not going anywhere.”

“Jesse?” Rupert asked.

“Friend,” Buffy replied.
“He was captured by vampires?” Rupert asked. “Last night? And you haven't freed him?”

“We couldn't find him.”

Why the hell Merrick had sacrificed himself to save this whiny child … “And if we were discussing a lost puppy, that might be an acceptable excuse, but you left a human in the hands of demons for an entire night.”

“But he could still be okay, right?” Willow asked. “I mean, there must be lots of reasons why vampires would keep someone alive.”

Oh certainly, Rupert thought. Perhaps they're saving him for a mid-afternoon snack.

“Sure,” Xander said. “There's probably … torture and then there's the torture.”

“Xander,” Buffy warned.

“Jesse's my bud. I'm not letting him …”

“He's my responsibility,” Buffy interrupted. She glanced toward Rupert and looked away quickly. “I let him get taken.”

Rupert sank back into his chair as the children babbled on. Buffy had accepted her responsibility. The lad, Jesse, was almost certainly dead but it wouldn't do any harm to allow Buffy to try to track him down. Perhaps a dose of reality would do her some good.

A flash of movement brought Rupert's attention back to the children. Willow had half-collapsed into a chair and Buffy was telling her to breathe. The advice seemed to be helping. When Willow had calmed down, Buffy addressed him, providing information she should have led with. “This big guy, Luke. He talked about an offering to the Master. Now, I don't know what or who, but if they weren't just feeding then Jesse may still be alive. I'm gonna find him.”

An offering. It was a surprising insight coming from his Slayer, but she was correct. Vampires might keep an offering alive. Rupert thought back to what they'd said earlier. “Right. So you lost, er, last saw this Jesse in a cemetery?”

“Yeah, but I didn't see where they went.”

“Keep in mind they might have gone underground,” Rupert said.

“Hey, electrical tunnels …”

“Um, hello?” Gods but the students in this place had terrible timing. “I need a book? The Call of the Wild? Hey Xander, Willow.”


“We're busy,” Rupert said. “Perhaps you could come back later?”

Willow whispered something to Buffy. “No big,” Buffy announced. “We have an idea.”

“An … what? You're going to need my help.”

He was surprised by how quickly the children crossed the room. “I think we've got it covered,” Buffy called back through the swinging doors.
Tucker held out a piece of paper. “I brought you that list.”

Rupert glared at the closed door before snatching at the paper. He stared at the addresses and then at the boy. Tucker, Xander had said? “List, ah, yes.” Tucker stood there dumbly as if expecting some other response. “If you don’t mind,” Rupert added, “I haven’t had breakfast.”

“Oh, okay.” When Tucker paused and glanced back, Rupert made himself busy with the texts, hoping the lad would take the hint. Last night’s research had been important enough that he’d fallen asleep over his books. Once the boy left, Rupert scanned the notes from the previous night: crescent moon, solstice. Gods, that was tomorrow, and he still didn’t seem to know what or where. Rupert took in all the books scattered across the table. He had no idea which ones his alter ego had already searched.

* * *

Rupert felt as if his spine would never be straight again. His books weren’t helping. He’d found no further information on the Harvest ritual. He knew neither its location nor its purpose. A woodcarving depicting a demonic transfer of energy didn’t provide much to work with.

Tea, perhaps, would help. He’d taken only a few steps towards his office and its hotplate when Willow burst through the doors. “Um, Mr. Giles?”

Rupert glanced down at the occult tomes scattered across the table and saw, for the first time, the flaw in his librarian persona. Fortunately few students seemed to be drawn to the library. This girl knew Buffy’s secret. Something told him she could be useful and, as exhausted as he was, he didn’t bother to question it. “Yes, Willow?”

“I was wondering if Buffy was back. I sort of think … Xander hasn’t been in any of his classes since she left. I think he followed her. It’s been a couple of hours. Should it take this long?”

“Back?”

“I, uh, you know.”

Damn Tucker for interrupting. No, this had nothing to do with Tucker. He should damn himself for allowing Buffy to leave. “Where did she go, Willow?”

“The tunnels?”

Rupert took one deep breath before asking. “Tunnels?”

“To look for Jesse? I think Xander followed because … well … Didn’t she tell you?”

“No. What tunnels?”

“The electrical tunnels? Buffy figured out there was an entrance in the crypt.”

She’d thrown herself into a vampire’s lair without so much as a by your leave?

“Mr. Giles?”

“Hmmm?”

“How dangerous is it?”

A Vampire’s lair? The truth would only distress the girl. “Buffy’s a Slayer. I’m sure she’s fine.” He
could see that Willow wasn't reassured. “She's had a Watcher, before me that is. She's had training. I'm sure Buffy knows what she's doing.”

“Oh, that's good. What happened to her other Watcher?”

He wondered what he could ask her to do. He could throw tomes at her, let her think she was helping with the research. She wouldn't know the difference, but then his eye struck on the computer. “Perhaps you could find, or uh search for information, on that infernal machine?”

“Infernal? Oh, you mean the computer? Sure.”

Giles watched from behind Rupert's eyes. He'd prompted Rupert into finding work for the girl. Now if she'd only come up with something, no matter how small, that he could expand on to make her feel as if she'd helped. If she thought she'd contributed, she might want to help again. He could work that, use it to get closer to her and all that power. “Wonderful,” Rupert told her. “I do believe your assistance could be quite helpful.”

* * *

Willow scanned the Googled list. Earthquake in '37? It wasn't supernatural but maybe vampires took advantage of natural disasters. She brought up the newspaper archives, expecting she'd have to search through the articles but no, there it was, right in a headline: bloodless corpse. There'd been a murder, a teen, someone famous, an actor. Oh, he'd been her age. Willow read on. Holes in the throat. Ah! Vampires. But … wait, there were other murders. She read further, gathering evidence. Rash of murders. This could be it. “Mr. Giles?”

He looked up from his books.

“I think you should see this.”

He came behind her and leaned down to read over her shoulder. He was sort of close but she supposed he'd have to be to read the screen. “I do believe you're right. Thank you, Willow. That is extremely helpful.” He looked distracted. “It's all coming together. I rather wish it weren't.”

“Should we, uh, go after Buffy?”

“I don't see how making ourselves vampire bait would help.”

“Oh.” It was a stupid idea.

“I'm sorry, Willow. I'm just … well, it's my first apocalypse and we still have no clue as to location. That is, it's due to you that we know what's happening but …”

There was a loud slam. Willow jumped up from her seat. Oh, it was only Buffy and Xander but … only Buffy and Xander, no Jesse. Maybe he had to, you know, stop and use the boy's room or something or maybe get something to eat. Vampires probably don't feed their vic … “Did you find Jesse?”

They had but they hadn't. Jesse had been changed – transformed? – into a vampire. How did that work? At the bang, Willow jumped and saw a waste basket flying away from Xander's foot. Oh God, she was a terrible person. Jesse was a vampire and she'd been wondering about how a human became one.

Mr. Giles was explaining, telling Xander and Buffy what they'd learned. He was trying to help, to stop the vampires from doing to anyone else what they'd done to Jesse. And here she was stupidly
wondering how the process worked. What did it matter how humans became vampires? The point was to kill them. “We don't know where,” she blurted out.

“Huh?”

“Where this.” She looked at Mr. Giles for confirmation. “Ritual? We don't know where it's happening.”

“There, there are a number of possibilities.”

“They're goin' to the Bronze.”

Xander was certain and everyone seemed to just pile on the going down at the Bronze bandwagon, but what if they were wrong? They didn't have any other ideas though. Willow hoped they were right and Willow hoped they were wrong. She sort of didn’t want to ever meet another vampire.

Xander had been right. It was surprising, how quickly Mr. Giles could pick a lock. She wondered if he'd teach her, but no, he was using his skills for good. She'd probably do something wrong with hers like … Well, okay, she didn't know any locks she wanted picked but once she found one …

The door was open. They were going in.

Buffy was up on the stage, fighting some big guy, well vampire. People were mostly standing still as if the shock had frozen them. Willow could get that. She felt sort of frozeny herself. Mr. Giles leaped into action, staking a vampire before it had even seen them and Xander was urging people to get out the door. Willow stepped forward to help Xander. They had to get these people out.

After they’d moved out the crowd closest to the door, she and Xander split up. It was faster, they could get more people out that way, but she didn't like losing sight of him. She tapped at a shoulder but then the girl turned and she wasn’t human. Willow heard herself squeak as the vampire grabbed her. This was it. She was never going to get to share smoochies or tell Xander how she felt … But then Mr. Giles was there and he wasn't really looking like himself. He looked younger somehow and he pulled the vampire off of her. “Buzz off, mate. The bird's with me.”

The vampire turned to dust but then there was another one and it jumped on Mr. Giles and knocked him to the ground. Willow scrambled through her bag and found the jar of Holy Water that Buffy had given her. Oh God, the vampire was almost biting Mr. Giles. “Get off of him!” She threw the Holy Water and the vampire screamed and ran off.

Then she held out her hand and Mr. Giles took it and she was the one to help him up. He brushed a lock of her hair away from her face, and all thoughts of should it be vampiress if the demon was a female fled from her mind. “Are you alright?”

Oh, his eyes were so green, or no, not really. The one was green but the other more of a greenish brown. It must be the lights. They were beautiful though, his eyes.

“Willow, are you alright?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

She looked around. The club was empty. “Did we win?”

“Well,” Buffy said as she walked up, “We averted the apocalypse. I'll give us points for that.”

“One thing's for sure,” Xander added. “Nothing will ever be the same again.”
Willow's gaze followed Mr. Giles. He was even walking differently. His stroll had a looser feel to it than it had earlier. He was probably a lot younger than she'd first thought, and even if he wasn't, younger that is, he was young at heart and that's what counted, right?

They stepped out of the Bronze and even in this alley the stars looked brighter than they ever had. Xander was right. Nothing was ever going to be the same.

* * *

Giles waited as Buffy climbed in through a window, presumably belonging to her bedroom, before pulling away from the curb. Willow, sitting beside him, kept glancing back at Xander. The lad had been staring off at nothing, only coming alive for direct questions, ever since they'd pulled away from the Bronze. The club hadn't been that bad and yet the lad was an emotional wreck. It was pathetic, truly pathetic. Willow hadn't turned into a whining heap. In fact she was jabbering away a mile a minute. “… and I really wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Believe me, you did help.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean back there in the Bronze? I didn't do that much. I mean, okay, I did sort of get the vampiress … vampire? Do female vampires get a different name?”

“Ah, no, vampire is the correct term for either gender. It's not as if they're human after all. But when I said you'd helped, I wasn't referring to the Bronze although I do thank you for saving my life.”

Even in the dim light of the car he could see her blush. “Oh, but I didn't do much. I mean, I had the Holy Water and I threw it.”

“You kept your head in a deadly situation. Not everyone can.”

“Oh.” Her smile was small but definitely there. Good.

“I am grateful, but when I said that you'd helped I was referring to your research, identifying the earthquake and the vampire attacks. Well done.”

“Oh, um, well, thanks.”

A quick glance told him Xander wasn't paying attention. “If you truly wanted to help, but no, perhaps not.”

“What? What do you mean perhaps not?”

“It's … you have other priorities, a social life. I shouldn't ask.” Come on, little fishy, take the bait.

“But you said I'd helped with the Holy Water and the research. I could help again. I want to help again.”

“I wouldn't want you to fall behind in your schoolwork but I do believe you might have an aptitude for magic.”

“Magic?”

“Vampires are real, why not magic?”

“Yes but magic? That's like something out of a story. I mean, yeah, vampires, definitely out of a story, but, well, I've seen vampires.”
“I assure you, magic is quite real. I will understand if you aren’t interested. It can be a demanding field of study.”

“No, no, I’m interested and I won’t fall behind. I’m top of my class. Well, okay, there are a couple of guys ahead of me, but I could definitely keep up with my schoolwork and learn magic.”

Giles pinched his lips into a thin line as if he didn't quite approve. “Well, I suppose we could try, but only as long as you keep your grades up.”

“I will. You'll see.”

“Do you have a free period during the day? I wouldn't want to teach you while I'm training Buffy. Too much distraction.”

“I can get out of computers. I already know everything Miss Calendar is teaching.”

“Tomorrow then?”

“Um, oh, yeah, tomorrow's good.”

Giles grinned, pleased at her response. Her eyes were almost sparkling at the thought of learning magic.

* * *

The stucco walls were so pale against the night sky that they almost glowed with a life of their own. With the arched doorway behind him, Giles walked through dark halls, passing rooms whose abandoned air suggested that light and friendship had not touched them in ages. The interior courtyard, open to the sky and lit by moonlight, was overgrown but tameable. Giles had yet to detect the demon that had spooked Tucker. It was possible the lad had invented the creature, but that seemed unlikely. His terror had been too convincing. Giles tightened the grip on his sword.

The house was silent outside of the creaking floorboards underneath his feet. No mice scuttled behind the walls. No owls hooted outside the windows. He felt as if the house was listening to him, watching him, as he made his way through it. The wail, as weak as it was, sounded as loudly as a siren against that silence. The sound wrenched at his heart. An infant abandoned here? It was a feint, an illusion, he knew that but he had to force himself to stillness all the same.

The wail died abruptly as if cut short. Giles knew, with a certainty so deep he didn't even question it, that some thing had stolen the child's breath away. This was the demon Tucker had spoken of. Giles had to stop it before it killed again. Giles had to save the child.

He tried to rush forward but his limbs wouldn't obey. He couldn’t move. He was trapped. The demon, it must be the demon. He struggled to turn his head, to see it coming.

“Keep still you bloody berk.”

The words had come from his own mouth but he hadn't spoken. It couldn't be Rupert. He was safely asleep. “Ripper?”

“I said keep still.”

“But the child, we have to save …”

“It's not a child.”
It was, he could hear the infant wailing. Terrified. Desperate. Alone. Why would anyone abandon a child here? The question, the logic of it, broke the spell. The child might not have been abandoned. The demon could have stolen it, but Ripper could be right. The demon might be mimicking a child, using natural human instinct to draw its prey to it. And he was the prey.

He heard a sound, a whisper, a brush of skin against skin. Letting go of his body, Giles allowed Ripper to take control. A clattering raced toward him, a thundering of claws against floor. There was a face, that of a woman, pale and as detached as the moon. It rushed at him, but no, it wasn’t just a face. There was a body underneath, big and bulky. As he threw himself to the left, out of the demon's path, Ripper got a sense of feathers and a glimpse of talons, sharp enough to tear his gut out. He slammed against the wall with a thud and lost sight of the creature as he scrambled for the relative safety of the hall. Crouched on the floor, panting, Ripper listened, trying to hear past the silence. There was nothing. He rose slowly and peered back into the room. The demon had vanished.

“Bloody idiot.” There were five doors, all open. The demon could come through any one of them. Giles could have shut them on his way through when he’d been casing the joint, but no, he'd been too busy searching for the demon to think about watching his back. Cocky bastard.

Ripper stepped back into the room, but felt only slightly more secure. He'd thought he'd been lucky, getting through that attack with nothing more than a few bruises but now he wasn't so sure. The demon had been ungainly in its attack. It hadn't kept up with him. Perhaps it couldn't. Based on the feathers, it could be some sort of harpy, which meant it'd be deadly in the air but awkward on the ground. If so, the house would provide some defense. The demon wouldn't have room to fly.

He had to control the situation, to draw the demon out and choose the time of its attack. Standing at the edge of the room, with his back to the wall, that left the ball in the demon's court. It could wait before attacking, but if he moved into the center of the room, where it could see him, that might set it off. Most demons weren't known for their patience.

Ripper stepped into the middle of the room. A dark mass moved, rushing at him. Ripper swung his sword, sending feathers flying. A claw raked his leg as a high-pitched scream, like that of a baby, tore through the room. Ripper fell against the wall, holding his sword at the ready. The demon's pale face glowed from the far side of the room. It wasn't attacking. He must have hurt it. Shifting away from the wall, Ripper tested his leg. It would do. He took two steps forward and slashed his sword across the demon's eyes. It screamed as it scuttled back. He stepped forward and thrust his sword straight through its chest.

Ripper kicked at the corpse. An owl-like creature as tall as a man but with the face of a woman? It wasn't any demon he'd ever heard of. Giles would want it gone. A decomposing demon of this size would stink up the place up right quick, but that was Giles' problem. Ripper killed them. Giles dealt with the rest. If Giles had any brains at all, he'd find someplace to burn it and get that Tucker lad to cart it away. What use was a minion if you didn't make him do the dirty work?

* * *

This wasn't his bed. The mattress was too hard. Cecil considered rolling over but, well, some lady, whomever he's spent the night with, was bound to be offended. He sat up and blinked in surprise, vaguely disappointed that there was no lady. The heavy wooden bed-set, the tan walls, these all belonged to the bedroom he'd grown up in. With a groan he remembered where he was and why: the family estate, bound to purgatory, doomed to index demonology texts for an entire year. No wonder he'd slept through the alarm. He fell back onto the bed. Perhaps he should sleep awhile longer.

It seemed as if no time had passed before there was a knock on the door but the clock had swung around another twenty minutes. “Cecil.” Oh good Lord, mother's bellow.
He pulled the covers down to see her standing at the edge of the room, decked for the outdoors in a tan jacket, dark turtleneck, plaid skirt, and, please no, walking shoes.

“I won't have this lollygagging about. Get up, get dressed, have breakfast, and come find me.”

A chat. With mother. Cecil sat up and put his head in his hands. This wasn't right. He'd been standing up for the family honor. Giles had killed uncle Rod, but was Giles being punished? No, he'd been assigned to the current Slayer while Cecil was doomed to languish at Darlington Manor for a good year. If he was lucky, uncle Quentin would have forgiven him by then. It was damned unfair.

Cecil found her sitting in the gardens. “Mother?”

“Good, come walk with me.”

Cecil stifled a moan. A walk with mother meant a cross-country hike.

“It'll do you good.”

He was doomed. They'd walked for about five minutes, meandering through the gardens rather than heading out for an extended hike, before Cecil realized that while technically mother's requests didn't rank higher than the task that uncle Quentin, as Head of the Council, had assigned him, he could use any requests she might make as an excuse to avoid his indexing task. It obviously couldn't be put off forever, but he would count any delay as a boon.

“Cecil.” As usual her look suggested she could read his thoughts. “Do you know why I want to talk with you?”

He tried, unsuccessfully, to avoid sighing. “I made a scene, an unnecessary scene, in uncle Quentin's office. You don't believe Rupert Giles killed uncle Rod. Quentin was being more than kind in giving me such a light sentence.”

“The scene was unnecessary and far too flamboyant, and Quentin has been generous. You could have been expelled from the Council. As for that Giles scion, don't be an idiot Cecil, of course I know he murdered Roddie.”

“But Quentin said …”

“Quentin is protecting the family. Rupert Giles is dangerous, more so than you realize. Moving against him requires caution. Do you think you could be cautious?”

“Yes, mother, of course.”

“No you can't but you can do what you're told.”

Index demonology texts, he thought ruefully.

“You'll be looking into Rupert Giles' past. This can't be the first time he's stepped outside the bounds. We need to know what else he's done. Don't talk to anyone in the Council. Don't use your own name. We can't afford for this to get out.”

She stopped and brandished her walking stick into one of the bushes to push the leaves aside. “Weed.” As she knelt down into the dirt, she called up, “Well come along Cecil. I don't have all day. Hold these leaves off to the side.” He felt clumsy as he knelt down next to her. She pulled a trowel out from someplace and started digging at the offending plant. “There was some nonsense with the Giles lad and a demon, oh, twenty years back now. Start there.”
They wanted evidence. He'd find it, and if it wasn't there to be found, he'd … The flat of her trowel smacked down against his undefended thigh. “Ow!”

“Find the evidence. Don't create it out of thin air. We can't afford a mistake.”

* * *

Rupert had hoped to be finished in the main office before seven but had, unaccountably, overslept and didn't pull into the parking lot until a quarter after. He stopped outside of the office to see if he could possibly … but no, Kris glanced up and saw him watching. Damn, he'd hoped to avoid her but it was too late now and his business couldn't wait.

“Ah, good morning Miss Mansfield.” She smiled brightly up at him but didn't reply. Apparently he wasn't allowed to be this formal. “Kris, that is. Good morning Kris.”

“Rupert. What can I do for you?”

He noted with relief that her tone was professional, lacking the flirtatious subtext of their previous encounters. “I'm looking for Bob.” The back office, Bob's office, was dark. “Isn't he in?”

“Bob … well, I don't know if you've heard.” She paused as if she didn't want to give him bad news. Had the principal been attacked? It wouldn't be the first death associated with the school. The previous librarian, for example, but that may have been the Council making way for him. “There were deaths last night,” she continued. “A number of students were … It was at a local club, the Bronze. There's to be an assembly, third period, for the whole school. Bob's with a couple of teachers from the English department, working on his speech.”

The Bronze. Deaths. He'd left for the Bronze, the night before, with Buffy and with Willow. What had happened? “Who died?”

“Huh?”

He jammed his hands into his pockets so he wouldn't slam his fists onto her desk. “The students. Who's dead?”

“I have the list here someplace.” After a moment, she stopped scrounging through her desk and gazed up at him. “Willow is fine.”

“What?” Did Kris know about Willow's power, about the hooks he'd put into the girl's chakras?

“Miss Rosenberg. Her name isn't on the list.”

Was Kris a witch herself? How had she connected him to Willow? “I, um, thank you, but perhaps I could see the list?”

She dug through paperwork for another minute and handed it over. “You understand the names haven't been officially released yet. You can't share this information …”

“Quite,” he interrupted as he handed the paper back. Buffy's name wasn't on it. Willow's name wasn't on it. That was all he needed to know.

She seemed disgruntled. Ah, the interruption. “I apologize for being so abrupt. So very few students even come into the library. I hadn't expected it would disturb me, the thought that one of them might have died.”
“Of course.” Despite her words, she didn't seem to be appeased. “What was it you'd come in for? You wanted to see Bob?”

“Mentoring. I'll be mentoring one of the students, before school that is.”

“Oh, he did leave a file.” As she scrounged, once again, through paperwork, Rupert found his foot tapping against the floor. He forced it to stillness. She pulled out a folder and glanced through it. “Permissions seem to be in order. One homeroom transfer for …” She stared up as if surprised. “Buffy Summers?”

“Yes, I have some experience with troubled teens and thought I could be of some small assistance.”

“I see.” She glanced through the papers again. “Everything seems to be in order. I'll ask Mrs. Miller to send Buffy along to the library when she shows up at her old homeroom.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the help.”

“No problem.” Her smile was open and friendly, still lacking the flirtatiousness she'd displayed in his earlier visits. Perhaps he'd imagined it. That would certainly be for the best. He couldn't take up with anyone associated with the high-school. For him to be truly effective, his interactions with Buffy had to remain unnoticed.

* * *

Rupert couldn't help but be fascinated by how much power the Hellmouth held over the human mind. There had been a massacre at the Bronze the night before. Many of these students had been there but not one seemed to recall last night's more supernatural elements. It was unfortunate that he couldn't perform a study but of course his duty to the Council came first. Still, while he was waiting for Buffy to arrive, perhaps he could pull a student aside and ask a few questions. And of course, as soon as he had that thought, there she was, stepping out of the most atrocious nightmare of a suburban vehicle he'd ever seen.

There seemed to be a woman in the front seat, presumably Buffy's mother. Did the woman honestly feel it necessary to drive her teenage daughter to school. That would pose a problem. Buffy needed to be at school well before homeroom started. Fortunately issues revolving around her mother were Buffy's problem, not his.

“Buffy.” He most certainly did not need to know why she'd chosen to combine an almost stylish dress with a leather jacket.

She pulled a lollipop out of her mouth and paused to look at it before replying. “Giles. Waiting at the front gate. For me. Is there an apocalypse? Please tell me there's no apocalypse.”

“No apocalypse. I want you in the library.”

“Okay, but you'll have to make it quick. I've got homeroom in about …” She paused to glance at her watch. “… ten minutes.”

“No you don't, well, that is you do have homeroom but it's been moved. To the library.”

“My homeroom … Wait. Everyone in my homeroom or just me.”

“Don't be tiresome. Obviously you alone. I'm enhancing your training, adding meditations that are best performed early in the day. You would, actually, gain the most benefit by performing them just as you are waking but it's an imperfect world and we make do with what we have.”
“Giles, are you trying to kill my social life because I have to tell you that's a waste of time. After Cordelia and the stake last night? It's already dead.”

Gods, did she not listen to him at all? “Buffy, please, I need you to calm down. You should come to these meditative techniques … Hold on. Did you just say you'd staked a student?”

“No,” she grumbled. “I'm saying I've already all but staked my social life.”

“Buffy. Library. You have eight minutes. I've already cleared the change with Principal Flutie.”

He was waiting in the library, trying for patience, when the bell rang. Honestly, did he have to head out and hunt her down? The doors swung open and she dashed in as if she'd been running the entire way. “Sorry, I was telling Willow why I had a new homeroom. So, Giles, why do I have a new homeroom?”

How could she expect to survive as a Slayer if she couldn't be bothered to listen? “Your focus is weak. I want you meditating twenty minutes each morning. We'll use what little time we have today but I want you here earlier tomorrow.”

“Earlier? To meditate? You're joking, right? This has to be a joke.”

“Buffy, please sit.”

She grumbled a bit but did flop down onto a chair.

“Ah, you should probably sit on the table to meditate.”

She gave him an odd look as she jumped onto the table.

“Legs crossed.”

She crossed one leg over the other.

Rupert held back a sigh. “I obviously meant lotus position.”

“Lotus what?”

Rupert pinched the bridge of his nose. “I take it your previous Watcher didn't teach you to meditate?”

“No.” Gods, was she actually pouting? “Is there coffee? I could really use a coffee.”

“You can have a cup of tea after you've meditated.”

“Tea? Ugh, no thanks.”

Rupert breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't going to have to share his Harrods stash with the barbarian child.

* * *

Giles couldn't help but think that Willow would have made a better Slayer than Buffy. Where Buffy had arrived late, Willow had not only arrived early, she was bouncing with what appeared to be excitement. A skyblue sweater hung from her slight frame. Giles took a moment to appreciate the color, not for the color itself but for what it represented. Blue had psychic associations with openness and Giles would certainly need Willow to trust him for this to work. “There you are. Good. Ready to begin?”
“I've been thinking about it all morning. Do you really think I could do magic?”

“You're ready to believe magic exists?”

“Well, like you said last, night vampires do and so it sort of makes sense that there's more … Oh.”

The color drained out of her face. “It does exist, right? I mean, you're not just …”

What was wrong with the girl? She honestly seemed to believe the lessons had been a ruse, no, not a ruse, a trick to torment her? Gods, he had to stop that line of thought immediately. If she shut down, it'd be that more difficult to get through to her. He took her hands in his. When she looked up, her face was apprehensive as if she expected to be smacked down, not physically more than likely, but verbally. “Of course magic is real. I'll show you some now, before we start.”

He had her sit at the table and sat across from her. “Magic requires an exact mindset, one rather similar to a trance.” Her face said she didn't quite believe him. “Here, I'll show you.”

Willow gasped as the book rose off the table, which is precisely why levitation spells were among the first taught. They were simple but dramatic spells, easy to learn but impressive to see, giving the student that extra boost of belief in magic which was often half the battle with beginners. “Ready to give it a try?”

“But I don't even know where to start.” Her eyes were wide and her voice trembled.

She seemed almost afraid and it took a moment before he understood why. Willow was terrified of failure. He took her hands in his. “Willow, I'll be teaching you. I'll tell you everything you need to know. Magic requires focus, a certain mindset. It will take some time for you to pick it up, but the beginning exercises are simple. The first thing I need you to do is to relax. I'll be holding onto your hands. Let my hands be your anchor. I want you to close your eyes and follow my voice. You're at a beach. The warm sunlight sinks deeply into any tense places in your body. You feel your muscles warm and relax in response.”

As he continued speaking, Willow followed, sinker deeper and deeper into a relaxed state until her mind had stilled and her shields, untrained but there all the same, had dropped. He struck quickly, sending power out from his hands and into hers, following her energy channels and sinking into her chakras, leaving spiles – spigots that could be turned on or off at his will – behind in each.

Giles continued with the lesson. While Willow's magic was now his to call on at will, continuing the training would keep her close. If she died, he'd lose the power. Keeping her close made practical sense. “Your turn.”

He pulled out a sponge ball and set it on the table before her. She picked it up and squished it between her fingers. “With this?”

“Yes. Why not? It's small, it's light, and it can't hurt anyone when you lose focus.”

“When I lose focus?”

“Trust me. When I started learning, I lost focus thousands of times, tens of thousands of times. It's part of the process. Shall we give it a go?”
The Witch

Chapter Notes

For those who prefer to read smaller sections, this story is being posted scene by scene at fanfiction.net

Since it's been about six months since the previous chapter, a few reminders:

- Unlike possession, in which a demon takes over a human host, domination entails the creation of a psychic bond between the demon and its host. The demon does not inhabit the host but is, instead, connected to the host’s mind. Think of a boat tied to a dock. Like the boat, which remains in the sea, the demon continues to be discarnate, existing in a non-material plane, but a persistent connection between the demon and its human host remains. It may sound trivial. I assure you, it is not. The demon is, in effect, always in the back of the host’s mind, whispering directly into the host’s thoughts, always exerting its pernicious influence.
- Because of Eyghon's influence in the back of his mind, Rupert's personality has split into Giles, Rupert, and Ripper.
- Giles, after recognizing Willow's power, worked a spell that gives him access to it.
- Cecil Ashworth wants to take Giles out for killing his uncle Roderick Ashworth. Cecil's mother, Antonia, is Quentin Travers' sister.
- Giles has been flirting with the schools' secretary, Kris Mansfield, mainly to mess with Rupert. He'd set up a date to watch Rupert deal with the surprise.
- Tucker Wells, after an encounter with demons, has agreed to learn about them from Rupert.

The real estate agent, an unfortunately flouncy woman, stood on the far side of the gate and called out a cheery “Take all the time you need. I'll be at the office when you're ready to talk price.” Giles would have taken that as a bad sign but Ripper had already killed the mansion's demon. Instead Giles wondered if he could get the cost down, not that it wasn't low already. The mansion had a reputation which, in Sunnydale, was saying something but the building itself was structurally sound. Of course, given that the estate agent wouldn’t even set foot on the property, she had no way of knowing that. He should be able to set his own price.

Although the wallpaper was hanging in tatters and the rugs had been shredded by the demon's claws, the woodwork was quite exquisite if rundown. Giles ran a hand along the cherry bannister. He could see it refurbished, glowing in the light, and could almost feel how his hand would glide across the sensually smooth surface. Unfortunately repairs to the mansion would require workmen and Giles couldn't afford the interruption in what was to become his refuge.

The second floor reeked with the stench of decaying meat. Gagging, Giles fumbled for his handkerchief. In the master bedroom, ancient mattresses and decaying cushions, piled high into a kind of nest and surrounded by scattered human remains, created an image out of Dali's worst nightmare. Stepping in just long enough to grab a one of the demon's feathers, Giles backed out of the room and down the stairs until he could breathe again. Good, he'd identified the focal point for the ritual. Luckily the spell itself could be done from the open garden in the center of the house. He
wouldn't have to be near that stench to remove it. Of course that would have to wait for nightfall. For now, he'd find the estate agent and tell her that “Randall Page Rayne” definitely wanted the house. He couldn't put it under his own name, not if he wanted the house as a refuge but of course he didn't have to. Giles had long ago combined the name of the man he'd killed and that of the lover he'd left behind, throwing in Deidre's surname on a whim, to create a false identity he could hide certain behaviors behind. It had saved him a great deal of trouble with the Council.

Hours later, with the initial paperwork behind him, Giles returned to the house just as the moon was rising over the horizon. The waning moon, little more than the tiniest sliver in the sky, would carry away the remnants of the darkness that had taken over the house. In the open space surrounded by the house on all four sides, where grass grew between the brickwork that made a patio, Giles poured the salt into a large circle, chanting as he poured, “Omnes minores daemones fugerunt coram Eyghon.”

Facing the south, Giles lit the black candle that dominated the altar. “Eyghon æternum regnum oritur quasi caenosum derelinquere caeno decurrit de terra. Eyghon surgit metuendus in omnia entia inferiora. Eyghon surgit terra est in suo.”

Turning to the east, Giles lit the yellow candle. “I call upon the Guardian of the East, the Lord of the element of Air. Take up your guard in the east and hold your protective wings over me.” He continued, turning to the south, and lit a red candle. “I call upon the Guardian of the south, the Lord of the element of Fire. Take up your guard in the south and hold your protective sword over me.” He lit a blue candle in the west. “I call upon the Guardian of the west, the Lord of the element of Water. Take up your guard in the west and hold your watchful eyes over me.” And a green candle in the north. “I call upon the Guardian of the north, the Lord of the element of Earth. Take up your guard in the north and hold your protective shield over me.”

He was now ready to draw on Willow's magic. Closing his eyes, he saw the cord that bound her to him, its colors shifting, its whirls of red bound by interlocking wires of an orange so dark it was almost brown. At the end of the cord he found the spiles, the hooks he'd dug into her energy centers. Turning those spigots, he released a flow of energy. The power lurched out of her in spurts and bursts, bumbling forth like an untrained puppy, difficult to control. Giles wrenched the power into smaller channels. Choosing carefully he wove those channels together into a larger force. The power swirled around him, so strong it glowed visible in the physical plane. Giles took this power and poured it into the cauldron and pulled it out again, each time condensing and increasing the power until it flowed like lava pouring down a mountain. It was into this thick, physical power that Giles dropped the feather. As the feather burst into flame, answering flames danced from inside the house, cleansing any remnants of the demon and its victims.

Buffy was late. Giles had said he wanted her at the library an hour before homeroom but she stopped dead when she saw the poster. The bright yellow background only enhanced the silhouette, that of a cheerleader with one arm raised to the sky. Buffy brushed her fingers across the words – Cheerleading Tryouts – and then along the shadow of the pom-pommed girl. She didn't have to stay in the shadows. She could live the dream. She had her Slayer duties, sure, but she could do both. Buffy felt as if the sun was rising as she tore the poster off the wall, but she still tucked it away in her bag before continuing to the library.

“You're late.”

“Good morning to you too, Giles. And no, of course I don't mind being here an hour before anybody else.”
Giles merely pointed to the table. So far distracting him into an argument hadn't worked, not in the mornings anyway which was really unfair because mornings was when she needed the break. Sparring was fine. Not only did they spar in the afternoon but it was almost like fighting. That she could do any time, but these morning meditations, ugh, she could really do without them. Plus he made her sit on the table with, like, no cushion or anything.

Lotus position was no big to slip into. One nice thing about Slaying, it left you limber. She rested her hands on her knees and closed her eyes. Clear the mind. Yeah, right, like that was easy. Cheerleading tryouts tomorrow. She'd been on the team in LA. Making the Sunnydale team should be no sweat. Oh, right, clear the mind. Her thoughts did seem to be slowing. Maybe she was getting the hang of this meditative stuff after all. Maybe …

Her body jerked. “Buffy.” Giles' voice had a snap to it. She blinked her eyes open. “Had a nice nap, did we?”

“What do you want, Giles? It's …” She glanced at the clock. “Godawful early. I should be asleep. You and you're expecting me to sit still and relax without dozing off?”

“Buffy, you're the Slayer. Your abilities behoove a certain level of discipline that I'm afraid I'm just not seeing from you. Try again.”

Glaring at him just seemed to make Giles more determined. Buffy placed her hands back on her knees and closed her eyes. He could just take his clear mind and shove it. Cheerleading tryouts. Tuesday after school. Giles would expect her to show up for sparring. He thought her whole life should be about fighting vamps but she could do both or she thought she could anyway. Maybe she should talk to him about it.

“You're not clearing your mind.”

“How do you know?” she asked.

“You're not snoring.”

Pushy, dictatorial, throwing his weight around, thinks he's the boss of me guy. She'd tell him after she made the team.

Willow was late. Well, no, technically she wasn't late – the bell hadn't run yet – but she'd always been early for her magic lessons. Rupert was, well concerned was probably the right word, concerned that he didn't recall establishing these lessons. Willow had just shown up acting as if he'd been giving her lessons for days. It had been something of a trick to find out what he'd already taught her without looking too ridiculous. Still, that hadn't been the problem. Some other version of himself, the part who took over when he wasn't aware, that creature who had established Willow's lessons, he was someone Rupert didn't trust. That other self never did anything without an evident gain and Rupert had no idea what that gain might be.

The door swung open. “Ah, there you are.”

She moved slowly, as if her whole body ached, and gave him only a small smile in place of her usual thousand words a minute.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, just tired.” She half-fell into a chair at the table and then merely sat there and stared off at
“Willow?”

“Huh?” She startled in her chair. “Maybe I should get more coffee.”

“More coffee?”

“Well, I've had three cups already but they didn't seem to help.”

“Perhaps you need more sleep,” Rupert suggested.

“But I did. I mean I slept last night but I just woke up exhausted.”

“Why don't you try taking a nap here in the library. Unfortunately there's nothing to stretch out on but you do look tired enough to sleep in a chair.”

“But, my lesson.”

“You can practice your magic tomorrow. Besides, you'd learn nothing in this state.”

With her head already resting on the table, Willow's “okay” was barely audible.

“Don't worry. I'll wake you for your next class.”

Rupert sat across from the girl. Exhausted she'd said. She was new to magic, certainly, but the practices he'd assigned shouldn't have used that much energy. Still, it wasn't just exercises, was it? In the course of a few days she'd learned that vampires were real, seen a close friend Turned, and fought off an invasion of vampires. It was perhaps more surprising that all of the children weren't exhausted. He'd better keep a closer eye on her energy levels, just in case. If she wasn't feeling better in a day or two, then he'd intervene.

Giles sighed. Gods but Rupert could be oblivious although, honestly, that was often for the best. The girl was breathing evenly. She wouldn't wake. In his office Giles found a pair of scissors and an envelope. He hadn't expected to have an opportunity this soon. Quickly but carefully so that the girl wouldn't notice the difference, he cut off a few locks of Willow's hair. The scissors he returned to his office. The envelope containing her hair went into his pocket.

Jerry had been called in to meet with Travers but not in his office. This meeting room, at the back of a largely ignored libray, was as anonymous as a Council room could get. That's when Jerry knew he was in trouble. He'd suspected, earlier, that trouble was brewing when Cecil Ashworth had contacted him and had practically ordered him to hand over sensitive Council documents. He should have stayed out of it, but Jerry was almost certain that Cecil wasn't acting on his own. Cecil had a backer, one who could ruin Jerry's career if he weren't careful.

When the Council Head arrived, almost fifteen minutes after Jerry had, he was certain that the delay was deliberate. Travers would want him unsettled. “Good afternoon, Mr. Taylor. You haven't been waiting long, I hope.”

“No, sir.”

“I understand you met with my nephew.”

Jerry sat up taller in his chair, as if that would throw Travers off the scent. “Sir?”
“Don’t play game with me, lad. In his quest for information, whom would Cecil turn to but the loyal family retainer.”

“I’m no menial, sir.”

Travers waved that away. “Your family has worked for the Ashworth family for generations. It doesn’t matter whom you are. What matters is how Cecil sees you.”


“Close enough,” Travers replied. “What did you give him?”

Damn. Travers had the power to blacklist Jerry, to nip his career in the bud. But Antonia Ashwood, Cecil’s mother, was a power in her own right. She couldn’t hurt Jerry as directly as Quentin could, but if she learned he’d turned traitor, she’d find some way to bring him down.

“Come, come. I know it had something to do with Rupert Giles.”

In for a penny. “I correlated reports of demon attacks,” Jerry replied. “These reports ranged from Rupert Giles’ youth, from the time he left the Council, to the present. I correlated data in 50 mile increments, centered on Mr. Giles’ known location on any given date, and extended out to 250 miles.”

“And are you planning to blackmail my nephew?”

Jerry was as shocked as if he’d been slapped. “No, sir.” Of course not. The request may have come from Cecil, but Jerry was fairly certain the man was acting under his mother’s orders.

“If he asks for anything else, give it to him but let me know. Your supervisor, Mr. Wyndam, is my agent in this. Bring any information to him.”

And then Travers was gone, a ship whose passing had left Jerry floating like detritus in its wake, left him drifting between Scylla and Charybdis. Cecil’s little spy games, showing up in a fedora and a trilby, suddenly seemed far less amusing. Jerry was as much in over his head as Cecil was; the only difference was that Jerry knew it.

From the back of their mind, Giles watched Rupert relax as Willow bounced into the library. “Feeling better from yesterday, are we?”

“So much better. I don’t know what was wrong with me yesterday but I feel so much more awake today. I guess I did just need a little sleep.”

Giles had decided to keep an eye on the magic lessons, on all of Rupert’s interactions with Willow. He wasn’t about to instruct the girl himself. Rupert had enough skill to teach the basics of magic and infinitely far more patience with Willow’s mistakes. Honestly, the girl couldn’t even levitate fuzz without it wobbling. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled as the balls fell to the table.

“Don’t be,” Rupert replied. “You’re doing quite well.”

“Yeah? How long did it take you to pick it up?”

“Ah, well, I had an advantage. Three years of meditation practice.”

“I suck.”
Giles laid his hand on hers. He needed her to trust him, well to trust Rupert but it came down to the same thing. She had to be willing to open herself to him. “You do not. You're very good at schoolwork but this is a different kind of knowing. It will take time.” To amuse her, because laughter was a gateway to trust, he added, “And I did not hear you say that last word.”

She did chuckle at that but then she hung her head. “Mr. Giles?”

What was this? “Yes.”

“I, uh, well Buffy's got this thing and I sort of think you should know.” She looked up, all earnest. “I mean she's going to tell you, she totally is, just not yet, but I sort of think you'd want to know more nowish.”

Giles chose his words with care. “I wouldn't want you to divulge something learned in confidence, but because Buffy is the Slayer, anything, no matter how small, could be a matter of life or death. I'm certain you wouldn't want her death, or anyone else's for that matter, on your conscience.”

“Oh, no! It's nothing like that, nothing that could get anyone killed. I mean, I don't think so.” Giles wanted to intervene but it would be better if she came to this on her own. She said, in a small voice, “I guess I should tell you, huh?”

“I do think that would be wise.”

“Well, it's not really a big thing. I mean, it'd take some of her time, but not that much, I don't think. I mean, you won't be mad at her, right?”

Could the girl just get to the point? “I can't gauge my reactions until I'm aware of the situation, but I promise I'm here to lead Buffy, to help her. I won't be angry.”

“Well, okay.” Another pause. “She's trying out for cheerleading, but that's a good thing, right? I mean, she'd hear about all kinds of stuff going on at school, which might not be demony now that I think of it.”

Giles gently squeezed her hand. “Thank you, Willow, for sharing that with me.”

“You aren't going to tell her I told you, are you?”

“No.” He gave her hand another squeeze before releasing it. “But I would like, if you feel you can that is …”

“What?”

“Time spent cheerleading would be taken away from training. Buffy is a Slayer but to take on the denizens of the night, she has to be in top form. This, or any other extracurricular activity could, in fact is likely to, get her killed or if not her, then someone else, someone like your friend Jesse.”

Willow stuttered her response. “You mean Jesse's dead because Buffy wasn't good enough?”

“It's hard to say. She hasn't had a Watcher for, well, some time. She wasn't in peak condition.” He paused, giving Willow a chance to take that in. “But a Slayer isn't omnipotent. It may have turned out no differently even if she had been up to par.”

“Oh.” Willow's voice was quiet. He'd never seen her so withdrawn.

“But that's where you come in.”
“Huh?”

“If you're willing that is. Try to help Buffy see that she needs to focus her attentions where they'll do the most good. She needs to train if she's going to be an effective Slayer. Do you think you could do that?”

“I, uh, I suppose so.”

“Good. Thank you.” Giles thought back to the previous night and how Willow's magic had been difficult to control. He couldn't rely on the girl's power in that state. That could be cured with the proper training and practice but it would take an unfortunately long time for Willow to learn. There were other techniques, ones that might speed up her control, but they'd have to be introduced more gradually and less openly. “I'm putting a hold on your levitation lessons.”

“What?” She sounded panicked.

“Not to worry. You'll still be practicing levitation but there's a more basic technique I want to add to your training. I'm afraid it's rather dull actually, but you'll need that control before you can move onto the higher magics. Have you ever meditated?”

“Don't you think you should tell Mr. Giles?”

As Buffy turned backwards, walking into the gym door to open it, she shook her pom-poms at Willow. “No, definitely not. You should have heard him this morning, ranting because I don't meditate well enough. Meditate? Really? Because that's gonna save my ass.”

Willow glanced back unhappily as Xander stopped to stare at Amber. “Ooo, stretchy! Where was I?”

Willow turned back to Buffy. “But meditation helps focus. That would be useful against vampires, right?”

“Trust me, Will. Focusing when you're being attacked, not a prob.”

“But what about training? If you're cheerleading, are you going to have enough time to train? You know, because you wanna be your best when going against demons, or so I'd guess.”

“We haven't seen a vampire in over a week. It's no big.”

Xander ran over to catch up. “Oh, hey! Here's a good luck thing for tryouts.”

Buffy took something from him and held it out. A bracelet. “What's this?”

“What's that?”

“Oh, how sweet.” She turned the bracelet over and read the words etched there. “'Yours Always'.”

“I-i-it came that way, really, they all said that!”

Willow took a step back. Xander liked Buffy, like he liked her, to the point where he was going to ask her out or something and Buffy was her best friend, well no, Xander was her best friend but Buffy was her best girl friend, as in a friend who was a girl and not in a girlfriend sense, and they were gonna date and she'd be left alone, in a three's a crowd kind of a way, and even when she wasn't alone she'd be seeing Buffy with Xander, her Xander and she'd just be all-alone Willow.
“Just look at that Amber. Who does she think she is, a Laker Girl?”

Willow didn’t bother to wonder why Cordelia would be talking to her. She just snapped off the first nasty thing she could think of. “I hear she turned them down.”

And then Buffy was talking to Amy and neither of them seemed to see she was there and so Buffy had Xander and now Buffy had Amy and she had nobody. At least it’d look like she was doing something is she was watching the tryout, right? Wait, why was there smoke? “That girl's on fire!”

Buffy put out the fire, which was cool, she was the Slayer and all, but then Xander had to go making a big deal of it, not that it wasn't a big deal, but he didn't have to keep going on about it. “It was like she was a superhero or something.”

“Well, she's a Slayer. That's sort of like a superhero, right?”

“Right, she was amazing. Did you see how she …”

Willow zoned out on Xander's Buffy-praise as Miss Mansfield ran into the gym. The secretary spotted Amber right off even though the girl was in Buffy’s arms on the floor and people were milling all around. Willow was wondering what she was doing there. Wouldn't the school nurse have been more helpful? But then Miss Mansfield just took over. “Everyone clear the gym. Come on, get out.” Wow, and who knew Miss Mansfield's voice carried that well.

“Come on,” Willow said, interrupting whatever Xander was saying.

“What about Buffy?”

Buffy was still holding onto Amber. “She's sort of busy. We'll catch up later.” At least he hadn't started rambling on about Miss Mansfield as well. All the guys thought she was hot which, okay, she was rather pretty but Willow really didn't need to hear Xander going on and on about it. Except maybe it was just that he didn't like redheads.

They were almost out of the gym when an ER crew came rushing in through a side door. Tucker, who was racing so fast that he didn't have time to slow down, crashed into Xander. “Hey,” Xander shouted, “watch where you're going.”

“I heard a girl got burned, a cheerleader. Where is she? Did you see it? Is her face all scarred and gnarly?” He sounded excited. Ugh.


“Yeah, yeah, I heard.” Tucker dodged around him and ran into Buffy who grabbed him by the arm, too hard based on his wince, and pointed to the door. “Okay, okay, I'm going.”

“What was that about?”

“Tucker's kind of creepy,” Willow said.

“Yeah, in a sleeping with corpses kind of way.”

“Xander!”

“Okay, he doesn't actually sleep with corpses. Probably.”

“Come on,” Buffy said.
“Where are we going?”

“To talk to Giles. There was something off about this.”

The shelves in Giles' new study, on the first floor of the mansion, were a mess. The spell he'd used to clean up after that harpy-demon had removed biological materials but nothing else. He was going to have to clean the rest of his house the old fashioned way, with plenty of elbow grease. Oh, he could have tapped into Willow's magic again but Rupert had noted her loss of energy. There was no need to set him investigating, not when it would lead straight back to Giles. Tucker, the git, had absolutely refused to clean. In retaliation, Giles had set him down with a copy of Gordimer's *On the Specization of Demons*. It was the definitive primer on demonology but Giles honestly didn't believe the lad was that interested. He'd planned to give Tucker something more interesting and less useful, but if the boy was going to act the git then he could deal with the consequences.

And, as if to support his supposition, Tucker shoved his chair away from the table. “This bites.”

“Bites?”

“Do you think I care if the R'konian and Thrashalla demons both branched off from something called a Drokna? I wanna know what you know. I wanna know how to kill ’em, like you did with that big bird thingy.” When Giles had first brought Tucker to the mansion, the boy had almost bolted and run off into the night. Giles had literally twisted the lad's arm behind his back, forcing him through the house ahead of himself as if he were using the lad for a shield. After they'd gone through the whole house, Tucker had gotten over his fear. Apparently the idiot had forgotten the demon had wings and could swoop down on them. Well, Giles had never thought the lad was all that intelligent. He'd make a better grunt than minion anyway.

“I can teach you how to fight.” Fighting demons was nothing like fighting a human, but Tucker didn't need to know that and he did seem to have an underlying desire for violence. No wonder Eyghon found him appealing. “Why don't we start now?”

The physical training for a neophyte Watcher was stringent but nothing compared to that of the apprentice Enforcer. Right. Time to get the lad in shape. “Let's begin with a roundhouse kick. Notice how the thigh and hip rotate as the leg kicks forward. You try.”

Pitiful. Absolutely pitiful. “Perhaps we should start with a front kick.” It took Tucker a good twenty minutes to come up with an even halfway decent front kick. “Good enough. Give me one hundred kicks.”

“One hundred?”

“On each leg.”

The lad collapsed to the floor far short of his goal.

“Get up you lazy git.”

Tucker's glare would have looked menacing coming from, well, anyone else. Giles stood over him until the lad made a wobbly rise to his feet. “Finish this session. Add twenty-five kicks. Each leg.”

“No.”

“What did you say?”
“I said no.” Tucker stepped back to the table and reached for his hoodie. “You're not the boss of me.”

“You're the one who wanted training.” Giles' voice was quiet. Anyone other than Tucker would have noticed the menace.

“I wanted to kick ass. Not a bunch of air.”

“If you won't obey, then I have no use for you. Get out.”

Tucker made a sweeping bow that was somehow more sarcastic than anything he could have said, before walking out the door.


“I will not bloody bring him back. The boy's an idiot. We're better off without him.”

Mine. There were no hallucinations, no long-lost friends dying before him. Giles had just enough time to think this is new before Eyghon hit him. His skin tingled. Everywhere. It was unpleasant but not unbearable. It got worse. Burning, his whole body seemed to be burning. He could barely see through the pain but his skin seemed to be untouched. Burning … Burning … “All right,” he screamed. The burning stopped. “I'll get him back but it might take a while.” His skin started tingling again. “I mean it! The lad's proud. He stormed off. If I go after him now, it'll just drive him off further.” The tingling stopped. Thank Gods Eyghon had believed him.

Giles left the shelves, the cleaning, and the boxes full of books behind. He'd had enough for one night. If he didn't fuck someone soon, he was going to take someone's head off, possibly literally, and if he killed Tucker – and wouldn't he like to – Eyghon would most certainly make him pay. He needed a fucktoy and he needed one now. Luckily he'd heard of a club.

Giles had woken early to fuck the young man, Troy he thought the name was, one last time. A gag kept the complaints down but Giles quickly came to regret keeping the man bound all night. His legs weren't working well and Giles had to heft him up to get him into the car. A quick memory spell ensured that Troy wouldn't recall exactly whom he'd been with or exactly where he'd been. “Where can I drop you off?”

The git actually had the nerve to cry. “Please, just don't hurt me.”

“I'm trying to take you home,” Giles growled through clenched teeth. Honestly, why did everything have to be so bloody difficult. “Where is it?”

“Right up there.” The berk pointed to the corner.

“I know you're not from this neighborhood. Don't think you can get me to drop you off near my home so you can find your way back. That won't work. Unless you want me to tie you up again.”

“No. No.”

“Then where?”

“Corner of McDowell and Washington.”

Out of the way to the high-school, but not too far off. Giles didn't take him to the corner, if the lad
were canny enough he'd have friends watching out for him, friends who wouldn't be under the memory spell, but there was a small playground nearby, one where he could slip in, drop the lad off, and make his getaway before his car was noticed. Troy still couldn't stand but that should wear off in a few hours. All of this was rather a nuisance though. He was going to have to find partners who didn't mind it a bit on the rough side.

Giles slumped back into his chair and stared up at the darkening sky through the ridiculously tiny slots that counted as windows in the high-school library. Rupert had been wasting his time for hours. Unless one of Sunnydale's cheerleaders turned out to be an alcoholic, and physically feeble at that, spontaneous human combustion was highly unlikely, which meant that the fire had been a supernatural attack.

_You could do it_ , Eyghon whispered in the back of his mind. A _small touch of magic, one simple fire spell and, poof, flaming corpses_. Giles saw a row of flaming bodies, screaming and running, their speed fanning the flames.

“Well, yes, but since we know I didn't start a fire spell, that's not quite helpful, now is it.”

_It would be simple. The boy_ . Giles saw Xander burning and Willow, frozen by shock, her eyes wide and her hand covering her mouth, still until it was too late.

“No.”

_The Slayer needs a lesson. She disobeys. She wastes her time with this frippery._

“I am not killing Willow's best friend. The shock could freeze up her magic. We may need that power.” Speaking of which, he had things to prepare. Willow was almost due for her magic lesson. Meditation should, over time, improve the flow of her magic, but there were other techniques, left-hand path techniques, that might help get her up to speed more quickly. Unfortunately he couldn't just introduce her to dark magic. He'd have to catch her interest, make her think she was sneaking behind his back.

Most occult books were trash, full of so much nonsense that anyone trying to learn magic from them would be left more confused than when he'd started. There were, of course, tomes that contained valuable knowledge. Many of those were benign, that is they could be perused without exposing the reader to harm. Some were dangerous. Those Giles kept at the mansion. However, he needed Willow to believe certain off-limits books were kept in this office, and so he'd taken a suspended shelf and stored there a number of harmless books with dangerous sounding titles: the _Maledicta_, the _Necronomicon_, _The Wisdom of the Beast_. As he heard Willow approach the office, he turned and took his time shelving one specific book, _The Rose and the Thorn_. “Giles?”

He jumped as if she'd startled him. “Ah, Willow.” Pretending he'd just realized it was open, Giles popped the book onto the shelf, giving Willow a chance to glimpse what was up there, before shutting the cabinet. “I seem to have lost track of the time,” he said as he gestured her out of the office.

“What was that you were reading?”

“Reading?” He gave her a patently false grin. “Nothing that need concern you. Really, dull stuff, tomes, quite dry.”

Once they were out in the main room of the library, Giles glanced around as if missing something.
“Damn.”

“Giles?”

“Ah, nothing important. I seem to have mislaid my briefcase. Tell you what, why don't you start with meditation while I have a look around for it.”

The teacher's lounge was empty at that hour, exactly as he'd expected. Giles pulled a small mirror from his briefcase and set it on a table. The scrying spell was short. He merely had to chant a few phrases and then could see Willow through the mirror. Standing before the shelf of supposedly off-limit books, she'd pulled out *The Wisdom of the Beast*. Excellent. It wasn't the book her wanted her reading, but he could fix that.

“If you've read Saramago's *Blindness*, you should recognize this quote: 'Nothing, it's as if I were caught in a mist or had fallen into a milky sea. But blindness isn’t like that, said the other fellow, they say that blindness is black. Well I see everything white.' What does it mean that the victims, the the blind, see white rather than black, light rather than nothing? Jonathan?”

“Well, white is sort of good, right, like the opposite of evil? So I'm thinking that anyone who sees only white is sort of ignoring the bad things, but like at a societal level. Like when they're all thrown into that asylum so others, non-infected people I mean, don't have to see them, much less think about them.”

Tucker slouched back into his chair. Fuck, how long was Mrs. Gluck going to let Jonathan drone on? He glanced up at the clock. Shit, not even five minutes into class. Was this day never going to end? He glanced out the window and jerked his seat so hard it squealed against the floor.

“Mr. Wells, would you care to share … Oh my God.”

Cool! The student driver car had gone straight through the chain link fence.

“He'd been crowded against the window by the other students, but he needed to get a closer look. Tucker turned, shoved his way past them, getting one or two in the ribs with an elbow, and ran for the door.

“What? Who?”

“No man, but she can't see!” Tommy nodded toward the road.

“What? Who?”

“Cordelia, she's like fucking blind.”

Oh, awesome. Her eyes were totally white. She screamed when Tucker touched her face. “What was
But then Buffy had to barge in and shove him off. “Go away Tucker.”

He stood his ground and stared at the white eyes. They were as pale as milk, all the way through.


“Mr. Wells.” Miss Mansfield, that hot new secretary, had come out of nowhere. “Behind this line.” Tucker looked at Buffy who’d taken another step forward and he backed off, joining the crowd of students who’d come out to see the show. He turned his gaze on Cordelia’s eyes. It was just too cool.

Miss Mansfield took Cordelia’s arm. “I’ll take it from here.” They’d taken two steps toward the school when she stopped. “What is it?” Cordelia sounded like she was freaking. Totally awesome.

“Just a minute,” Miss Mansfield told her. Raising her voice, she added, “Who witnessed this? Who was here?”

“I had three other students in the car: Dolores Rodriguez, Tommy Fisch, and Theresa O’Connor,” Mr. Pole said. “Oh, and Miss Summers.”

“She was in the car too?”

“No, she was just here. Saved Miss Chase’s life actually.”

Miss Mansfield was staring at Buffy. Good, maybe if she was distracted he could get a closer look at Cordelia’s eyes. It was too cool that Buffy had saved her. This was so much better than getting run over by a truck.

The window between the hallway and the principal’s office reminded Buffy of a big terrarium or maybe that should be aquarium. She thought it over for a moment. Nope, aquarium was the one with the fish so it must be terrarium. Besides, it wasn’t principal Flutie’s office that was the terrarium. His was off in the back, behind a closed door. It was Miss Mansfield’s space, the outer office, that was the terrarium. Oh, and hey, Miss Mansfield was waving her in. Looked like glass worked both ways.

“Please have a seat.”

Oh, good, one of the sit here in the chair of doom while waiting for the principal to see you chairs had been pulled over across from Miss Mansfield’s desk. “Am I in some kind of trouble? Because that whole thing in the girl’s locker room …”

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing.” It couldn’t be the locker room. That had been over a week ago and if they’d thought she’d seen that body, well, the other girls were still seeing a therapist. It was sort of unfair, really. They got out of gym to talk to a shrink. Buffy saw bodies all the time and she had all that Slaying as exercise. She should get out of gym too.

“I hear you were involved in the driver’s ed incident.” Miss Mansfield’s hands rested on her desk as she spoke. Damn but her posture was perfect.

“Huh? Oh, um, yeah, I was there. I mean, it wasn't my class or anything.” Shut up. Shut up.

Miss Mansfield slid a drawer open and pulled out a folder. Oops, and there was her own name,
Buffy Anne Summers. “I am well aware that was not your class.” She lay the folder down, square against the blotter. Buffy took in the desk: blotter, folder, one pen, and nothing else. Oh-kay. “In fact, you should have been in English with Dr. Gutterson.”

“Well, uh, Cordelia, I'd lent her my notes, my English notes, and I needed them back before class.”

“Even if it is true that Cordelia, whose GPA in English exceeds yours – actually whose GPA in all her classes exceeds yours – would need a set of notes, why would she borrow yours? You two don't hang.”

Buffy winced at the GPA exceeds yours remark. You try and kill vampires all night and still find time to do your homework. “Cheerleading,” she said. “Cordelia and I are both trying out so we, uh, were hanging and that's where she asked for my notes.”

“I see.”

Buffy wasn't quite sure why Miss Mansfield had brought out her permanent record, especially since she hadn't opened it yet.

“Did you make physical contact with Miss Chase?”

Physical contact? “Huh?”

“I was told you shoved her out of the way of a truck. You were in physical contact?”

“Well, um, yeah. I had to touch her to save her from getting run over. If that's what you mean.”

“The fear is that Miss Chase's … disfigurement might be contagious.”

Pretty sure it's a witch, Buffy thought. “You mean the whole blind thingy?”

“If it is a contagion it could spread through the school and beyond. It's an unknown. We don't know what'll happen.”

“Well, I did touch her but … perfectly fine. No blindness here.”

“If you have any symptoms, you will report to the nurse's office immediately.”

“Okay, is that it?” Buffy rose.

“No.” Miss Mansfield gestured at the chair. Buffy sat again. “You were at the cheerleading tryouts during the incident with Amber Grove?”

“You mean when she burst into flame?”

Miss Mansfield's raised eyebrow conveyed a world of disdain.

“Sorry,” Buffy said. “Um, yeah, I was there.”

“Miss Rosenberg was also at the cheerleading tryouts, correct?”

“Can I ask what this is about? Amber hasn't gone blind or anything has she?”

“No. I am merely investigating incidents that occurred on campus. The liability insurance here in Sunnydale … well, these things do have to be looked into. So, cheerleading tryouts? Miss Rosenberg?”
“Yeah, Willow was there, but she wasn't trying out. I mean, she had every right to be there. She was supporting me, being supporto gal.”

“But you were the one who saved Miss Grove. You grabbed a banner and wrapped the girl in it, thereby putting out the flames. Willow stood by and did nothing.”

Nothing? It's not like anybody else had acted. “Um, sure, but Willow, she noticed the fire first. I might not have been in time if she hadn't called out.”

“I see.” Buffy felt as if Miss Mansfield was making some kind of a mental note but she couldn't figure out about what. “In both incidents you leaped into the fray, successfully performing the rescue, putting yourself in grave danger but coming out unscathed. What do you have to say for yourself?”

It's a good thing I was there. “I'm not sure …” what you want. “I couldn't stand by and let them get hurt, possibly die.”

“Of course not, nobody's asking you to. But you do see how your safety would be a concern for us.”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

“Good. Do. You may go now. Back to class with you.”

Even though she sort of figured Miss Mansfield would know if she didn't go straight to class, Buffy flopped down onto one of the couches in the lounge area. What had that been about? Contagion. Insurance. Surely a secretary wouldn't be handling that kind of stuff. On the other hand, here on the Hellmouth, who knew? Maybe it was some weird form of denial to give this stuff to someone who couldn't do anything about it.

Miss Mansfield's voice came through the PA. “Willow Rosenberg, please come to the principal's office. Willow Rosenberg.”

Willow would be in that advanced chemistry class at the far end of the school. Buffy decided to cut her off and found Willow walking down the hallway just outside the biology lab. “Hey Buffy.” Willow scrunched her nose. “Weren't you just at the principal's office?”

“Yeah, it's about driver's ed, that thing with Cordelia.”

“The whole her eyes going all white thing?” Willow shuddered. “Um, but why would they call me down for that? I wasn't there.”

“She, Miss Mansfield I mean, asked about Amber Grove too.”

“Oh, so it's the witch incidents. Wait,” Willow added more slowly. “I thought people on the Hellmouth were in denial about this kind of stuff.”

“Yeah,” Buffy agreed. “She mentioned contagion, in relation to Cordelia's eyes, but if that were true, wouldn't there be CDC guys in outbreaky suits?”

“Oh, positive pressure personnel suits.”

“Huh?”

“A hazmat suit. I'm not sure they'd investigate for just one case. At most it'd be a BSL-1. Biosafety level one, that is. Pretty much means not a problem.”

“But if they did think it was contagious?”
“With the one case? They might be wearing gloves and face masks.”

“So there’d be somebody medically oriented here.”

“I'd think so, yeah.”

The PA blared out from a speaker. “Willow Rosenberg, please come to the principal's office. Willow Rosenberg.”

Willow looked panicked. “Oh gosh, I'm late. Gotta go.”

Buffy stared as Willow dashed down the hall. “So Miss Mansfield gave me two stories: contagion and insurance. That's one story too many. What's she up to?”

Willow sat up in her seat, straining to see, as Buffy approached Amy. The liquid would turn blue if Amy was a witch or it was supposed to anyway. What if it didn't? Did that mean Amy wasn't the witch or that Willow hadn't gotten the spell right? This was her first big official spell, beyond levitating little fuzz balls that is. What if she'd messed it up? Giles said spells were more than chemicals and words. They required power. What if she didn't have any? But she could levitate the balls, right. Not very well though so maybe she had a little power but maybe not enough for this spell. Okay, Buffy was right there and she was going to spill the liquid aaaand It did turn blue! She had gotten it right. In her excitement she turned to Xander and then realized what that meant. Amy was the witch.

“Lishanne? Are you … Oh my God!”

That was weird. Dr. Gregory sounded upset but he never got upset. Willow rested her hands on the countertop to raise herself up higher. Oh, no mouth. Yeah, that would upset pretty much anybody and maybe she should sit back down now because she didn't feel so good.

“Let me see! Let me see!”

Oh, except Tucker didn't seem too bothered or even bothered at all, which was sort of squicky when you thought about it.

“Back,” Dr. Gregory called out. “Everyone get back, give Miss Davis some room.”

Tiffany and Nicole didn't need to be told twice. They backed off as if losing your mouth was contagious.

“Let me see.”

“That means you too, Mr. Wells.”

As Dr. Gregory herded the bulk of the students toward the middle of the lab, away from Lishanne, Tucker ducked under a desk and came up right next to her. “Wicked cool. Can I touch it?”

“Mr. Wells!” Wow, who knew Dr. Gregory was so strong. He yanked Tucker off of Lishanne with no trouble at all. “Main office, Mr. Wells.”

“What? I didn't do anything.”

Dr. Gregory sighed. “Run to the main office and inform them of Miss Davis' condition.”
Tucker looked back toward Lishanne as if he were going to try and touch her face again.

“Now,” Dr. Gregory bellowed.

“Okay, okay, I'm going.”

“Come on,” Buffy said in passing. They followed her to the windows where it was pretty much empty since everyone else had crowded into the back, gawking at Lishanne from a safe distance.

“Did you see?” Xander asked. “Amy was as freaked out as the rest of us.”

“Maybe it's Tucker,” Willow said. “He did seem awfully interested, emphasis on the awful. Ugh.”

Buffy shook her head. “The test was positive. Amy's our Sabrina. I just don't think she realizes what she's doing.”

“Well, should we talk to her?”

“Maybe we should talk to her mother,” Buffy said. “I wonder if she knows what she's created.”

“Oh, that was quick.”

Miss Mansfield was at the front of the room, her arms around Lishanne. She was also scanning the room as if to see who was there. “Oh, great, another office interview.”

“Really?” Xander asked. “You think I'll have time to comb my hair?”

“Xander.”

“What? She's hot … entot. She's a Hottentot and, uh, I really like them.” He glanced between her and Buffy. “God I wish I had some guy friends.”

“I think you should leave your hair alone,” Buffy said. “Women really go for that I don't care wild-man look.”

“Really? You think so?” He glared. “Oh, and now we're making fun of me. See if I help the next time you need any eye of newt.”

“Seeing as it was Willow who cut out the frog's eye, I'm not that worried.”

“You think Miss Mansfield is up to something,” Willow said.

“She's very interested.”


“I don't know,” Buffy said. “I think there's more to it.”

“So are we going to check her out?” Willow asked.

“We've got a definite witch to deal with first.”

“We're gonna talk to Giles?”

“We're gonna talk to Giles,” Buffy agreed.
If he recalled correctly, the *Grimoire of Aldus Nightwell* should describe at least two spells to cause blindness. The tome was, of course, a copy. As rare a book as Nightwell's grimoire was kept in a museum inside a humidity controlled case. Only a copy would be out in the field but this was a copy that Giles had magicked up himself. It was an exact image of the original. “It wouldn't have killed me to have added an index,” Giles murmured to himself as he leafed through the pages. “Ah, here's one.” Giles leaned forward to scan the text, only to slump back a moment later. This spell he was already familiar with. Much like the spells to set an opponent aflame, it required neither a terrible amount of magic nor an in-depth knowledge of the arcane. Anyone with a moderate amount of power and, well, less likely, access to dark magic tomes, could have cast either spell. Giles shut the tome. It wasn't worth searching for more variants of either spell. What if he had found a spell that required a high-level of arcane power? There were so many variants that didn't, that it wouldn't have told him anything about the witch casting these spells. To sum up, he didn't know if she was a hereditary witch or a solo practitioner. Except … the dark magic tomes suggested a hereditary witch. One didn't just run across the darker magics unless one knew to look for them. Well then, a hereditary witch, probably not all that strong. That would be simple enough to work. He could merely find her relatives and inform them what she'd been up to. They'd rein her in themselves. Of course if it did turn out that she was a solo practitioner, he could make use of her. Tucker had turned out to be a worthless minion. This girl, if she were the witch, drawn to the darker magics as she was, would naturally be drawn to the power that Eyghon could provide her. It would be useful to have a competent minion and she certainly was competent. He'd have to see what he could learn about her family. Damn. In England he'd know someone who knew someone, but here in the states? It was going to take a little digging.

“Giles!” Buffy stormed in, aflame with urgency, as Willow and Xander trailed behind. Her level of excitement suggested that they'd found the witch. It was that cheerleader? Really?

“Buffy, I take it the test was successful.”

“More than,” Buffy said.

“There was another attack,” Willow explained.

“Ah, good, what happened?”

“I know you didn't just say good in relation to a magical attack,” Buffy said.

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose before answering. “I merely meant that the more information we have, the easier it will be to classify her power.”

“It was Lishanne,” Willow said, as if that name told him anything. “She lost her mouth.”

“By lost you mean?”

“No mouth at all,” Xander said. “Just skin where her mouth should be.”

Well, that wasn't particularly useful.

“Giles. Share.”

“Ah, right. The spell doesn't tell me much. As the previous spells did, it requires only a moderate level of magical power and a not too in-depth knowledge of the arcane.”
“Great,” Buffy said. “Could we get that in English?”

“It means anybody could have done it,” Willow said. “I mean, I know we know it's Amy, but she's not like a super strong witch and she doesn't know a lot. It's more like she's reading spells from a book than, you know, really knowing what she's doing.”

“Oh, great. *Destroy Your Enemies for Dummies* then.”

“Rather like,” Giles replied.

“So, what do we do?”

“Nothing tonight.”

The three of them stared at him as if he'd grown a second head. “This is going to require research. She's human so we don't necessarily want to kill her, but we do need to defeat her in such a manner that her spells are uncast and so she doesn't take up this particular nasty habit again.”

“Research,” Willow chirped. “So you'll need our help?”

“Ah no.” Only Willow looked disappointed. “I've already gone through the English texts.”

“So tomorrow?” Buffy asked.

“Yes, I should know something by then.” Gods, the children were milling about as if they actually wanted to help. “Don't you have classes to get to?”

“You don't have to tell me twice.” And Xander was out the door.

“Are you sure you don't need any help?”

“Yes, Willow. I've been trained in this type of research. I'll be fine.” Good, and there she went, following Buffy out of the library. Now, how on earth was he going to determine whether or not Amy Madison was a hereditary witch?

Rupert had gotten only a few hours sleep before returning to the library. He wasn't quite sure why he'd decided he needed to know whether or not Amy Madison was a hereditary witch, but trying to decipher the Sunnydale Times' obituary section had proven to be quite fascinating. There'd been a rash of sudden blindness back in the 1920's. Most likely the work of a witch unless a K'talkna demon had somehow turned up in the town. Anyplace else, Rupert would have said it was impossible. In Sunnydale, he wasn't quite sure the word impossible had much meaning. There'd been nothing more recent that he could attribute to an attack by a witch which either meant attacks had occurred and had been kept out of the papers or that a local coven kept rogue witches under control. He still didn't know if there was a local coven much less how to find it.

“Macho macho man, I've got to be a macho man.” If he had to describe Buffy's entrance into the library, the word dancing wouldn't quite cut it. She was bouncing far too much although there did seem to be an almost rhythmic motion to her steps. “I've got to be a macho.”

He took in the gold and scarlet of her uniform. At least she wasn't carrying the pom poms. “Buffy, did you specifically choose to don that uniform to taunt me?”

“Oh, cheer up you grumpy puss. I'm on the squad. Not only do I cheer, but I get to lead others to
cheer. Oh, which reminds me, I can't make practice after school today. We've got a game and with all the new members of the cheerleading squad, we've sort of got to practice because we're macho macho men.”

“Buffy.” Really, one preferred not to shout but the girl was unbelievably distracted this morning. “You did promise me that this cheerleading nonsense would not interfere with your duties as a Slayer.”

“And it won't. I promise. I can to both. 'Cause I'm a macho macho man. Oh, oh, I just had the best idea ever.” Apparently the best idea ever involved jumping up and down like a child that had been given too much sugar. “We could work some of my Slayer moves into the cheerleading routines. That way I could practice both at the exact same time. Oooh, tea.”

The cup had been sitting there for a couple of hours. “Buffy, I don't believe you should …”

“Bleah.” She dropped the cup on the table, happily not breaking it, but Rupert had to move quickly to gather up his notes. “Ugh, that is horrible. What, did you put extra pucker juice in it?”

“Buffy, perhaps you could sit and start meditating.”

“Oh.” She looked quite put out but she did sit down and close her eyes. A few seconds later she was bouncing in her seat and humming.

“Buffy, you aren't even trying.”

“I can't help it.” She jumped to her feet. “I'm just buzzed today, but that's good, right? That's all that extra energy I can bring to fighting the forces of evil. 'Cause I'm a macho macho man.”

Rupert looked at his tomes. He was no closer to finding local witches and Buffy was giving him a headache. “Perhaps you could work on that idea, the one where you combined Slaying and cheerleading, er, techniques.”

“Oh, do you think so? We could start out with a couple of kicks.”

“Not here,” he shouted but too late. She toppled several card catalog sleeves onto the floor.

“Oops.”

“Please, Buffy, the gym, practice there.”

“Okay.”

“Wait. You'll need a pass.” He wrote out permission for her to spend the rest of homeroom in the gym.

“Right. Bye. 'Cause I'm a macho macho man.”

“Gods.” Rupert pinched the bridge of his nose. “I swear I never had that much energy myself.”

Giles sent Xander for a wet cloth. “Hold her head up, please.” Buffy had collapsed into a chair. As Willow held Buffy's head, Giles shone a light into her eyes. They were definitely dilated. He took Buffy's pulse and felt her forehead before allowing Willow to lay the wet cloth on her head. Damn, he should have realized she'd been bespelled this morning. Yes, she was usually energetic, but she'd been far more hyper than usual.
“We've got to get her to a hospital.”

“They can't help her. This is a bloodstone vengeance spell. Hits the body like a quart of alcohol, and then it eradicates the immune system.” Giles felt his heart sinking. The previous spells had been dark magic, certainly, but they hadn't been all that impressive as far as magics go. Almost anyone with a little bit of training and power could have performed them. The bloodstone spell, though, that required a master of the dark arts. Amy must have been trained from a very young age, which certainly did suggest a family coven. Families didn't generally go for the darker magics though. Most likely her parents didn't realize how dark she'd gone.

“A vengeance spell, like she's trying to get even with Buffy?”

“Cause she knows I know she a witch.” Buffy sounded even weaker. There wasn't much time.

“Yes, she intends to kill you. We'll have to stop her and we don't have much time. Does anyone know where she might be?”

“Cheerleading,” Xander said. “There's a big game. The whole squad is there.”

Ah, that was quite public.

“How do we stop it?” Willow asked.

“Cut off the witch's head.”

Xander looked at Buffy. “I'm in.” Finally, a use for the boy. If he chopped off Amy's head, then Giles wouldn't be connected to the death.

“No,” Buffy said. “She's only doing this to survive her mother.”

“Buffy,” Xander added. “We're not going to let you die.”

“Isn't there anything else?” Willow asked.

“If we can get our hands on Amy's spellbook, there is a spell I can perform.” Giles thought quickly. If they were in London, he could have Amy beheaded within a half-hour. Unfortunately he didn't have those kinds of contacts in California.

“Giles, where would she be casting these spells?”

“She'd need a sacred space, someplace private where she could draw out a pentagram.”

“Her home. Okay. Help me up.”

As Xander and Willow helped Buffy up, Giles wrote out a list of supplies. “Here,” he said, handing the list to Willow. “Get these ingredients together in, um, the science lab. We'll need to start the spell as soon as we return.”

“I should go with you,” Xander said.

“No,” Buffy told him. “Keep an eye on Amy.”

Giles was hoisting Buffy onto his arm when he saw Willow shudder. “What is it?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing really. I was just sort of icked out by the two frogs, but I'll get them.”
“Quickly, please. We don’t have much time.”

They had the spellbook. Now he just had to get Buffy back to the science lab before Mrs. Madison's spell killed her. He stretched the seat belt across her and, damn was she even still alive? He took her pulse. Weak but still there. Good.

“Is this your car?” He looked up to see Amy, or no, Catherine, holding the spellbook in both hands but eying his Volante as if it were a three-thousand year old tome. Well, no, she wouldn't care about such a rare edition.

“We don't have time for inconsequentialities.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.”

“Climb in the back” Giles cringed. “Try not to mar the paint-job.”

They met no one as he carried Buffy to the lab. A positive benefit of this cheerleading nonsense. As he laid Buffy on a lab table, he told Willow to cut out one frog eye. “You, Catherine, across the room, by the windows.” Willow asked where he wanted the frog's eye. “Leave it on the counter here, next to the scalpel. I'll need it shortly.”

The second frog wasn't moving. “Couldn't you find a live one?”

“A live what? Frog? No, you didn't say it had to be live. What are we going to do? Should I try and find one? But I don't know where there'd be one unless Dr. Gregory has one …”

“Willow, calm. I'm sure I can make do with this one.” Damn, he didn't know if it would work with a dead frog, but Buffy didn't have much time. He'd have to try and hope for the best. “Right, here we go.” He added the elements to the beaker. “The center is dark. Centrum est obscurus. The darkness breathes. Tenebrae respiratis. The listener hears. Hear me!”

Catherine called from the other side of the room. “Oh, it's … it's working!”

“Unlock the gate. Let the darkness shine. Cover us with holy fear.” Catherine's body dropped to the floor.

“Corsheth and Gilail! Receive the dark! Release the unworthy! Take of the energy and be sated.” He took a charm, made from Willow's hair, and dropped it into the bubbling liquid. “Release.” There was a pounding at the door. “Release.”

“Um, Giles?” Willow said. “There's an ax. Hurry.”

“Release,” he screamed.

Light flashed through the room. Giles grabbed the second frog. Here came the dicey part. Mrs. Madison rose to her feet. Dark energies swirled around her like a vortex. She was aiming for Buffy.

“Corsheth and Gilail! The gate is closed. Bestow upon the unworthy the shell that has been prepared.”

The witch turned with a scream on him.

“Willow!” As Buffy rushed to her friend's side, Giles boxed up the frog and tucked it away into his coat pocket.

Buffy helped Willow up. “Oooh, groggy.”

“Are you alright?”

“Uh, just sort of dizzy?”

“Hello?” The voice came from the other side of the door.

“Amy?”

“Uh, yeah. Willow? Did it work? I mean, I'm myself so something worked.”

Giles boxed up the first frog and the unused spell components while Buffy let Amy in and the girls caught up.

“So, uh, what's up with my Mom?”

“I'm not sure.” Buffy glanced apologetically at Amy as she continued. “She was all big with the dark energies and then she collapsed.”

“Ah, yes,” Giles said. “She fell as I completed the ritual. It may have been a side-effect, something associated with releasing her spells. Dark magic can build up a karmic debt. She may have just paid it.”

“And what about Willow? Why'd she collapse?”

“I'm okay, Buffy, really. I was just dizzy there for a moment.”

“I'm afraid that's my fault. I should never have allowed you in the room for the ritual. You're so new to magic, I'm afraid the energies were too powerful.”

“No, not too powerful. I'm fine, really. I can handle it.”

“We can discuss it later. Perhaps you could see what happened to Xander? If he confronted the witch, he may require assistance.”

Willow and Buffy dashed out the door, leaving him alone with Amy. “My Mom's not coming back, is she?”

“I don't know exactly what happened so I can't be certain, but I doubt you'll have any further trouble with her.” Giles stepped over to Mrs. Madison's body and checked the pulse. “She is alive. You call an ambulance. I'll clean the remainder of the spell away so we won't have anything to explain to the police.”

Giles stood over the body. It was highly unlikely that Mrs. Madison could move her mind out of the frog's corpse, but he'd ritually destroy the frog just the same. There was no need to take chances, not on a Hellmouth.

Salt didn't need to be consecrated to be effective but sometimes it was better to avoid taking chances. Giles had blessed the salt himself. Mrs. Madison had been a powerful witch, was possibly still a powerful witch. Her mind had been trapped in the frog's corpse but that didn't mean she was dead.
He didn't see how she could escape but that didn't mean that escape was impossible. Under the dark moon, in the center of the garden at the center of his mansion, Giles poured the salt in a circle around the dead frog. He had four hearts, those of ravens, and placed one at each of the four quarters. He hadn't had time to hunt himself but luckily Sunnydale had provided a shop for such things. One of the benefits of living on a Hellmouth. The hearts didn't need to be fresh. In fact the processing, based on Egyptian mumification, strengthened their effectiveness. Once what was left of Mrs. Madison's mind was surrounded by salt and guarded in all four directions, Giles called down the ancient gods.

"Keres, you violent storms whirling in the dusk, you daughters of darkness and night, take this, my offering." He poured blood over the frog, not enough to break the circle, but enough to soak the ground below. "Drink deep and tear into the unworthy, releasing her soul to the great judgment." Cuts appeared on the body of the frog.

"Nephthys, Lady of the Great Temple, daughter of the dark earth and the night sky, hear me. Sink the night-boat, the drifting refuge of this unworthy soul. Catch her in your fierce claws and hasten her journey to the place of judgment." He set a falcon's feather across the charcoal and watched the smoke rise until the feather had been reduced to a charred remnant.

"Ereshkigal, primordial one, Lady of the Great Below, all that this soul once was is now gone. She has given up her body. She has given up her family. She has given up her glory. She has given up her power. Take her soul and trap it. Let the unworthy rot like meat in your great charnel house."

Giles brushed the remnant of the feather into a small bowl and scattered the ashes into the circle. The frog's corpse vanished in a flash of fire.

"It is done."

Willow slipped into the computer lab and took a seat. Stupid test. She could be doing something useful like learning witchcraft so she could help Buffy, but no, Miss Calendar let her miss classes but not tests. It wasn't fair. She could ace the test and Miss Calendar knew it.

Willow stifled a yawn. Once she'd finished the test, which would definitely be early because, hello, acing it, Miss Calendar might let her get a nap in. Giles would let her sleep, actually he'd probably insist on it if he saw how tired she was, but she didn't want him to know. He'd said those witchy energies from yesterday had been too much for her, but he was wrong. Still, if he saw how tired she was, he might stop her lessons, and he couldn't do that. Witchcraft made her special.

"It wasn't four pounds, it was three and three-quarters." Oh great, Cordelia and the crew that never rested from gossip, and there were still three whole minutes until class started. Wonderful. Maybe they'd just ignore her. “And anyway, she'd cheated to lose even that much weight. If I hadn't had a mouth, I'd have lost even more weight.” Oh, they must be talking about Lishanne.

“No mouth?” What, did Harmony live in her own little world?

“Harm, hello! Wake up and smell the coffee. Lishanne had her mouth wired shut. It was some sort of emergency weight loss surgery, which, really, nobody needs. Well, not unless they're really fat, like over 130 pounds or something.”

Right, she'd get through this test as fast as she could and grab a coffee on the way to the library. There was no way she was staying in the same room with Cordelia any longer than she had to.
Quentin found Cecil in the Ashworth library, apparently busy with his indexing project. “Let me see.”

“Uncle, if you don’t mind, this bit is rather tricky and …”

“Now.” Cecil looked away as he handed over the notes. If Quentin had actually thought Cecil had been working on the indexing project, the lad’s blush would have given him away.

“Quentin.” Ah and there she was, the lady of the house, come rushing in to protect her indolent child from the tyrannical uncle.

“Cecil,” he said, “find someplace else to be.”

“But uncle, my work. You assigned the task yourself. Surely you don’t expect me to just abandon …” Good Lord, the lad apparently had no idea that Quentin knew the indexing had been assigned to another. Cecil was more of an imbecile than Quentin had imagined.

“Cecil.” Ah, good to know that Antonia could still intimidate the youngsters. “Off.”

She waited until the lad had shut the door, leaving them alone. “Now, what can I do for you Quentin?”

Quentin laid the notes on the table. “You're getting careless, my dear. You've handed the task over to someone efficient. You can't imagine I believe Cecil has gotten this much done already.”

“You knew I wouldn't let Cecil do the work when you assigned it to him. If it's to be done, it'll be done properly.”

Quentin relaxed into the leather chair closest to the fire. “Why Antonia, you almost sound as if you're suggesting Cecil doesn't have the wherewithal to be a Watcher.”

Antonia sat across from him. “If you wanted Cecil out of the Council, he'd be gone. Stop playing games, Quentin.”

“Alright. Are you trying to get him killed?”

“I told you to stop playing games.”

“You sent your son to investigate Rupert Giles. This is no game, Antonia. In fact, Cecil would likely be dead already if he hadn't been smart enough to use Taylor's young lad as a middleman.” Cecil, smart? It didn't seem likely and then he knew. “Ah, but calling on Jerry Taylor wasn't Cecil's idea, was it? You had him involve the lad.”

Antonia didn't bother to confirm his supposition. “You're afraid of Rupert Giles.”

“I'd say I'm cautious around the man. With good reason.”

“Cautious? If you're merely cautious around the man then you're not just an idiot, you're the heir to the throne of idiots. He's risen far in the Council. Granted anyone who makes it into the upper echelons is dangerous, but Rupert Giles is something more.”

“Something you want to pit your only son against? You could have gotten him killed.”

“Please, Quentin. Cecil is just the kind of knight-errant who'd go after Giles on his own. In directing his search, I'm restraining him, keeping him under control.”
“Please, yourself. Cecil wouldn't have acted on his own, not against your wishes. You told me to stop playing games. What is this game you're playing at?”

“It's no game, Quentin. I'm looking beyond my own interests. I'm looking out for the Council, which should be of some small concern to you. Rupert Giles isn't good for the Council. Rupert Giles has to be gotten rid of. You're obviously not up for it so I'm taking care of it myself.”

“You bring me something concrete, and I'll take care of it, through the proper channels.”

Ah, and that had ruffled her feathers. “Why should I be denied the pleasure of killing him myself?”

“Because the Council can do more then kill him. The Council can shame him and shame his family.”

“We'll see.” He hadn't got her agreement but he had got her thinking. That would have to do.

“Oh, flowers from the school. Isn't that thoughtful, and so nice of you, hun, to take time off from your weekend to bring them over. Madison, Catherine, let me double check. Yes, room 238, right down that hall.” Kris could see why the nurse had made a big deal over the flowers. These were the only offerings. Mrs. Madison had left a daughter and a husband, divorced but still, behind and neither had thought to leave flowers. Perhaps she was being too critical. Mrs. Madison wasn't dead after all although you could hardly tell that by looking at her. Against the pale walls of the hospital room and under the bright light coming in through the window, Catherine Madison looked like a corpse. Only the assorted beeping machines suggested she wasn't dead.

Kris hadn't been sent by the school. Oh, Bob would have paid for the flowers if she'd suggested it, but Kris had come here on her own recognizance, looking for answers. Mrs. Madison had died in a science lab but no one could explain what she'd been doing there. Her daughter, Amy, had said Catherine had come to see her cheer, which made as much sense as anything given that Catherine had led the cheerleading squad back in her day. But how had the woman ended up in a science lab? No one seemed to know. The suggestion that Catherine had gotten lost just didn't hold water. It seemed the Sunnydale witch – Kris hoped there was only one – had claimed another victim, but this one didn't fit into the same pattern as the others. The first three victims had been current cheerleaders. Catherine may have led the squad but that had been almost two decades ago. And the other cheerleaders had revived around the same time as Catherine had been struck down. Had Catherine confronted and defeated the witch – and if so how? – only to be struck down herself? Had she been the witch or just another victim?

Kris turned and left. Catherine was too far gone to reach. There were no answers here. She couldn't assume the witch was dead. She'd have to wait and keep watch.
Teacher's Pet

Chapter Notes

Note: “How to govern is from Kuan Tze but the cup of white gold at Patera, Helen's breasts gave that”. According to Robert Anton Wilson's The Illuminati Papers, Ezra Pound “refers to a celebrated drinking cup said to be molded directly from the right breast of Helen of Troy and, therefore, the most beautiful cup in the ancient world.”

Note: Dent Clocks, company that Giles thinks about.

Note: Pink Floyd's Careful With That Axe. Eugene.

Possible trigger warning: Giles is manipulating Willow into reading books on sex magick in order to get her to practice techniques to get her magic flowing more smoothly. That's as far as it goes. There will be no intimacy between the two of them. Just wanted to give people a head's up so when you see it you know how far it's going.

A big shout out to mikeda who found a first name for Dr. Gregory. Many thanks to Gill O, and Not Vacillating who helped me with British idioms, and to Il Mio Capitano for Brit picking this chapter.

Since it's been a couple months since the previous chapter, a few reminders:

1. Eyghon is connected to Giles by a process called domination. Unlike possession, in which a demon takes over a human host, domination entails the creation of a psychic bond between the demon and its host. The demon does not inhabit the host but is, instead, connected to the host's mind. Think of a boat tied to a dock. Like the boat, which remains in the sea, the demon continues to be discarnate, existing in a non-material plane, but a persistent connection between the demon and its human host remains. It may sound trivial. I assure you, it is not. The demon is, in effect, always in the back of the host's mind, whispering directly into the host's thoughts, always exerting its pernicious influence.

2. Under the stress of Eyghon's influence in the back of his mind, Rupert's personality has split into three. Rupert is closest go canon Giles and has the least contact with Eyghon. Giles is the personality in charge of protecting Rupert. Ripper takes care of any dirty work Giles needs done. To keep Eyghon from tormenting Rupert, Giles has agreed to give Eyghon access to the Slayer line.

3. Giles, after recognizing Willow's power, has worked a power that allows him to drain her magic for his own use. In order to keep an eye on her, he has Rupert teaching her magic.

4. Buffy is taking homeroom in the library. Giles expects her in an hour early so she can meditate. That's going about as well as you'd expect.

5. Kris Mansfield, Principal Flutie's administrative assistant, is aware of Slayers and Watchers. Buffy noticed Kris investigating the witch's magic attacks.

6. In order to gain access to the Slayer more quickly, Giles killed Roderick Ashworth, who had been next in line – before Giles – for a Slayer. Cecil Ashworth, nephew of both Roderick Ashworth and Quentin Travers, tried to force Quentin to act against Giles. As punishment, Cecil has been assigned to an indexing task back at the Ashworth family library. Cecil's mother, Antonia, has given him a new task: find information that will discredit Rupert Giles.
8. When Giles found Tucker in the school library after hours, Eyghon claimed the boy as his own. Giles tried to teach demonology to Tucker but the boy got bored and gave it up.

As Rupert poured tea from the pot, catching the loose leaves in a strainer, he heard a knock at the back entrance of the library. “Buffy's early,” he muttered to himself although, in fact, she wasn't. She was scheduled to arrive an hour before homeroom started. She never did. When he opened the door, he found it wasn't Buffy at all but Willow waiting to be let in. “Hi, Giles.”

This was unexpected. Rupert wondered if his alter ego had arranged this. The lout did seem to delight in tripping him up. “You're here early.”

“Buffy wanted me to look some stuff up and I know she's been having trouble with the meditating thing so I thought I'd come here and help her out. I mean, not help her meditate because that's something you have to do all on your own but I thought if I was here it'd sort of help her get into the meditative mood since I'm meditating now too. Is there more tea?”

Ah, good. He, or his other self, hadn't known Willow would come to the library before school. “Tea? Certainly. I'll pour you a cup. Milk or sugar?” He hated sharing his Harrod's stash with the barbarian children but at least Willow, unlike his Slayer, had the maturity to appreciate a cup of tea.

“Oh, I can get it.”

As he followed her, more sedately than her mad-dash pace, into the office, Rupert compared Buffy's morning grogginess to Willow's vitality. The two girls were friends and presumably kept similar hours but Willow was far more lively in the morning. Perhaps Buffy's Slayer duties were keeping her from getting enough sleep? Well, she'd just have to forgo socializing with her friends. Her duties as a Slayer were far more important.

Rupert found Willow standing before the tea service and staring down into her cup. She looked up as he joined her in the office. “Um, there's a bunch of floaty stuff, like loose leaves or something. Don't you use teabags?”

“Heaven forfend.” He poured the tea and loose leaves back into the pot and then, with a strainer firmly in place, poured the liquid back into her cup.
“But wouldn't teabags be easier?”

“Everything should be made a simple as possible, but no simpler.” He didn't bother trying to explain tea to the girl. He wasn't quite sure Americans could understand. It seemed to be one of those cultural gaps that neither time nor tide could diminish.

“Oh.” Willow didn't seem fazed. She merely took him at his word and reached for the milk.

Back in the reading room, Giles stood by the staircase as Willow sat down at the computer. Given that Buffy would probably start banging at the door the moment he got comfortable, he didn't bother to take a seat. “I take it your own meditative practice is going well?”

“So so,” she shrugged. “It's sort of hard to clear my mind.”

“Yes, it generally is,” he replied. “That will take a bit of time.”

“You think there'd be a shortcut, some type of spell or something to make it easier.”

“That would defeat the purpose I'm afraid. Meditation builds discipline.”

“I'm disciplined,” the girl muttered. “I've got the best grades in school. You don't do that without discipline.”

“Yes, well, those who desire a shortcut tend to lack discipline.”

Before Willow could reply, Buffy swung through the library doors. She held a paper cup with the words Espresso Pump in one hand and a doughnut in the other. "Buffy, please tell me that's at least a decaffeinated.”

“Why would I drink decaf?”
“Because you still haven't succeeded at your meditation practice, and neither sugar nor coffee will be of any help whatsoever?”

Buffy shook her head. “There you're wrong, Giles. Sugar and coffee will keep me awake.”

“Awake and too hyper to meditate properly.”

“And you say I'm undisciplined,” Willow muttered but, happily, too quietly for Buffy to catch.

“So, Willow.” Buffy slipped into a seat on the far side of the table. “Find anything yet?”

When Willow gave him a guilty glance, Rupert realized he'd been keeping her from whatever it was she'd come in to do. “No, I'm just getting started.”

“What is it you're researching?” Rupert asked.

“Buffy wants to know more about Miss Mansfield.”

Rupert was certain he was blushing. The secretary had flirted with him when he'd first arrived at the school. He'd been flustered by the attention and it seemed he'd dithered too long. She'd shown little interest since then. He rather regretted having missed the mark there. “What on earth for?”

“She was too interested in the witchcraft,” Buffy replied.

“Interested?” He hadn't noticed that she'd been paying any attention.

Buffy stared at him as if he were the imbecile. “She interviewed all the students at each of the incidents? She was the first school official on the scenes?”

“And you don't think her position as Principal Flutie's assistant had anything to do with it?”

“I just want to know more about her.”

“I see.” Gods, look at the time. “Up onto the table. Lotus position. You’ve only thirty-five minutes until homeroom starts. You should have been meditating for the past fifteen.”

“Can't blame me for trying,” Buffy said as she hopped onto the table.

Rupert didn't tell her that he bloody well could blame her for delaying her meditation. Starting another conversation would be counterproductive.

Less than two minutes in, she started squirming. “Buffy, settle down. Clear your mind.”

She opened her eyes. Even worse, she drank more of the coffee. “I can't. It's too loud in here.” Loud. In the library. She must have seen something on his face because she added, “Willow's keyboard, the clattering, it's distracting.”

Willow stopped whatever it was she'd been doing. “Oh, I'm sorry.” Wonderful, give the insecure girl yet another complex. “I'll get out of your way.”

“Huh? No, I didn't mean …”

Ah, Buffy thought she'd found another way out of meditation. This he could handle. “Willow, why don't you meditate as well?”

“What?” Ah, apparently Buffy hadn't expected that tactic.

“She did come here to help you after all. If she's meditating then she can't distract you. Perhaps you could make a contest of it. See who can keep still the longest.”

“Oh, yeah, I can do that.” As Willow made herself more comfortable in her chair, Buffy glared at Rupert. Apparently she'd picked up on what he was doing.
“Hey, how come Willow gets to sit in a chair and I'm stuck in this lotusy position?”

“Once you make it into trance, then we'll see about allowing you a chair.”

Gods and it actually worked. Buffy lasted a whole five minutes before squinting open one eye and peering over at Willow who was sitting still, taking deep and even breaths. Buffy closed her eyes again. Perhaps competition was the key. He'd have to think on it.

When the bell rang, Willow leaped up from her seat with a shout of “Homeroom. I'm late!” and Buffy didn't settle again. Hmph, and perhaps competition wasn't the answer.

* * *

“Willow.”

Buffy called out to her just a block from the Bronze which was good because that last alley? Sort of dark and scary. Scarier now that she knew about vampires. As Buffy ran to catch up – and how did she even run in those shoes? – Willow compared her clothes to Buffy's, starting with her own sensible shoes. Well, yeah, because if she tried to run in Buffy's shoes she'd twist an ankle and then she'd be vampire-chow for sure. Her own sweater had some really nice gold tones to it but looked all beige and drab in the dark light of the alley. Her skirt was colorful, actually her whole outfit was a lot more colorful than Buffy's black shirt and purple miniskirt with the black wavy lines. Maybe Buffy needed to wear darker clothes for patrolling or maybe they hid her from the vampires or something but if that was true then Willow should also wear dark clothes because she was a lot slower than vampires although she didn't actually go hunting them down herself. Maybe it was just that Buffy was cooler than she was. Yeah, that was probably it, with her no sleeves and how was she not cold with no sleeves and that really short skirt? Willow looked at her own sleeves which ran down all the way to cover half of her hands. Mom really had to stop shopping for her clothes without her. The sweater was nice and all, particularly when there was light and the gold tone could actually be seen but the sleeves were too long and, now that she was seeing Buffy's miniskirt, her own skirt sort of looked like something somebody's grandma would wear.

“So, what's up?” Buffy took her arm as they continued into the alley.

“Oh, not too much. Kill any good vampires? I mean, not good vampires because obviously none of them are good. I just meant, uh, kill any evil vampires? Except that they're all evil so maybe I just meant kill any vampires?”
Buffy’s smile wasn't a superior smirk. It wasn't. “There were a couple of fledges rising at Shady Rest. No big.”

“Fledges, those are baby vampires, right?”

“Yeah, vamps that have just been Turned. I'm not sure why there's a special name for them.”

Oh, just been Turned. Like Jesse had been. Willow sort of lost the thread of the conversation. Buffy kept chatting until they were at the Bronze. There wasn't much of a line or any line at all really but that was because the Bronze was packed. The dance floor was full and she didn't see Xander anywhere. Buffy was looking around too but probably not for Xander. “Are you meeting Angel here tonight?”

“Mr. cryptic here's a vague warning and sorry but I've got to go guy? Not so far as I know.”

“Oh, you just had that sort of searching for somebody look and, oh, speaking of searching, you won't believe what I found on Miss Mansfield.”

“So, give.”

“Well, I didn't have a chance to search during computer class because I'm doing those magic sessions with Mr. Giles so I had to wait until after I got home and finished my homework. I've still got some more searching to do but I did find, well, she disappeared when she was four.”

Buffy took one look at the tables, all claimed, and steered them toward the bar. “Disappeared? But she's here, I mean we know where she is so how can she be disappeared?”

“That's the thing. She turned up again when she was nineteen.”

“So what happened in between?”

“Nobody knows. She said she doesn't remember. I did a pretty extensive computer search. If there'd
been any info, I'd have found it.”

“Doesn't remember?” Buffy asked. “So there's nothing on her for, what?, fifteen years?”


“That doesn't sound very likely.”

“It's what she claims.”

“Okay, well see what else …”

“Babes!” Xander, he had made it to the Bronze. And, okay, grabbing them each by a shoulder was different.

“What are you doing?” Buffy asked.

“Work with me here,” Xander said. “Blayne had the nerve to question my manliness. I'm just gonna give him a visual.”

Willow grabbed Xander back. “We'll show him!”

And she was actually getting to hold Xander sort of like she was a real girlfriend but then Buffy walked off and Xander sort of let go so she had to let him go too. Oh, and look who Buffy was talking to. “That must be Angel! I think?”

“That weird guy that warned her about all the vampires?”

“That's him. I'll bet you.” And, gosh, he was cute, just as cute as Buffy had said.

“Well, he's buff! She never said anything about him being buff!”
Why would Xander think another guy was buff, except she could tell when a girl was pretty, or when guys would like a girl which sort of came down to the same thing so maybe it went that way for guys too. Or maybe Xander was just protesting because he didn't want any other guy swooping in on Buffy but that totally wasn't Xander's call. If Buffy wanted to see the cute, cryptic guy then that was totally her call and, oh, look, Angel was giving Buffy his jacket.

“Oh, right! Give her your jacket. It's a balmy night, no one needs to be trading clothing out there!”

Well, at least Buffy wouldn't be cold anymore.

* * *

Gods, if Buffy absolutely had to wear a leather jacket to school, you'd think she'd at least pick one that wasn't longer than her dress. Not that this jacket was, longer that is, but it only missed completely dominating her outfit by a few scant inches. As large as it was, it would be better suited to a … Gods, please let it not be a lover. She was already more negligent of her Slayer duties than should be allowed. “Buffy. Late as usual I see. Please fill me in on last night's patrol quickly so you can get at least some meditating in.”

“Good morning to you too, Giles. Delightful to see you so bright and dare I emphasize, early, in the day.” She had the nerve to tip her coffee at him as if he didn't know she was late because she'd stopped off at the Espresso Pump.

“Please Buffy, I'd like you to report on your patrol.”

She must be weakening. Rupert had to raise only one eyebrow to get her to speak. “Nothing unusual. I found a couple of fledges at Shady Rest, just like you'd thought. Killed them and headed out to the Bronze. Oh, and I saw Angel. He said that there's, um, a Fork Guy coming, or maybe Fork Guy's already here since he cut Angel, so I guess that means Fork Guy is definitely in town.”

“Fork Guy?” Rupert asked. Wait, what was this other name she was so casually referring to? Giles settled his tea carefully on the table before asking. “Who is this Angel?”

“Angel? You know. Angel. Big cryptic guy who told me about the Harvest.”
“He has a name?” Idiot, of course he has a name. “And you’ve known it for how long?”

She spoke slowly, dragging out the words. Apparently it hadn't occurred to her that he'd need the names of her enemies. “Since, um, before the Harvest?”

“And you were planning to leave me in the dark indefinitely, then?”

“Well, uh, you know. Harvest. Saving the world. I sort of forgot you didn't know.”

“Buffy, I can't protect you if I don't know what your enemies are up to.”

“What? Enemy? Angel isn't my enemy. He's been helping.”

“But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.”

“Kisses? There've been no kisses. You think there should have been kisses?”

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose. “Proverbs.”

“Proverbs? Those things Jesus said or told or something?”

“It was a quote. Proverbs is a book in the Bible.” Good to know the American educational system was maintaining its ever so high standards.

“Um, what was a quote?”

“‘Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.’ Proverbs 27:6. I was attempting to suggest you don't know enough about this Angel to consider him an ally.”

“But we wouldn't have even known about the Harvest if it wasn't for Angel.”
Ah, youth, so easily shocked. “And perhaps that was a ruse, merely meant to gain your trust.”

“Why? Why would he want to be all trusty with me?”

Giles held back a sigh. “Because you're the Slayer. Anyone who wants power might begin by attempting to gain your trust.” She seemed to be taking that in. “Now, what can you tell me about this Angel? Leave nothing out.”

“What? I'm not spying on him for you.”

Damned recalcitrant … Giles gave up. Let Rupert deal with the impudent brat. “So, er, Fork Guy. What else do you know?” Rupert wasn't quite sure why his Slayer looked upset. Surely she'd been trained to interrogate a source.

“Angel's arms were cut up because the bad guy, the evil guy, the one I'm supposed to hunt down, had attacked him.”

“Oh, I, uh, you're friend will be alright, yes?”

“I suppose.”

“What else did he tell you about this Fork Guy?”

“No mercy. Ripping my throat out. Blah blah blah.”

Gods but she was surly this morning. He knew she was a teenager but Rupert expected a tad more maturity from his Slayer. “In other words the epithet of Fork Guy came from you?”

“Huh?”

“Did your source actually refer to this character as Fork Guy?”
“Uh, well, no.” She stared down at the floor. “I called him that.”

“Any other information?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Perhaps in the future you could ask this, er, Angel to be a tad less vague.”

“It's not my fault that's all he told me.” Did she have to be this defensive first thing in the morning? “He just sort of vanished.”

Vanished. A Slayer said he'd vanished. Giles sipped at his tea to cover his shock. This Angel couldn't be human. “I'll see what I can learn with the overabundance of information at hand. Lotus position. Come on. You'll barely get thirty minutes in.” She grumbled but she sat on the desk and shifted into the Lotus pose and at least closed her eyes. He didn't expect she'd actually get into a trance any day soon but at least she was trying.

As Buffy fidgeted on the table, Giles thought about her so called friend. Calls himself Angel. Isn't human. Damn, it was so very little to go on. When he looked up, she was glancing at the clock. “Buffy,” he warned.

She actually had the nerve to jump off the table and pace about the room. “Giles, I'm a Slayer. I'm primed to fight, not sit on my butt and do nothing.”

“Buffy, I can make you a better Slayer, I can keep you alive, but only if you trust me. I've explained why the meditative practice is important.”

“Yeah, yeah, connect with my inner rainbow warrior.”

“There's no need for sarcasm. Merrick thought you wouldn't last and this attitude is exactly the reason why.”
“Merrick thought I wouldn't make it?”

Gods, was she honestly about to cry? “I'm sorry, Buffy. I shouldn't have said that.”

“If it's true, why not?” Her arms were folded and she wouldn't look at him.”

“Please, will you try meditating? It's just another twenty minutes, not long at all.”

“Okay.” She sounded broken. Well and good. It was time she accepted the harsh reality of her Calling.

* * *

The library's table was piled high with the books that Giles had already searched through. Open before him was the *Journal of Nicholas Stone*. Its discussion of the creature calling itself the Invitavit Iste Angeli hadn't helped Giles with his search. Far too many creatures based their nom de guerre on some variant of the word angel. The demon might be cunning, almost certainly had to be cunning, if it had identified and targeted the Slayer, but it almost certainly wasn't well-educated. A more knowledgeable demon would have taken the name of an actual angel, Kushiel whose name meant punishment or Maalik whose name meant hellfire for example. Unless the demon was clever enough to appear less intelligent than it actually was. Giles leaned away from the table. Gods, this was getting him nowhere.

“Hey Giles, what's up?”

Willow's bookbag hit the table with a heavy thud. Giles wasn't entirely sure why she brought books to these lessons. Reading would, in fact, be a distraction from both her meditation and levitation practices. It was possible she merely enjoyed books. It was a sentiment he could agree with. He supposed he should give way to Rupert. It wasn't as if he'd been making any progress but, hang on, perhaps Willow could provide information on this mysterious Angel. “I'm researching Buffy's informant.”

“Oh, Angel, really?” She moved behind him so she could see the text. “The Invitavit Iste Angeli, Slayer of Angels, one of the darkest beasts to roam this land, does sometimes call himself Angel, a dark desecration touching the very core of our faith. The demon's murderous rampages directed at servants of the forces of good’ … Hey, you don't think that Buffy’s Angel is this creepy Angel Slayer, do you?”
“Many demons name themselves with some variant of the word angel. For me to definitively associate any one of them with Buffy's informant, well, I'd need more information than is currently available.”

“But Buffy's Angel, I mean, he's a good guy.”

“Is he?” Giles stood and started pacing the room. “He's allied himself with the Slayer who has considerable power in her own right. How do we know what his motives are?”

“But, well, we could say that about you.” She must have seen something on his face for she backtracked immediately. “Not that we would, of course, because you're her Watcher and obviously that's a good guy kind of a thing but, uh, how we would actually know that having never heard of a Watcher before …”

“Watchers have prepared Slayers for centuries. We've guided them. We've trained them. It is a long and time-honored association. We do not steal their power or abuse it for dark purposes.” Eyghon chuckled in the back of Giles' mind as an image of the Scythe flashed through his thoughts. Right, except that stealing Buffy's power and abusing it for dark purposes was, in fact, his goal. But, still, he was her Watcher and until that day of inevitable betrayal, he would guide her to the best of his abilities.

“What do you know about Angel?” he asked.

“Well.” She seemed reluctant to speak. “If you're thinking he's evil and all, I mean, it's not really my place to say. Maybe you should ask Buffy.”

He'd already asked Buffy but he could hardly share that with Willow if he expected her to provide information. “Have you seen him, this Angel?”

“Well, yeah, I mean, he was at the Bronze last night.”

“Then you can at least describe him to me.” He could lead her slowly, get her talking, and see what else she'd say.
“Well, uh, I suppose that couldn't hurt. He's taller than Buffy, sort of broad shouldered, and, uh, has dark hair.”

“That's it?” Gods, the girl was almost as useless as Buffy.

“He had on a white t-shirt?”

“And what has Buffy told you about him?”

“See, that's where I think you need to talk to Buffy because it's really her business, I mean your business as well since it's Slayer stuff but totally not my business and so I shouldn't say anything and could we start practicing magic now?”

“Fine.” He obviously wouldn't get anything else out of the girl. Rupert could bloody well wake up and take over her lessons. Giles needed to think.

* * *

Antonia found Cecil playing snooker. Ha! And he'd thought he could hide from her. Where else would he be? He wouldn't hide in the library; too many associations with work. And it was too early for him to have wandered down to the pub. Of course he was playing snooker.

“Cecil.”

When he saw her, he jumped. “Mother.”

“Should I even bother asking after your research?”

Cecil picked up his cue, lined and made the shot before responding. She had to give him one thing. He did play a good game of snooker. Too bad there was nothing else he could do well. He stared at the table as he spoke. “Do you know how many demonic attacks there are on any given day in London? I do. Shall I share?”
“Rupert Giles spent two years at Oxford after returning to the Council. Start there.” Could he do
nothing on his own?

“He’s too intelligent to release a demon on Oxford proper. Yes, there were attacks in the vicinity, by
which I mean he could have driven there, released a demon and driven home all in one night. So
what? There's nothing to tie him to the attacks, or at least that's what dear uncle Quentin will claim.”

“How did the rate of demonic attacks change? Were they higher after he'd returned to Oxford? Did
they drop after he'd left?”

“What?”

“Good Lord, Cecil, are you not even working on a comparison study?”

“Taylor's data covers Oxford while he was there, covers London while he was there. He didn't give
me any data for those areas when Giles wasn't there.”

Idiot child, always blaming others for his own deficiencies. “Forget the statistical analysis.” She'd
assign it to someone competent. It'd have to be someone she could trust to keep his mouth shut. Not
Jeremy Taylor. Quentin must have already suborned the poor fellow. As for the overall project, she
couldn't leave Cecil out of it completely, not if she was going to present it as his investigation.
“Interview Giles' friends.”

“He hasn't got any.” Antonia watched as Cecil realized that interviewing Giles' friends would return
him to London. “He must have had some mates at university. I suppose I could start there.”

Mates from university, most of whom would be working for the Council. “You aren't to speak of this
to any Watchers.” Naturally Quentin knew they were investigating Rupert Giles but there was no
need to clumsily advertise the fact. “I'll get you a list.”

Cecil dashed off, presumably to pack. How the Travers and Ashworth lines, both ancient and
venerable in their service to the Council, had produced such an imbecile, Antonia would never
understand. At least her daughters were intelligent.
Rupert counted the room numbers as he strode down the hall, 105, 107, ah, yes, Science 109. Giving the door a quick rap before pushing through, Rupert called out as he entered the classroom. “Stephen? I told you scones were harder to bake than you’d thought. Just because you tried and failed, don't think you can hide here and get out of our bet.”

Rupert's second step fell short as he stopped just inside the classroom. “The cup of white gold at Patera.” The words fell from his lips but they were nothing compared to the beauty before him. This Venus would put even Troy's Helen to shame. Her lips, as dark and as red as pomegranates, were just as likely to doom a man to Hell as to deliver him to Heaven. Her arms, white wings that would whisper softer than the tenderest down, would encircle no comforting paradise but would instead beat against him in a wild mating of two aggressors, each vying for dominance.

“Can I help you?” Her voice, the briefest cooing of morning doves, left him wanting more.

Help? Ah, yes. “I was looking for Dr. Gregory.”

“He's not here.” The words were a brash squawk. Rupert noticed Tucker sitting next to the woman at Dr. Gregory's desk.

Mine, Eyghon growled.

The woman? That would certainly explain his attraction.

Mine. The boy. Save him.

“I'm afraid Dr. Gregory isn't in today. I'm the substitute teacher, Miss French.” Shielded by Eyghon's mistrust, Giles struggled against the siren call of her voice.

Save him.

“Mr. Wells, shouldn't you be in class?”
“It's my lunch period.”

“Tucker was helping me plan out egg sac designs for the science fair.” The woman's smile mimicked a feminine frailty.

Unfortunately Tucker seemed to be completely under the spell of that smile. “Yeah, buzz off old man.”

“Ah, of course. I'll catch up with him, Dr. Gregory that is, some other time.”

Out of sight of the classroom, Giles plastered himself against the wall. He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd just escaped some dangerous beast although he couldn't be quite sure what until the image of a giant praying mantis flashed across his mind. “Do you mean Carlyle was right?”


“I'm not sure what I can do.”

Save him.

“Fine, but it'll need research.” With a stabbing pain, the lights in the hallway grew so blindingly bright he had to raise an arm against them. “Look, she's hardly going to attack him here at the school. I need to know how to kill her if I'm to save the boy.”

The pain receded but slowly as if Eyghon were reluctant to stop torturing him. Giles was just able to push himself off the wall when the wail of a siren drew him toward the cafeteria.

“Giles, Giles.” Buffy ran up, closely followed by Willow and Xander.

“What's happened?”

“It's Dr. Gregory. They found him.”
“Found him?”

“In a fridge. His head is missing.”

Once again Tucker flashed across Giles' thoughts. *Save him.*

* * *

Tucker stared at the white picket fence and pale stucco walls and checked the address: 857 Weatherly Drive. It had to be wrong. Miss French couldn't live in this bland suburban hellhole. There wasn't even a red light much less girly curtains or anything. He tried peering through the curtains but they were heavy and shut. He rang the bell and brushed a hand over his hair, hoping he had the right place as the door opened and …

Breasts. He could see breasts. Two of them, right there, hanging out of her dress. They were huge and … breasts. Miss French's breasts.

“Come in Tucker and, please, call me Natalie.”

Breasts. So close he could reach out and touch them but then she turned and the breasts were gone but, oh God, curves. There were curves and … lower curves. He followed the curves and found himself sitting. The breasts were back and they were handing him a drink.

“Don't you like your martini? I could make you something else if you'd prefer.”

No, no, then the breasts would go away. He downed the martini. The breasts smiled their approval. That … didn't seem right. Breasts … breasts didn't smile, but these did.

A bell rang and Miss French's eyes narrowed and the eyes were scary somehow, much scarier than the breasts, and something, something was wrong but he didn't know what.

“Miss French?” The words were far away, terribly, terribly distant.
“Blayne? Just a minute.” Miss French was so very far away, and the breasts, he couldn't touch them. He couldn't reach out. He couldn't move.

The chair rushed past him and he was on the floor. The ceiling was so white, like a great milky void, but it was moving and the walls closed in on him and he didn't know where he was but it wasn't where he'd been before.

“Blayne.” He heard her voice, the voice that went with the breasts but he couldn't see the breasts or the curves. He could only hear the voice. “You're early. Come in.”

“I hope you don't mind.” A voice but not the voice of the breasts.

“Not at all.”

“I couldn't wait to get my hands on …”

The voices had faded. The room was gone. Dark. Oh God, what was hap …

* * *

Even in the middle of the afternoon, the Zeitgeist's red ceiling and dark walls held the light at bay. Not that the restaurant was actively dark, but to Cecil it suggested a hidey-hole, a place where he couldn't be found. Of course that's not what he told himself. The best Käsekrainer this side of Berlin and as much lager as he could put back. The restaurant wasn't currently offering up much in the way of company. That was a shame given that he'd just escaped from more than a whole week stuck in the middle of nowhere with mother, but the lack of company couldn't be helped. Low profile, he was meant to be keeping a low profile so uncle Quentin would think he was stuck at home working on that damned indexing task. Of course that didn't mean he couldn't hit a couple of clubs later on. It wasn't as if Quentin or any of his stick-in-the-mud compatriots would catch Cecil there. He might run into a few of his own friends, some of them Watchers, but they'd never narc on him.

When a shadow loomed over his table, Cecil looked up with a grin, expecting that friendly little waitress. It wasn't a pretty girl. It was mother. “What … what are you doing here?”
She sat down across from him. “Busy at your assigned task I see.”

Fuck. How did she always manage to make him feel as if he was three with his hand caught in the sweetie tin? “It's just lunch, mother. Surely you can't expect me to starve myself.”

One look at his beer said she knew exactly how many he'd had.

“I can't continue until I have a list. You told me you'd provide a list of names, mother.”

“I have a contact. I presume you can handle extracting the names from him yourself.”

Shit, that was fast. He'd thought he'd have a few days in London before she had him back in the salt mines. “Of course. Who is it?”

“The Wyndam-Pryce lad.”

Cecil's heart sank. No, she couldn't mean … “Wesley?” No, it wouldn't be Wesley. That'd be too easy. Besides, Wes was too young to have known Rupert back in the day.

Mother raised an eyebrow. “No, his cousin Alan.”

Damn. “But you told me I shouldn't speak to Watchers.”

“And you won't. Unless I specifically instruct you to. Alan can be trusted.” Which meant mother knew one, or rather more than one, of Alan Wyndam-Pryce's secrets. “He will provide you with a list of known associates. You will take it from there.”

Cecil stared at his beer. He didn't want to leave it but felt uncomfortable finishing it off before mother. He wished she'd leave.

“Well? Get going.”
With a grim frown, Cecil called the waitress over for his check.

* * *

Over an hour before homeroom was due to start, Giles stood, alone, in the empty library. He didn't know why he bothered to arrive early. Buffy would waltz in whenever she felt like it and not a moment sooner. The girl had no sense of duty, especially when it came to the meditative practices. The situation was spiraling out of control. Giles needed her to meditate, she would meditate, and once she'd finally managed to access a trance state, he'd tap into her subconscious and locate that damned Scythe.

At least her lack of enthusiasm gave him time to step into his office and check his purportedly forbidden bookshelf. Hmm, *The Wisdom of the Beast* was still missing. Not surprising, really. Of the books he'd put out to tempt Willow, *Wisdom* was the most serious, outside of *The Rose and the Thorn*. A quick cantrip revealed that Willow had pulled *The Rose* from the shelf but had quickly put it back. He could almost picture the twitchy little virgin reading the subtitle, *A Tantric Guide to Sex Magic*, and shoving the book away as if it had burned her. He'd have to see what he could do to correct that. Untrained magic didn't flow smoothly, but Giles was not about to fight for control each time he had to access Willow's power. She was already meditating regularly, which would smooth down the flow of her magic over time, but the more she practiced, the faster her magic would become usable. There was nothing to get a teenager to practice, well, anything like wrapping it up in sex.

“Giles? Don't tell me I made it here before you.”

Giles glanced at the clock as he closed up the shelf. Buffy wasn't late? Would wonders never cease. “I'm in here,” he said as he stepped into the library's main room. “I take it you have something important to report?”

“Huh?”

“Presumably you're on-time for a reason.”

She grimaced as she dumped her coffee and some sort of flaky, sugary concoction onto the table, but she didn't disagree. “So I was in the park last night.”

“The park?” Gods, could she just get to the point? He hadn't even put on the water for his tea yet.
“Yeah, Weatherly.”

“You went hunting last night.”

“Yes.”

“When you assured me you wouldn't.”

“Yes, I lied. I'm a bad person. Let's move on.”

And she'd been looking for whom? Right, Fork Guy. “Did you see someone with a fork?”

“More like a jumbo claw.”

He checked to see if she'd been hurt. Apparently not. “And?”

“And I saw something else. Something much more interesting than your average run-of-the-mill killer vampire.”

Oh, please, do pick up the pace. “Oh?”

“Do you know Miss French, the teacher that's been subbing for Dr. Gregory?”

The giant praying mantis creature? “Ah, yes.”

“Well, I'm chasing Claw Guy last night and Miss French is heading home. Claw Guy takes one look at her and runs screaming for cover.”

Well, he would, wouldn't he? Of course Giles couldn't tell Buffy that. “Ah.”
“Ah? That's it? I tell you rampaging killer vampire is afraid of a substitute teacher and all you can say is ah?”

“This will require research. Why don't you meditate while I gather my books?”

“Meditate? There's not only Claw Guy but also a really scary substitute teacher … Okay, that doesn't sound as bad as it should, but we don't even know what she is and you want me to sit back and meditate? I should be following her, checking her out.”

“If she frightened off a vampire, she's terribly dangerous. I don't want you hunting her until I have a plan of attack.” Based on Buffy's expression, his words had gone in one ear and out the other. “Did you manage to kill, um, Claw Guy last night?”

“Huh? Oh, no, he sort of got away.”

“And yet you believe you can chase after an unidentified creature? If you can't even sit still and tune into your Slayer powers, how do you expect to defeat Claw Guy much less anything more dangerous?”

“Fine.” She took a bite of her croissant and a swig of coffee before settling into lotus position. Ah, yes, because sugar and caffeine would be so helpful as she tried to calm her mind.

Giles walked into the stacks before calling on Eyghon. “What do you know of this creature?”


“Perhaps I can delay Buffy until the creature has left town.” Pain lanced through Giles' mind. “What was that for?”

He saw an image of Tucker. *Save him.*
“We don't even know that she's targeting him.”

Eyghon showed him an image of Tucker in the science room with Miss French. *Save him.*

“Yes, well, if the demon is that dangerous you may have to choose between the Slayer line and Tucker as an acolyte.”

*Both.*

When Giles stepped out of the stacks, Buffy's foot was twitching a mile a minute. Wonderful. She couldn't even still her mind for two minutes and yet Eyghon was forcing him to send her after a demon that would almost certainly kill her. Giles felt trapped between Scylla and Charybdis, and Eyghon would most certainly take it out of his hide once the Slayer was dead.

* * *

Five children were listed on the morning roll as absent. While Kris reviewed the list, she wondered how many were actually dead. In Sunnydale, it was unlikely they were all out sick. As if to prove her point, in rolled Detective Young, the high-school's contact with the Mayor's Task Force on Missing Children. Kris wasn't surprised to see that his cup of coffee had come out of the high-school's cafeteria. The detective almost always stopped in to see the lunch ladies before coming to the main office. “Detective Young.”

He shook his head as if disappointed. “Kris, I've asked you to call me Dan.”

And I've told you to call me Miss Mansfield. She stood just far enough behind the counter that he couldn't reach out and take her hand. “No new missing students I hope.” But of course there were. He wouldn't have come in person if there weren't.

“Blayne Mall,” he replied. “The father's some sort of hot-shot lawyer, thinks he's a big deal. The mother called in last night, hysterical. Garcia took the call and let the woman hold up the line for a good forty-five minutes and, to add insult to injury, the father's office called this morning. He demanded to speak to me in person, if you can believe it. I got him off the phone in less than five, but then I'm not Garcia. I didn't bother to offer him a Kleenex each time he sniffled at me.”

“Did his parents mention any after school activities?” Kris made a mental note to stake out the Mall
house that evening. If Blayne were a newly risen Fledge, he'd likely be drawn back to his home. Family members were the most common victims of newly Turned vampires.

Detective Young leaned on the counter with a pleased look, as if he though she was asking just to draw out the conversation. “I'd have to check my notes.”

“Please do.”

“Well, only because you said please.” He didn't actually look through any papers. “He had some science thing in the early evening with one of the teachers. I'll need to talk to him.”

“Her,” Kris said. Young's eyes lit up at the correction. “Miss French, a substitute, is taking on Dr. Gregory's classes. You'll have heard he was found, headless, in one of the refrigerators.”

“Yeah, little Nellie was quite shaken up about it.” School had started less than a month ago and Kris had already seen him out at night with two of the lunch ladies. This despite his wedding band. Apparently he'd made a third conquest in the cafeteria. It was quite remarkable if a bit nauseating. Late forties and balding didn't generally manage to juggle at least four women at once.

“Miss French doesn't have any students at the moment. You should find her in Science 109, either that or the Teacher's Lounge.” Kris didn't offer to call the woman to the main office. The detective could hit on at least three women at once, and Kris was not going through that again.

“French, eh? Does she live up to her name?” When Kris didn't respond, he added, “Don't know why we bother. It's not like we'll find any of the little monsters. These boys, they head off to Tijuana and we never see them again.”

“How do we know they're alright if no one sees them?”

“Hey, if I was down with that many hot taco-tails, I'd never come home either.”

Wait, he'd said monsters. As in more than one? “Are there any other missing students this morning?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, um, Melanie Hart and Tucker Wells.”
Wells, wasn't he also taking biology? “If you leave now you'll have a good ten minutes with Miss French before the next class starts.” Letting Detective Young find his own way out of the office, Kris brought up Tucker's schedule. Yes, there it was: biology with Dr. Gregory, the teacher who'd been replaced by Miss French. She brought up the substitute's records. Born in 1907. So much for staking out Blayne's home. Looks like she'd be keeping an eye on the teacher.

* * *

The last bell had run a good minute ago but Mrs. Miller had them trapped in the classroom. “You're not going anywhere until I'm sure you all understand the assignment.” When they were finally released, Buffy had to shove only a few of kids out of the way to be first out the door. Of course she was a couple of halls and one staircase down from the science classrooms. Forcing her way through the halls was like swimming against a stream. Everyone seemed to be going the other way.

When she peeked her head around the corner, she was just in time to see Xander leaving Science 109. She was thinking about asking him if he'd noticed anything odd about Miss French when he pumped both fists into the air and shouted, “Ooo, yes!” Okay, and maybe he wouldn't have a useful perspective.

After about two minutes, Buffy started to wonder if Miss French was even in the classroom. Maybe she'd gone for the day and Xander had been all happy because he, you know, hadn't had his head bitten off by a demon. After four minutes, she couldn't stand not knowing. Buffy walked past the classroom and peered through the window in the door. Nope, Miss French was there all right, eating an, ugh, white-bread sandwich. At the six minute mark Buffy told herself that Miss French had not climbed out the windows. Someone would have seen her. She was just taking her time getting organized or something. Maybe heads took a long time to digest and she had an upset stomach. Finally, after more than ten minutes, Miss French left the classroom and, yay!, made her way out the front of the school.

Good, now all Buffy had to do was follow her home, keeping her distance so Miss French didn't see her, and maybe she should be wearing a hat and sunglasses as a disguise or something. Scrounging through her backpack as Miss French walked down to the sidewalk, Buffy found a hair-tie. She threw the rubberband back in and looked up to see Miss French walking into the parking lot. “No. No no no no no.” She caught up just as Miss French drove off in some sporty little red number. So much for surveillance. Buffy turned back to the school. Maybe Willow or Giles had come up with something.

In the library, Buffy found Willow on the computer and Giles, what a surprise, going through a pile of musty books. “Hey, Buffy, I thought you were going to follow Miss French.”
“She what?” So much for keeping the surveillance a secret from Giles.

As she spoke, Willow glanced toward Giles as if she thought he was about to explode. “Or, no, of course I didn't think that because, um, why would you be following a teacher even if she isn't really a teacher and only a sub?”

Thanks Willow, Buffy thought. “I lost her,” she explained to Giles.

“Lost her as in the demon is aware you were trailing her and has now gone into hiding?”

“No,” Buffy replied. “Lost her as in I didn't know she'd have a car.”

“Gods.” Giles pinched the bridge of his nose. “And I'm left having to applaud your lack of preparation since it has, quite likely, saved your life.”

“I wasn't going to confront her.”

“Oh? Well, that's alright then, because naturally she'd never attack if you hadn't confronted her. Demons are so considerate that way.”

“She let Claw Guy go.”

Before Giles could respond, Willow's computer beeped. “Buffy, 911! Blayne's mom called the school. He never came home last night.”

“The boy who worked with Miss French yesterday?” Giles asked. “That would fit with the demon's modus operandi.”

“Her what?”

Willow leaped to her feet. “If Miss French is responsible for … Xander's supposed to be helping her right now! He's got a crush on some kind of a demon.”
Buffy grabbed her hands. “It's okay, Willow. I saw him. He left her classroom. He was fine. Completely head-having and everything, and she's left campus for the day.”

Willow dropped back into her chair. “Oh. Good.”

“So Giles, come up with anything?”

“As you know, Dr. Gregory was decapitated. Since there has been no sign of his head, I have been investigating creatures that would, um, eat the head of their victims. I believe we are dealing with a She-Mantis, the demonic form of the praying mantis. The female assumes the form of a beautiful woman and lures innocent virgins back to her nest where she mates with them and literally bites their heads off.”

“A praying mantis?” Buffy asked. “Isn't that sort of, um, tiny?”

“Ah, no, sorry. Left that detail out. The She-Mantis is as large as a human.”

“Xander's gonna die!”

“She doesn't have Xander, Willow. I saw him. He's fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'll find Xander and make sure he knows. You two, go through all the info you can find on praying mantises. Do they have any natural predators? What makes them go wiggy?”

“Buffy, you can't assume that a demon could be harmed by the same creatures that would kill an insect. If that were the case we could merely step on it.”

“We can't assume not either. Just look it up.”
Xander woke behind bars. As he rose, wiping the straw he'd been sleeping on from his face, he scanned the room. It seemed to be a basement, with stairs to his left and old refrigerator and something … large moving in the background. His mind flashed to an image of a serrated hand. “Miss … French?”

“Please, call me Natalie.” It spoke with her voice.

Okay, this was bad. He backed away. Something grabbed him from behind. “Ah!” He turned and backed into more bars. Something else grabbed him. “Ah!” He jumped away from both of them, toward the big bug creature. “Tucker! Blayne!”

“Oh, God! Oh, God!” Blayne was freaking. Well, he sort of had reason to.

“You gotta save me, man.” Tucker grabbed his collar.

“Hey, back off.” Xander brought his hands down on Tucker's arms to release the hold. “What's going on?”

“She, she, she gets you, and, uh …” Blayne was no help.

“What?”

“She gets you, man, and ties you up and these eggs come shooting out and then …” Tucker made a choking sound.

“I don't wanna die like that!” Blayne added.

Okay, it seemed to involve mating and death, sort of like in English class with Mrs. Gluck rambling on about sex and death and how they always go together or are always associated with each other or something which, frankly, had never made any sense, but this was less literature-like and more happening any minute in real life like. “Blayne! Chill! It's okay. It's gonna be okay. We'll get out of this.”
“You gotta plan? What is it?”

“Just, uh, let me perfect it!”

“Oh, God … Oh, God … Oh, God …”

“It's okay,” Tucker muttered to himself. “I got out of the last one. I can get out of this one.”


It didn't take much arm twisting to get Tucker to talk. “Okay, okay. A bunch of us were hanging in this abandoned mansion and some … thing came out of nowhere. It tore into them. There wasn't anything I could do.”

“And?” Xander twisted harder.

“I snuck out, uh, while it was eating them.”

“That's so less than helpful.”

* * *

Kris' training had taught her that demons live in crypts, sewers, tunnels, and caves. No one had ever suggested a demon would live in a one-story suburban home with wooden shingles and a flower garden worthy of Charlie Dimmock. Kris would have preferred to follow Miss French home but had been detained after school. No matter, she'd found the address online and Miss French was definitely home. Lights in the house had been turning off and on ever since twilight had fallen. Still something didn't feel quite right. Kris would prefer to get a look at her target but didn't want to give herself away by getting too close. After three and a half hours of surveillance, she felt as if she were wasting her time. What if Blayne Mall had been Turned? Waiting here wouldn't save his parents. Kris ticked off her reasons to stay: Miss French's birth year was listed as 1907; Blayne had, apparently, visited her last night; Tucker Wells, also one of her students, was missing. No, Kris would stick to her original plan.
When a car pulled into Miss French's driveway, Kris thought for a moment that she was getting someplace, but then Buffy, quickly followed by Willow and Mr. Giles, jumped out. Buffy was about to kick the door in – and why hadn't Kris thought of that? – when it was opened by an old woman. Kris couldn't hear what they said but the three left the house behind, which meant … what? Oh, shit, that's what had been bothering her. Of course the demon would have given a false address. Good Lord but she was an idiot, the heir to the kingdom of idiots.

Okay, so she'd follow the Watcher instead. That proved to be not particularly difficult. Mr. Giles and Willow stood by as Buffy jumped through a manhole into the sewer. Did that mean Buffy was the Slayer? But that didn't scan. The Council would never have allowed the kind of behavior that Kris had read on Buffy's record. On the other hand, Buffy had saved Amber and Cordelia, Buffy was the one kicking down doors, and Buffy had jumped into the sewer although Kris didn't know why.

What did that make Willow then? She could be an Eyas, a Potential being trained in case she'd be Called, but what would she be doing studying with the Slayer's Watcher? None of this scanned. The Council wouldn't put years of training into an Eyas only to get her killed before she'd even been Called.

* * *

“Buffy?” Giles let Willow call down through the open manhole. He wasn't entirely certain why Buffy had jumped down into the sewer, but whatever she was chasing down, he doubted it would help her survive the She-Mantis. How had the situation gotten so far out of control? There was no need for Buffy to fight this demon. It would wander off soon enough, but now that she was hunting it, there would be no stopping her. He could only hope that she would survive the encounter.

* * *

When she dies, we take the witch.

“What?”

Willow looked up from the manhole. “Did you see Buffy?”

“I'm sorry, what?”

“You said something. I though maybe you'd seen Buffy.”
“Oh, no. My mind was wandering.” As she started calling down into the sewer again, Giles turned his attention to Eyghon. *We will what?*

*Take the witch.* Eyghon forced visions into his mind: Willow branded with the black mark. Willow straining against her bonds as Giles dedicated her to the demon, calling its essence into her, and making her into Eyghon's high priestess.

Suddenly relieved he'd missed dinner, Giles struggled to control the roiling in his stomach. The Slayer was one thing. Her calling predestined her to die at the hands of a demon, but Willow was an innocent. *No.*

*You think to challenge me?*

*Buffy might yet survive.* She wouldn't. And then he'd have to sacrifice Willow or Eyghon would destroy Rupert. He had to protect Rupert. That was his task. Perhaps the She-Mantis would remain hidden. The creature couldn't kill Buffy if they couldn't find it.

“Come on!” Buffy struggled with the vampire, shoving it along the sidewalk. “Come on, where is she? Which house is it?”

She was using the vampire to find the She-Mantis? How unexpectedly clever.

The vampire hissed and bucked against Buffy. “This is her, isn't it? This is her house? This is it! Better than radar!”

Ah, so much for avoiding a fight with the She-Mantis. For a long moment, Giles couldn't tear his gaze away from Willow. She seemed so small, so fragile and innocent.

* * *

“It's so unfair how she only went after virgins.”
As Xander laughed and glanced between the two girls, Giles waited for the boy's brain to catch up. “What?” Ah, and there it was.

Tucker's face suddenly looked even paler as the other boy spoke up. “Flag down on that play, babe.” Giles decided to intervene. Obviously he'd be stuck driving the idiots home and he certainly wasn't about to listen to protests of manly prowess from three wet behind the ears toddlers for the next half hour.

“Blayne, is it? Drop it now or we won't save you the next time you're grabbed by a demon.”

“Next time? Next Time?!?”

“I don't think it's bad. I think it's really …” Willow paused as Xander picked up the machete. “… sweet. It's certainly nothing I'll ever bring up again.”

As Xander chopped the eggs into tiny bits, Giles took two steps back to join Tucker by the cages. “Are you alright?” he said for the crowd. More quietly, he added, “If you've changed your mind about learning how to survive Sunnydale, be at the mansion Saturday morning, 5 A.M.”

To test Tucker's interest, Giles had suggested a time the lad would almost certainly consider an ungodly hour, but Tucker merely nodded in response. Perhaps he was finally serious.

* * *

Kris had flipped the switch but the lights hadn't flicked on. The stairs leading down to the basement were still dark. She took a deep breath. Dark basement, lights not working, this must be the place. She wished she'd brought a flashlight as she descended into the darkness. She stopped as one of the steps creaked beneath her. Nothing rushed her. Of course not. The Slayer had been here. Kris was safe.

The floor was covered in … Kris didn't want to know what it was. She saw what could be a claw but had no idea what kind of a demon it might belong to. It was sharp though, far too sharp for her to be messing with.

While Kris couldn't identify the demon, she could imagine herself fighting it. She could see, quite clearly, how years of training would fail her. A strike chopping at the demon's shoulder would be
blocked, sending her sword flying. The claw, serrated and sharp, would cut straight into her. Her body would drop, heavily, into her pooling blood. And then she’d grow cold.

Sunnydale would kill her. Kris had told herself that before she’d come, but she’d never truly believed it. She believed it now. She could see her death in the demon that lay before her. She could see her death in the citizens Turned in the night. She could see herself confronting a demon fresh from the grave. She’d been trained, but even a newly risen Fledge would have demonic speed, strength, and aggression on its side.

If she tried to Slay, possibly if she even merely stayed, Sunnydale would kill her. But if she didn’t Slay, then what was her purpose?

* * *

In the room above the operating room, the white tile was unsullied by any hint of color. Even the white leather and steel supports of the chairs emitted an antiseptic aura. As he waited for Alan Wyndam-Pryce, Cecil remembered campfires that had driven back dark nights to create a camaraderie where an even greater darkness could be shared. As the sons of Watchers, they’d shared horror stories of demons, some true and some patently false even then, but the darkest stories, the stories they believed could touch them, were of human malice. A great number featured Alan Wyndam-Pryce. Alan pulled wings off of flies. Alan set cats on fire. Alan had gelded his cousin Wesley. If Alan could do that to blood, imagine what he’d do if he caught you. If he even knew you were here now, listening to these stories … About that time someone would jump out from behind a bush, shouting boo and scaring them all half to death. That bit about Wesley had been proven false in the locker room, but it was true that Cecil had thanked God, every night in his prayers, that Alan wasn’t his cousin.

“Ah, there you are, Cecil. Haven’t been waiting long I hope.”

He startled in his chair and tried to cover it up by rising to his feet. Alan’s smirk told him he hadn’t succeeded. “No, of course not. Good to see you.”

Alan gestured for him to take his seat again. “Let's get down to brass tacks, shall we?”

“Here?” There were a good half-dozen technicians, doctors and assistants, in the operating room below. “Isn't this a tad conspicuous?”
The thin sliver of Alan's smile reminded Cecil of the slash left by a knife across open skin. “Not at all. We're talking about your next job. Your mother's ambitious for you don't you know. She thought you'd do well in my department.”

Good Lord, no. Cecil could barely handle looking down through the windows into the room below. A vampire, male, naked and uncovered, had been spreadeagled across an operating table. His head had been immobilized by a metal strap and his mouth had been gagged. Thank the Lord for small mercies. At least they didn't have to hear him scream. The doctor was cutting open his fingers. Cecil didn't need to know more.

Alan had been the driving force behind the Council's newly recreated Department of Physical Research. His proposal to capture and physically examine demons had been controversial and widely discussed. Granted, Alan's arguments had seemed sound. It had been over sixty years since the Council had closely examined any demonic specimens. Science had made tremendous advances in the intervening years. Still, Cecil couldn't shake the suspicion that Alan had merely wanted something he could legitimately torture.

“Couldn't we talk somewhere else?”

“And give lie to your official reason for being here? I think not.”

And if Cecil puked on the tile, would that suggest he was a good candidate for this department? Cecil decided to move on. The sooner he got through the interview, the sooner he could get out. “You knew Rupert Giles when he left the Council?”

“Oh, long before that. He called himself Ripper back then and had the most delightfully disreputable friends.”

“He did? Weren't they your friends as well?”

Something in Alan's manner, Cecil couldn't have said what, suggested Cecil take care with his line of questioning.

“Oh, they were most certainly my friends,” Alan replied. “As I said, they were delightfully disreputable. Ripper's problem is that he's never known when to step back. He took it all terribly seriously, to the point of actually leaving the Council.”
“And you?” Cecil asked.

“For me it was a lark, nothing more. A chance to have a go at girls a tad more adventuresome than the bookish little librarians one met at university, but of course Ripper didn't stop there.”

“He didn't?” No, of course he hadn't. Demons. Cecil had been sent here to investigate Ripper, er, Rupert for a reason.

“Oh, no, he'd fuck anything. Boy, girl, didn't matter. I heard he once had a go in the stable. It seems the poor mare was never the same again, wouldn't let a stud near her.”

Mare? Stud? “You can't mean …”

Alan's grin insinuated he'd meant all kinds of deeds that Cecil couldn't even imagine. “In fact, he'd have loved having your little piggy body in his clutches, hogtied, squealing.”

Damn him. Cecil was under the aegis of an official investigation, well, no, it wasn't official, but mother had damning evidence against this bastard. He couldn't treat Cecil this way. “But you played with demons.” Cecil immediately regretted his choice of words: played with. It sounded disturbingly sexual.

Alan stood in one swift motion, turned his back on Cecil, and stared at the room below. Pushing a button, he said, “Remove the gag.” At first Cecil didn't follow. Was this another reference to himself squealing? But the doctor nodded and an assistant removed the gag from the vampire's mouth. The screams filled the viewing room, even at that distance and through the glass. They echoed around Cecil like bells, diabolical and insane, ringing so heavily that he couldn't think. Alan pushed another button and the screaming stopped. Thinking that Alan had terminated the creature, Cecil looked down to see that, no, the vampire was still screaming. Alan had merely blocked the sound except Cecil could still hear it. The sound echoed around him, resonating, diminishing but still present.

As Cecil stared at Alan, he suspected that the man wished it was Cecil strapped to the table, screaming for mercy. “Not you!” Cecil exclaimed. “I mean, of course I know you weren't involved with anything demonic but Rupert, well, we know he's controlled demons.”

“Controlled demons?” Alan's scoff said he couldn't be bothered to catalog the unending depths of Cecil's imbecility. “One doesn't control demons.”
“But they can be unleashed.”

“No,” Alan replied. “Rupert never unleashed demons, or at least not as far as I know.”


“As I said earlier, Rupert took things too far. He left the Council. He abandoned his duties. I had my own career to think of.”

“Ah.” It seemed unlikely Alan would tell him anything else. Time to get the list and get out. “Names. Mother said, er, I believe you have a list of names for me, friends of Rupert's, people I can interview?”

Alan handed over an envelope. “Don't forget to burn it after you've memorized the names.”

“I, er, what?”

“Nothing. A small joke.” Alan brought his hands together as if in prayer and pressed his fingers to his lips, and Cecil felt he couldn't just walk out. “Who'd have thought,” Alan said, “that of all of us, Ripper had the most ambition.”

“What?”

“After he'd returned to the Council, Rupert advanced through the ranks in quite the single-minded manner. I do believe it's why he'd been assigned to a Slayer. Your dear uncle Quentin feared that Rupert was after his job and possibly also after his skin.” Alan grinned and Cecil again thought of the trail left by a knife slashing across open skin. “Well, I believe our time is up. Do give my best to your dear mother.”

* * *

Giles glanced at the clock. What was it that drove Americans to create such blandly utilitarian products? The hands of the library's clock flicked past black numbers on a white background. Giles couldn't have created a drabber object if he'd tried. He wondered, if he replaced it with a Dent clock,
would anyone notice? It would certainly add a ray of sunshine to his day. Still, the important thing was not the ugliness of the clock, but how much time had passed. It had been almost four minutes since Willow had started levitating five of those fuzz balls that Rupert had found for her. Giles had better move quickly before she exhausted herself. The girl had absolutely no focus.

“Willow.” He spoke her name gently to avoid breaking her concentration. The five balls remained floating about her, as well they should. He held up another ball and placed it on the table before her. “Leaving it on the table, push the ball toward me. Don't drop the other five.”

As she frowned, the sixth ball shot straight into his chest and the other five plummeted to the table. Giles thanked the Gods that Rupert had found the girl fuzz balls to work with while Willow slumped into her chair. “I suck.”

“Not at all.” Giles hid his grin. If Buffy had been there she'd have made some ridiculous comment about Willow's potty-mouth, but Giles was certain it was a side-effect of her meditating this close to a Hellmouth. “You merely need to work on your focus.” In a musing tone of voice, as if he'd forgotten to whom he was speaking, Giles added, “It's too bad you're too young for the Tantric meditative practices.”

“The what?”

He jumped as if startled. “Oh, I'm sorry Willow.”

“Why would Tantric meditation help?”

“Tantra can help one gain focus more quickly but it's beyond the grasp of, uh, that is there's an adult aspect … You are far too young.”

Willow frowned and glanced toward his office. Ah, good. He knew she'd seen the texts, but now that he'd focused her attention, she'd return that pointless *Wisdom of the Beast* tome and direct her studies in a more fruitful direction.

* * *

It was rather a relief, after working at the high-school all day, to look around and see adults, rather than children, gathered around the coffeehouse's ridiculously tiny tables. Rupert turned his eyes away
from the crowd and brought the A-string into tune with a minor twist of the peg. He strummed a chord – ah, that was better – and continued into the opening. “No one knows what it’s like to be the bad man, to be the sad man, behind blue eyes.”

After he’d finished the song to a round of enthusiastic applause, which was always heartening, he returned to his table to find he had company. He took in the blonde bob and smiled. He’d always favored that cut, something about how the hair curled about the face was simply appealing. Her button-down top, made of blue silk, brought out her eyes. He wasn’t sure she knew this had been his table until she pushed a drink over. “It’s your poison. I asked at the counter.”

Ah, tea. Yes. “Thank you, Miss?”

“Karen.”

“Thank you, Karen. And I’m Rupert.”

Tea had given way to beers at a pub – or, no, in America they were called bars – that she knew down the street and somehow that had become an invitation back to his place. It was a terrible idea. It couldn’t lead to anything. Eyghon would kill anyone he got close to for more than a night, and she was definitely the kind of woman who would expect more than a night even if she was coming home with him on the first night. Hell, it hadn’t even been a date. But Rupert found he couldn’t let her go. It’d been so long since he’d had even a small touch of comfort. Things would be unpleasant in the morning, but that was hours away.

When he turned on the lights, Rupert saw a note centered on the coffee table. He fell back against the wall and closed his eyes for a moment.

“Are you alright?”

Giles opened his eyes and recognized the handwriting. So much for Rupert getting his end off. “I’m afraid you’ll have to leave.”

“What?”

Damn. He could waste ten minutes politely talking her out the door or he could do this the easy way. He shoved her into the doorway and mashed his lips against hers as his fingers wrapped around a
few strands of her hair and yanked. As she shoved him, he took a few steps back, letting her think she'd pushed him away. “What the fuck was that?”

He didn't let any warmth into his voice. “Isn't that why you came home with me?”

“It sure the hell was not.” Her eyes narrowed. “Asshole.”

The strands of her hair felt soft under his fingers as he watched her storm off. He'd have to deal with her before he could take a look at the missive. Happily he kept a fair number of herbs in the pantry. He pulled out the Lethe's Bramble and chanted until the flowers flashed with power. That should take care of Karen's memories. Hell, Rupert might even get another chance with her.

Giles returned to the coffee table. The note hadn't been folded over or stuffed into an envelope but instead had been left out for anyone to see. Of course no one other than Giles and the man who'd written it would be able to make sense out of anything other than the name: Eugene. Giles' thoughts flashed back to that night in Oxford, the night Alan had first dragged Rupert round to meet his friends. “You've got to have a name, Rupert. Something you can call yourself.”

“What? Rupert not dangerous enough?”

“You go around calling yourself Rupert Giles and the Council'll catch up before we can have any fun.”

“What do you go by then?”

“Eugene.”

“Oooh, Eugene. That's terrifying, that is.”

“I picked a real name so no one would think twice and wonder what my name might be. Besides it's from Floyd: Careful With That Axe, Eugene.”

“Fine, I'm Ripper then.”
“Ripper?”

“Yeah, Eugene.” He'd snarked out Alan's pseudonym. “Ripper.”

The note felt heavier in Giles' hands than it had any right to. It had been years since he and Alan had communicated by cipher, but of course he remembered the key. It took only a few minutes to work out the message.

Quentin's little piggy nephew has been around asking after you. I didn't give him anything of use, but it's bad luck for you all the same. Dear uncle Quentin didn't send him. Presumably you haven't been bad enough to provoke the tharn old rabbit, or perhaps he thinks you won't do anything too conspicuous if he ignores you. Antonia, on the other hand, seems determined to dig up all the old bones. Once she has her evidence to hand, she'll reveal it in such a manner that Quentin will have no choice but to act against you.

Giles sat by the fireplace with a glass of Glenmorangie to hand and stared at Alan's note. I didn't give him anything. That was almost certainly true. Ripper could tie Alan to Eyghon. It was a tad worrisome that Alan had chosen to warn rather than assassinate, but then Alan had always been clever. He must suspect that Giles had arranged for papers to come to light, papers that Alan would rather no one saw, upon Giles' untimely death or disappearance. In fact, Alan could be counted on to be almost as careful of Rupert's health as Giles was. It was heartwarming, in its way, if misguided.

Giles consigned the note to the flame. Antonia was no threat. There was nothing left for her to find. Alan's fears were as exaggerated as ever. The smarmy git had always been overly cautious, too afraid of losing his respectability to play ball with the big boys. He'd never worked out that people believe what you tell them. Giles had learned, long ago, to put on enough of a show of respectability to keep himself safe.

* * *

Willow pulled the door open slowly, peered into the hall, and stepped out on her tippytoes. She thought Mom and Dad were asleep but she had to be sure. It wouldn't do to have either of them barge in and catching her reading that book.

No light shone out from under the bedroom door. Okay, that was a good sign. As she took a step forward, the floor creaked under her foot. Willow froze mid-step. Oh no, what if they heard and came out and wanted to know why she was out of her room so late at night? Water, she could say
she was thirsty and that she was getting a glass of water, but that meant she had to actually go get a
glass of water because what if they caught her while she was returning to her room and she didn't
have any water with her?

The trip to the kitchen had never seemed so long. Each floorboard creaked underfoot. Her hand
slipped, shoving the cabinet door closed much harder and faster than she'd meant to. After the
resulting bang, she stood there waiting for someone to come running into the kitchen, but no one did.
The sink cried out, making a loud gurgling sound when she turned on the faucet. All the way back to
her room, Willow expected her mother to pop out and ask why she hadn't finished her drink in the
kitchen.

She tucked herself into bed so she could say, if asked, that yes, she had been in bed all night, and
then held her breath and listened very carefully before pulling the book out of her bag. The
introduction wasn't all that interesting. “Tantric traditions, originating in the early centuries of the
common era, had developed into a fully articulated tradition by the end of the Gupta period. Blah,
blah, blah.” She skipped ahead. “Left-hand path … repression leading to sublimation of pure essence
into socially acceptable, and moving on … confront conditioned fears by the breaking of taboos?”
Willow looked at the subtitle: *A Tantric Guide to Sex Magic*. Opening the book again, she skimmed
through the index and flipped open to a specific page.

As she read on, Willow's eyes grew wider until she slammed the book shut and stuffed it back into
her bag. She turned off the light, lay down, pulled the blanket up to her chin, and stared, quite
resolutely, up at the ceiling. But her gaze kept drifting back toward the book bag.
Never Kill a Boy on the First Date

Chapter Notes

This story is being posted chapter-by-chapter here at AO3. If you prefer to read smaller chunks, it's being posted scene-by-scene on fanfiction.net.

Thanks to Gabrielle, feliciacraft, Gill O, and Snogged for feedback on how formal Cecil would be with Deidre Page.

Since it's been a couple months since the previous chapter, a few reminders:

- Eyghon is connected to Giles by a process called domination. Unlike possession, in which a demon takes over a human host, domination entails the creation of a psychic bond between the demon and its host. The demon does not inhabit the host but is, instead, connected to the host’s mind. Think of a boat tied to a dock. Like the boat, which remains in the sea, the demon continues to be discarnate, existing in a non-material plane, but a persistent connection between the demon and its human host remains. It may sound trivial. I assure you, it is not. The demon is, in effect, always in the back of the host’s mind, whispering directly into the host’s thoughts, always exerting its pernicious influence.
- Under the stress of Eyghon's influence in the back of his mind, Rupert's personality has split into three. Rupert is closest go canon Giles and has the least contact with Eyghon. Giles is the personality in charge of protecting Rupert. Ripper takes care of any dirty work Giles needs done. To keep Eyghon from tormenting Rupert, Giles has agreed to give Eyghon access to the Slayer line.
- Giles, after recognizing Willow's power, has worked a power that allows him to drain her magic for his own use. In order to keep an eye on her, he has Rupert teaching her magic.
- Kris Mansfield, Principal Flutie's administrative assistant, is aware of Slayers and Watchers. Buffy noticed Kris investigating the witch's magic attacks.
- In order to gain access to the Slayer more quickly, Giles killed Roderick Ashworth, who had been next in line – before Giles – for a Slayer. Cecil Ashworth, nephew of both Roderick Ashworth and Quentin Travers, tried to force Quentin to act against Giles. As punishment, Cecil has been assigned to an indexing task back at the Ashworth family library. Cecil's mother, Antonia, has given him a new task: find information that will discredit Rupert Giles.
- When Giles found Tucker in the school library after hours, Eyghon claimed the boy as his own. Giles is training Tucker.

Giles was late. Rupert, the ineffectual idiot, had been roped into an after-school conference by Principal Flutie. The man had an impressive ability to sound conciliatory while grabbing on like a dog with a bone, but still, Rupert could have at least tried to get out of the meeting. It wasn't as if he had any interest in the bloody school mascot. Of course, Rupert couldn't know that Giles had arranged to meet Tucker at the mansion. Granted the building was locked, but Giles wouldn't put it past the lad to break a window. Giles didn't bloody well give a rat's arse about the school spirit, and yet here Giles was, stuck listening to Flutie ramble on about the school mascot.
“So I was thinking we could get a razorback.”

“I'm sorry,” Giles interrupted. “A what?”

Miss Calendar, who looked as happy to be there as Giles felt, graced the table with a sarcastic grin. “A feral pig. Razorback is an American colloquialism.”

“That's the Sunnydale school mascot? A boar that was once domesticated and has since run wild? Surely that's backwards. I thought the point of school was to civilize the little monsters.”

“A razorback is mean, ready for action.” Flutie actually gave a mock growl.

“I stand corrected,” Giles replied. “Mean and ready for action is definitely what we should be instilling into the students.” Flutie gave him a doubtful look, but Giles had been serious. Anyone raised on a Hellmouth would need to be ready for action if they were to survive.

“You want to bring a feral pig into the school? Am I understanding you correctly?” Giles rather liked Ms. Miller. By going straight for the core of the matter, she reduced the amount of time he had to spend stuck in these faculty meetings.

“Well, no,” Flutie admitted. “Not a real razorback, but a pig. A friendly pig that we'll sort of dress up as a razorback.”

Gods. “And we're here because you want us to vote on it?”

Apparently not given how confused Flutie looked at the suggestion. “No, of course not. The pig's already on order. It'll be here next week. I wanted you to be aware the pig, uh razorback that is, was coming so you could work it into your lessons, uh, maybe.”

“Great! If the razorback weighs 400 lbs and it's accelerating at a quarter of a mile per hour, with what force will it hit Billy Mehta's car?”

Giles was only slightly concerned that the physics professor seemed to be taking Flutie seriously.

“Is that it?” Ms. Miller asked. “Work razorbacks into our curricula?”

“Well, no,” Flutie said. “Herbert, that's the razorback's name, will be part of a push to engender school spirit which is the purpose of the meeting. I want the students to be more committed, to really be proud of Sunnydale High.”

Giles closed his eyes and imagined the trouble Tucker could be getting into at the mansion. Oh, but Rupert would be paying for getting him stuck here. “The track team seems to be doing rather well,” Miss Calendar offered. “I saw them practicing the other day. The coach is expecting a good year.”

“Eh,” Flutie said. “Nobody really enjoys sitting around and watching the track team. No offense Mr. DeRusso,” he added as the track coach gave him an affronted look. “I'm sure they'll be thrilled to read about any wins in the school paper.”

“I hear the cheerleaders have new uniforms, ones with shorter skirts. Surely that will get a rise … somewhere.”

A few of the teachers glared at Giles but Miss Calendar stifled a snicker.

“Not exactly what I was going for,” Flutie said.

“An essay contest.” Ms. Miller's voice carried quite well. “Students can write an essay on their high-
school experience. Top three essays get some sort of a prize and recognition at an assembly. Get the students thinking about the positive aspects of high-school.”

Such as being eaten by vampires or deformed by a witch? Flutie seemed happy with the suggestion though, happy enough that he actually let them leave. Giles was the first out the door.

“So, you're going to expunge that whole meeting from your memory, aren't you?”

Giles stopped and turned. “I beg your pardon?” He found himself speaking to Miss Calendar. “Expunge? Ah, yes, almost certainly.”

“We could grab a few beers. I hear alcohol speeds up memory loss.”

“Some other time perhaps?” Giles made a show of checking his watch. “I had an appointment which I am now late for.”

“Some other time it is.” Giles couldn't tell if she was mocking him or not. Some other time was vague. He couldn't, of course, date a coworker while he was training his Slayer in the school but he did rather want to set up a date just to confound Rupert. The berk had been practically celibate ever since Eyghon had killed Mary but the demon had been retaliating against Giles. It wasn't as Eyghon would kill everyone Rupert chose to hold hands with. Well, alright, he couldn't be sure of that but Giles controlled when the demon was released. He could protect anyone Rupert was interested in.

When Giles pulled up to the mansion, every single light seemed to be on. What the hell? It was still two hours until dusk and Giles had left the mansion locked. “I'll kill him.”

Mine.

“Fine. I'll hurt him enough that he'll wish he was dead.” Apparently Eyghon didn't have an objection to pain. Good.

Even before he entered the mansion, Giles heard two voices. The first was Tucker telling someone to shut up. The second, either not listening or not caring, continued to speak over Tucker's words. “I wasn't all that upset when Sliders ended. I mean, the whole sliding through parallel universes thing was cool but once they lost Quinn, not that they lost him really because he merged with the Quinn on that Earth but his memories, the real Quinn's memories not the other's memories, faded away so he was sort of gone if not actually lost …”

“Will you shut up?”

“But I'm bored.” Gods, it sounded like a brat of no more than nine. “There are all these books here but even the English ones are written out in long-hand and are hard to read and hardly any of them have pictures and most of them are too high for me to reach without climbing up that ladder which feels sort of rickety, like it's about to fall over …”

That was enough of that. Rupert stepped into the room. “You brought a friend?”

Tucker smirked and leaned back in his chair. The lad was incredibly stupid but with Eyghon's interest, Giles couldn't do anything permanent to him. “Mom's making me keep an eye on him.”

“Hi, I'm Andrew.” The boy practically bounced over, and he wasn't nine, or at least while he sounded nine, he looked older, thirteen or fourteen perhaps. “I'm Tucker's brother. I'm totally old enough to stay home alone, but Mom doesn't think so because there was this incident with her hairdryer …”
“He doesn't care, spazoid.”

“Quite,” Giles agreed. “Why did you bring him here?”

Tucker shrugged. Apparently he'd missed the menace in Giles' voice. “I had to watch him. You said to meet you here.”

“I said to wait until I let you in.”

“It was boring outside.”

Giles glanced down at the lock, taking in the new scratches. “How did you get in?”

Tucker's grin faded when his brother started replying. “Our uncle Charlie taught us how. He's in jail now but he knows all kind of tricks, a lot of which Mom wasn't too happy to see that we'd learned. I mean, I thought she'd be excited to know I'd never lock myself out of the house again, but …”

“Yes, well,” Giles interrupted. “Shall we move into the training room?”

Andrew kept up a steady stream of babble as Giles sparred with Tucker. After the third time he'd shouted at the boy to just shut up, Giles had dismissed Andrew from his mind, and so he was surprised to hear a loud clatter coming from the kitchen. He raced in to find Andrew picking a pan up off the floor. Giles didn't even know the mansion contained a pan. He hadn't brought one into the mansion. A teapot, yes, that he'd brought and a mug to drink out of, but nothing else. Rupert's apartment was his official home and he needed to be seen there.

“I'm hungry,” Andrew complained. “Don't you have any food?”

“No. If you're hungry, go home.”

“But I can't go home. I have to stay with Tucker. Mom said so.”

“Don't tell me you always do what your mother tells you.”

“Well, there was that one time that she told me to do the dishes and I didn't. It was just that I forgot because I'd been to the comic store and picked up issue The Mighty Thor #482, which was Thor's four-hundredth appearance in a Marvel comic, which was the Immortal Chaos! issue and is this a secret base?”

“A secret? What?” Actually the lad was more astute than Giles had suspected, but there was no reason to tell him that.

“This is real life, dolt,” Tucker sneered. “Not a comic book.”

“It's just that there's no food here or even a bed, just a lot of books, and then there are those cages down in the basement …”

Giles reached out one fist, wrenched the boy's collar into a knot, and pinned him to the wall. “You were in the basement?”

“Uh, well, uh, no.”

“Would you like to know what I do with those cages?”

“No, definitely not. Or, uh, I mean what cages?”
“I lock up little boys who are too curious and never let them go again.”

“But you can't. Tucker would tell Mom.”

Giles glanced back at Tucker. The boy was staring, wide eyed. “Tucker doesn't care if you live or die.” Giles let the boy go. “Out. Both of you.” Giles hadn't bothered to ward the mansion. That it was occupied should have kept out the vagrants and young idiots looking for adventure. He hadn't counted on Tucker's lock picking skills. He hadn't expected Tucker to bring a guest. He wouldn't make that mistake again. Unfortunately the warding spell required a fair amount of power, but Giles had access to power. Willow might be a tad worn out tomorrow, but that was hardly his concern. He would control who could enter his domain. Giles glanced at his watch. Even if it did make him late for his patrol with Buffy.

Buffy's kick extended out too far, leaving her vulnerable to an attack. Luckily her opponent was ignorant to pick up on the opening. As the vampire executed some sort of kick that sent him spinning three-hundred-and-sixty degrees, Buffy missed an excellent opportunity to move in with a disabling blow. And what were those grunting noises she was making? Surely she didn't find this difficult. Her blocks weren't terrible, but she missed an opportunity to stake the vampire. Rupert wasn't quite sure what she'd done with her leg, some sort of attempt at a kick based on how close it had come to the vampire's head, but he was surprised it hadn't gotten her killed. Her next kick was at least a reasonable attack but it left her torso completely unguarded. Really, California vampires had absolutely no idea how to fight. Wait, was she actually panting?

“We haven't been properly introduced.” Oh Gods, was she bantering with them again? “I'm Buffy, and you're history!”

“Poor technique,” Rupert said as he stepped around the crypt. “Prioritizing, sub-par … Execution was less than adequate. We really do have to work on your kicks.”

“Giles, don't mention it. It was my pleasure to make the world safe for humanity again.”

“I'm not saying your motivations are without merit but your technique could use … Hello.” He bent down, using his pen to pick up the ring.

“Oh, that's great! I kill 'em, you fence their stuff.” Could she never be serious. “What is it?”

“I don't know.”

“But it bothers you.”

“Hi, Mr. Giles.”

A young man, barely a teenager, stepped out from behind a crypt. Buffy glanced him up and down and turned to Rupert. “You know him?”

Rupert had never seen the boy before in his life. “Apparently.”

“Hi.” The boy offered his hand to Buffy. She didn't take it but did, reluctantly it seemed, offer her name. “I'm Andrew. You might know my brother Tucker. I mean, you sort of look the right age to be going to school with him and you know Mr. Giles so …”

“You know Tucker Wells' younger brother?”
“Oh, we met in Mr. Giles' secret lair although I guess it's not so secret now that I've told …” Rupert grabbed the boys' arm and twisted. “Ow!”

“I was helping Tucker with a school project, after school, in the library. This one – Andrew is it? – showed up. I'm not quite certain why.”

“Mom doesn't let me be home alone and she works late, well sort of late-ish, not really really late but she's not home when I get off of school so I have to find Tucker and hang with him.”

Buffy glanced between the two of them. “I see.”

“So I was sort of wondering how you made that guy go poof.” Oh great, the lad had started babbling again. “I mean, you two were fighting and suddenly he's dust. Are you filming a movie? Was it a special effect or something? Except don't they add those after?”

Buffy's glance said he's all yours.

“Ah, aren't you out rather late for someone your age?”

“Well, I'm not supposed to be home alone, which I sort of mentioned before, but anyway there was a thing with the hairdryer. It's so unfair. How was I supposed to know it'd set the couch on fire? And Tucker's out, I'm not sure where, so I was out looking for him and I saw you two here and …”

“Are you often out at night by yourself?” Rupert asked.

“No, well, I mean I guess sort of, not every night but, um, maybe three or four nights a week?”

That decided Rupert. This young and this innocent had no business on the streets of a Hellmouth at night. “What you saw was a vampire. They turn to dust when killed.”

“Oh.” The boy didn't seem too fazed. “So vampires are real sort of like how Luke and Leia and Han Solo are real?”

“Star Wars,” Buffy said, “not so real.”

“But they're in a galaxy far, far away.”

“You do know the difference between movies and reality, right?” Buffy asked.

“But that galaxy is far, far away. You can't say it's not real because it's so far away that you don't know for sure.”

“Fine,” Rupert agreed to end the argument. “Vampires are real just like your Star Wars characters are real, but vampires are far more dangerous.”

“They can't be more dangerous than a Jedi Master,” Andrew interrupted. “I bet a Jedi could kick a vampire's ass any day of the week.”

“Ah, but you are not a Jedi, correct?” Please let the boy's delusion not range that far.

“Well, no.”

“Right, which means you should be home well before dark and never offer an invitation into your home.”

“Ooooh, what about garlic? Does that kill them? Say if I ate a really garlic heavy pizza and breathed
on them? Would I be safe then? What if it was roasted garlic instead of raw?"

“No,” Giles interrupted. “Garlic does not deter vampires.”

“Oh.”

Good, that seemed to have quieted the boy down.

“What was that you killed him with? Is that a stake? Is it wood? It looks like wood but I'm thinking it
should be like steel or some kind of metal because wood rots and steel is eternal. Do you worry
about termites? I mean, what if a nest of termites ate out the heart of your stake? Would just the shell
be enough to kill a vampire? What if the shell of your stake crumbled in your hand before it went
through the vampire? I bet it couldn't kill a master of the night then.”

Buffy's stare suggested if the boy didn't quite down she might put a stake through him. “Giles, can
we go now? That's enough patrolling for one night, right?”

“Fine, you take one more run through Shady Rest. I'll get the boy home.”

“Bye.” She was gone before he could change his mind.,

“So, this secret lair you mentioned.”

Rupert didn't have to say anything more. “Oh! I sort of let that slip in front of Buffy. Does she
know? I guess she didn't know. Sorry, I've just never had a big secret before well except for that time
… Ow!”

Rupert felt bad about twisting the boy's arm but it seemed the only way to get him to shut up. “I'm
going to drive you home but we're stopping at this secret lair first. You'll navigate.”

“But, you know how to get there. Why do you need me to navigate? Oooh, are you an evil clone
like Bizarro? I mean, he's not always Superman's clone but sometimes like in …”

“Enough!” The boy actually stopped talking. “I will drive. You will navigate.”

They'd made it to the car and through three turns before Rupert could no longer stand the staring.
“What?”

“I don't mind if you're an evil clone, I was just wondering if you had plans for my brother because,
you know, he's my brother and all, but one of him is really enough.”

“I assure you, I have no nefarious plans for your brother.” It was true enough and yet not. Rupert had
no idea what his alter ego might have in mind for the lad.

The secret lair turned out to be a large three-storied building with a fair amount of land surrounding.
“You, stay in the car.” He slammed the door shut on the boy's babbling. Honestly, did he ever shut
up?

The door was locked but easy enough to jimmy. Rupert felt a wash of magic as he stepped through
the door. A barrier spell but it let him through. Well, of course it did. He could taste the feel of his
own magic in it.

The hallway and the first couple of rooms he checked didn't hold anything of interest. The library on
the other hand held a fair number of dark texts, forbidden tomes dealing in the blackest magicks.
There were a couple of cages in the basement, empty at the moment. Rupert didn't think much of
them. He also used cages to store his more valuable artifacts and tomes. Whatever his alter ego was up to, it wasn't evident from anything Rupert had found in the mansion. Perhaps the babbling idiot he'd left in the car could offer information.

Andrew wasn't in the car. Rupert found the boy running into and bouncing off of the barrier. Repeatedly. “Hey, Mr. Giles, check it out. There's a force field on your house.” As Andrew ran toward the door again, Rupert grabbed him and yanked him into a stop.

“Enough.”

“It's sort of like Sue Storm was here, the force field I man. She's the Invisible Woman, part of the Fantastic Four. They were all together and got their powers when …”

As Andrew babbled on, Rupert found he wasn't surprised that his alter ego had put a barrier on the house. He was more surprised that Andrew hadn't been locked in one of those cages in the basement.

Giles didn't know why Rupert had even bothered locating the mansion. Giles'd had his own pads in Oxford and then London. Rupert had investigated them thoroughly at first, convinced Giles was some sort of picaroon up to no good, but Rupert had given up those ideas. Giles had been careful to keep anything Rupert might disapprove of out of sight and, presumably, out of Rupert's mind. There was no need for Rupert to be tracking down this mansion although, now that he had, Rupert would most likely ignore it. Well and good. It wasn't as if Giles was up to anything interesting. Sunnydale's night life, even the adult version, was sadly disappointing. Fed up with the limited imaginations of the locals but frustrated by Rupert's insistence on nosing into his business, Giles headed back to the school library. He could at least get some research in.

By the time morning had rolled around, Giles had given up the idea of finding anything definitive on Buffy’s mysterious Angel in any of his tomes. He simply didn't have enough information, which meant he'd have to look into alternative sources of information. There was a man or possibly a demon who ran a bar called Willy's. Giles blearily blinked at the clock. Buffy was due any minute. If she kept to her usual schedule, he should be able to get in a good twenty minutes of shut eye. Enough, at least, to keep him going for a few hours. He rested his head on the table.

“Giles.” Something seemed to be poking at him. “Giles!”

He blinked his eyes open to find Buffy standing next to him.

“Are those the clothes you had on last night?”

Gods, he really should have gotten more sleep. “I'm afraid I was busy with research.”

“Is it that bad? Tell me it's not that bad.”

If he retreated to his office to prepare a cup of tea, perhaps she'd give him a moment to wake up.

“Giles, the ring?”

No such luck. “One moment, please Buffy.” She was rifling through one of his books when he came back out with his tea. He grabbed it out of her hand and tried to remember what the ring looked like. Ah, yes. “The symbol on the ring. I believe it's the run for fidelity, but, uh, it doesn't connect with any of the sects I've studied.”

Buffy sat there, swinging her feet and twirling the ring in her fingers. “What about this?” He looked
over her shoulder at the sun and three stars inscribed on the inner edge of the ring. “Haven't we seen that before?”

“Let me see.” Giles stifled a yawn as he took a closer look at the ring. “No, I don't believe this represents any …”

Buffy picked up a book, apparently at random. “Wait, it's right here. Sun and three stars. Yuck, check these guys out. Told you it looked familiar.”

Perhaps he should have set her researching this Angel, not that she would of course. “Oh, the Order of Aurelius. Yes, you're right.”

“Ooo, two points for the Slayer, while the Watcher has yet to score.”

“And yet you still can't manage even the simplest of meditative trances.” And that took the life out of her. Good, perhaps she'd give him enough time to wake up before she started in on him again.

Grabbing a milk out of the fridge, Buffy called back to Willow. “You want?” Then she noticed the empty tray. “Willow. Where's your lunch?”

“I'm not very hungry.”

“Willow.”

“What?”

“I've never seen you skip lunch before. Don't you know it's the most important meal of the day? Okay, maybe that's breakfast, but … What's wrong?”

“Excuse you.” Cordelia reached around Buffy for her own milk. “Rude much? Find someplace that's else to talk.”

“She does sort of have a point,” Willow said. “We shouldn't be holding up the line.”

“Uh uh,” Buffy said. “Not until you tell me what's up.”

“I'm just sort of,” Willow paused, “tired today. You know. I'm sort of like an enharmonic interval. I should be a C# but I feel like a D Flat, just a bit off.”

“Huh?”

“I wasn't up for the spring surprise.” Wait, Willow wasn't explaining the C# - D Flat thing? That couldn't be good. On the other hand, it didn't sound like anything Buffy wanted to know.

“Spring whatzit?”

“Spring surprise. Because it's green and I wasn't quite sure what it was so it's also a surprise. But also like Spring Surprise from the Monty Python skit.”

Okay, if Willow was quoting Monty Python, then she couldn't be that badly off. “Okay, but you're at least having milk.”

Buffy dropped her carton on Willow's tray and grabbed another for herself.
“Um, that's really nice of you and all.”

“But?” Buffy asked.

“But what?”

“That's really nice usually leads to a but.”

“I usually drink whole milk.”

“Oh, right.” Duh much? She knew that. What was she thinking? Buffy switched out the milks so Willow had whole. As they stepped into the line to pay, Buffy asked, “So, where was I?”

“Owen Thurman, talking to you. You sure you weren't, I don't know, dreaming or something?”

“Nope, it's all true.”

“What did you have to talk about?”

“Emily Dickinson.”

“He reads Emily Dickinson?” As Buffy set down her tray, Willow added. “Wait, you've never read her.”

Buffy dropped the book onto the table.

“Oh, I guess you have read her.”

“More like I have a book I've never opened,” Buffy said as they joined Xander at the table. “But that counts, right?”

Xander held up his fork. “Has anybody given any thought to what this green stuff is?”

“You see, that's why I'm not eating, I don't even want it near me.” Xander waved his forkful of green gunk at her. “Stop it, Xander, I'm serious.”

“Ooo, look at Mr. Excitement.”

Buffy glanced over. Owen! “Owen! He's all alone! Maybe somebody should sit with him.”

“Just to be polite,” Willow agreed. “Good luck,” she added as Buffy rose to her feet.

He was sitting there all by himself. He wouldn't mind if she joined him, right? They had talked at the library and he had seemed to sort of not mind, even if her dress did make her look fat.

“Look, an empty seat.” Cordelia was making a beeline on her guy.

Buffy picked up her pace, getting to the table just before Cordelia. As the other girl slid in next to her, Buffy dropped her tray. “Ooo! Ew…”

“Let me get that.” Owen bent down to pick up her milk.

Yes! Take that you guy stealing hussy. “Thanks.” Buffy crouched down next to Owen. “Boy! Cordelia's hips are wider than I thought!”

“At least you don't have to eat your Soylent Green.”
Okay, and was that the actual name of the icky green stuff?

“Owen,” Cordelia interrupted. “A bunch of us are loitering at the Bronze tonight. You there?”

Damn Cordelia and her direct approach.

“Who's all going?:

“Well, um, I'm gonna be there.”

“Who else?”

“You mean besides me?” Cordelia asked.

“Buffy, what about you?”

Yes! “What?”

“No, no, no! She doesn't like fun.”

“How 'bout we meet there at eight?”

“Yeah! Eight! There!”

Buffy dumped her tray on top of Cordelia's. See how it's done? She hummed to herself as she joined Willow and Xander back at their table.

“Oh.” Willow's word sounded disappointed. “Didn't go so well?”

“Well, of course not. She wouldn't want to hang with a guy like Owen, all, uh, well the word boring comes to mind.”

“Guess you're not the only one missing lunch,” Buffy said.

“Oh, well, you can share my milk.”

“No thanks, Willow. With all that energy drain I'm a bit worried I'd catch something and I want to be energetic for my date tonight.”

“You got a date?”

“I got a date.”

The only thing keeping Rupert's eyes open was the tea and he'd almost finished off the thermos. He supposed he could invigorate the brain by pondering the eternal mystery: Buffy's attire. The faux fur of her jacket? coat? had the coloration of a leopard but also had stripes rather than spots. Apparently one wasn't supposed to mistake it for an actual fur. She had the hood up. Apparently what was a slightly chilly evening to him was downright cold to her. If only it were colder, he might have a chance of freezing to death. It would, at least, be closer to sleep than sitting in a cemetery and waiting for the Anointed to rise was.

“How much longer?” Did the girl have no patience at all?

“Once the Anointed has risen, you can kill him and follow your hormones to the Bronze.”
Buffy slurped at her drink.

“Must you?”

The Anointed, Rupert thought as Buffy continued to slurp her drink. This was the second prophecy related to the Master in less than a month. Obviously he needed to pay more attention to the threat posed by this Master.

“I'm thinking the Anointed isn't showing.”

Rupert clutched at his travel mug, looking for warmth and finding none. It was possible he'd miscalculated. He hadn't slept the night before. “You may be right.”

“There aren't any fresh graves,” she added. “Who's gonna rise?”

“So, if you're getting crank calls …” Rupert's mug fell to the ground as he jumped up to a defensive position. Buffy sprang to her feet, stake at the ready.

“Tucker's brother.” Buffy didn't sound happy.

“Hi Buffy. Hi Mr. Giles. I was just wondering, if you're getting crank calls, is there anyway to tell where they're coming from? I tried *69 but the number is a payphone. How am I supposed to tell who called? I mean, I'm pretty sure it's Tucker but …”

“What are you doing here?”

“You guys sure hang out at cemeteries a lot. Do you like them or something? I mean, they are sort of creepy but in a pretty way, that is, some of the crosses are actually cool to look at, and it's nice and quiet here, which is a bit boring now that I come to think on it.”

“Andrew,” Rupert barked.

“Oh, I'm not here looking for you. I, uh, just happened to be here, in the cemetery, where you are.”

They might as well call it a night. “It's alright, Andrew. I'll take you home.”

“Then I can bail? I can go to the Bronze and find Owen?”

“Yes, I'll see you tomorrow.” Buffy vanished as Giles led Andrew to the car. “You do understand that you shouldn't be out alone at night.”

“Well, I thought about going to the mansion and bouncing off the door again but nobody was there and I knew I wasn't supposed to be alone so I left.”

“Where's your brother?” Giles asked.

“I don't know. He went out, which is why I came to find you.” Andrew glanced and quickly turned his head away. “Not that I was looking for you because you told me not to. I was just out and happened across you …”

“Tell your brother I want to see him,” Giles interrupted. “Tomorrow, after school.” Research hadn't turned up anything on this Angel of Buffy's. It was time to start asking around. While he was at it, Tucker could ask about the Master as well.
The neighborhood, poor in a well-scrubbed and mildly respectable manner, didn't even have a bohemian counterculture to recommend it. The squat row house was identical to dozens of its neighbors outside of the color painted on the doors and the detritus scattered by the doorway. A concrete garden angle stood solemn, if tacky, guard at the entrance of this house. Even if Cecil hadn't been given a name, he'd know this was the home of a middle-aged spinster.

Micki Faber hadn't been on the lists of contacts Alan Wyndam-Pryce had been pressured into handing over. Obviously Alan hadn't expected him to look further, but Cecil wasn't as stupid as everyone seemed to think. Alan had been chummy with Rupert during his bad boy days. Alan wasn't about to hand over names that might implicate himself, and so Cecil had asked each contact for more names.

Finding those initial contacts had been difficult in and of itself. Alan had given him middle names and nicknames in place of Christian names. In more than a week, Cecil had found only two of the people on Alan's list, and neither had been spectacularly forthcoming.

Art Thompson, for example, who currently ran an automotive shop, had returned to his work mid-interview once Cecil had mentioned the name Rupert Giles. “Ripper? What you after him for?” Art replied as he vanished under a hood.

Cecil ran through his cover story. “He's been recommended to join the Order of the Raven. It's quite an honor.” His previous interviewee hadn't asked what the Order of the Raven might be, which was lucky since Cecil had made it up. Cecil glanced around the auto shop and sniffed disapprovingly, not because he actually disapproved but, as his mother's son, he knew how quickly a hint of class conflict could encourage the kind of discord that loosened tongues. “Of course we must ensure that our candidates have nothing disreputable in their past.”

Art came out from behind the hood and looked Cecil up and down before replying. “Order of the Raven, eh? Who'd you say gave you my name?”

Cecil hadn't said. He hadn't expected to be asked. “Alan Wyndam-Pryce,” he admitted, having no better lie ready.

“Ah, a bit of fallout among the posh boys, is it? Not me you want to talk to. Micki Faber. Quite the looker back in her day. She'd hooked up with Alan. You tell her Alan sent you, she'll spill.”

And so here he was on Micki Faber's doorstep. She may have been a looker when she was young, but when she opened the door, Cecil saw a middle-aged woman who'd gone to seed. “Miss Faber?”

“Yeah, what do you want?”

“I'm here on behalf of the Order of the Raven. A Mr. Rupert Giles has…”

At Rupert's name she stepped back to slam the door shut, but Cecil darted his foot forward just in time. Oh, shit, he just hoped she hadn't broken it.

“Get off. I don't know Ripper, uh, Rupert Giles and I don't want to.”

He'd struck a nerve but perhaps one too deep. How could he get her to talk? What was it Art had said? “Tell her Alan sent you. She'll spill.”

“Alan sent me. Alan gave me your name.”

The door opened although not enough to let him in. “That feculent arse? Why the hell would he send you to me?”
“He didn't, actually. I'm looking for dirt.” She might not tell him if he asked about Rupert. Alan seemed to be the key. “Dirt on Alan, anything to smear his reputation. I understand there were drugs, dark rituals, possibly, ah, Satanic.”

She stared at his foot as if ready to break it if that would get him out of her doorway. “Dark rituals.”

“Real creepy they'd have been,” Cecil said. “There might have been people there, deformed and quite violent.”

“The monsters you mean.”

She'd seen demons? “Monsters?”

“That crowd, they played around with dark things. Things you wouldn't believe are real.”

“You tell me more and I can hurt Alan. I promise.”

“You shouldn't get on his bad side. You don't know what he's like.”

I know exactly what he's like. “Please,” Cecil asked.

“Thomas Sutcliff, Philip Henry, Diedre Page, Ethan Rayne. That's all I know.”

As he started writing down the names, she opened the door enough to shove him out onto the sidewalk.

“Don't come back.”

Rupert didn't quite feel as if he'd never be cheerful again, but six hours of sleep couldn't make up for missing a whole night. Tea, more tea should help. He really should have a sink somewhere in the library considering how often he felt the need for caffeine. On the other hand, plumbing flowing anywhere near his texts probably not the best of ideas.

As he waited for the water to boil, Rupert glanced at the newspaper and came instantly awake. Five Die in Van Accident the headline read. “Of course. The Anointed One didn't rise last night. He died. How could I have been so stupid?” He scanned the article for more details: Andrew Borba … sought for questioning in a double murder … bodies from van moved to Sunnydale Funeral Home.

It took him only a few minutes to dredge up any useful information from the article and he'd already researched the prophecies relating to the Anointed One, and so Rupert turned his studies back to the Master. Apparently an amulet associated with the Aurelian bloodline had quite interesting properties.

“Hey, how's it going?”

“Um, what?” Looking over his shoulder revealed Buffy in the doorway. “Good, Buffy, there you are.”

“I see we're still working on that Anointed One problem. That'll probably take you a few days, right. I'm mean, that's one obscure prophecy …”

“No, actually, I'd finished translating that yesterday. It seems I'd made one tiny mistake. Know where did I put that newspaper? Ah, there it is.” He laid the paper out on the desk.

Buffy, looking rather put out, stretched over to read the headline. “Five die in van accident?”
“Yes, I believe …” Just get it over with. Admit you were wrong. “I believe the five did not rise last night. They died. If you’ll take a closer look, among the dead was Andrew Borba, whom the police sought in questioning for a double murder. He may be this Anointed One. The bodies have been taken to Sunnydale Funeral home. We can …”

“Giles, do you want to hurt me?”

Hurt her? What? “I’m sorry?”

“I have a date.”

Gods, would this child never stop thinking of herself? “Another date? Buffy …”

“This is not another date. This is the first date, my maiden voyage.”

“Yes, well, I know it’s disappointing but your duty to the world …”

“Duty? What duty? It's five people who died in a crash.” Buffy picked up the paper and shook it at him, as if that would make her argument, or lack thereof, more convincing.

“One shall rise from the ashes of the five. On that night. It can't be a coincidence. Now, you will accompany me to the funeral home. I'm not certain what time it closes so let's meet at, say, seven shall we?”

“Seven? No, oh no, totally not. Six. At the latest. Five would be better. We could meet there at five.”

“I suppose but if the vampires do rise it most likely won't occur until later in the …”

“Great. Five it is. Bye.”

Giles glared at the clock. Where the hell was Tucker? The last class had been finished for a good ten minutes. Giles was scheduled to meet Buffy at five which, honestly, was far too early. What had Rupert been thinking, allowing Buffy to finagle the time that way? Well, there was nothing to be done about it now but if Tucker didn't get his ass in gear, Giles wouldn't even have time to introduce him to Willy's much less any of the other demon bars in town.

“What's up?” Ah, finally, the lad in question. At least he wasn't dragging younger brother along with him this time.

“You're late.”

“Andrew didn't mention a time. Just said after school.”

The twerp had the audacity to look amused. Well, this next assignment should knock that right out of him. “Think you're ready to do more than spar?”

“Huh?”

“I have an assignment for you, but it's dangerous. I'm not sure you're up for it yet.”

“I'm ready.”

Giles hid a smirk. The idiot child didn't even know what the job was. For all he knew, it could get him killed and yet he was certain he could handle it.
Mine. You will not kill him.

Oh, do settle down. It's dangerous, but not deadly. I was merely thinking that the young idiot neither knows the difference nor bothers to ask.

“I'm looking for information on a couple of, um, people. It will be, as I mentioned, dangerous. You'll have to be discrete. The first is a vampire called the Master. I don’t know much about the second, but he goes by Angel.”

“A vampire? Titanic!”

Giles didn't bother asking about the teenage slang. “Are you sure you have it?”


“I'll be taking you to a demon bar, Willy's. You will speak to the clientele and see what you can learn.”

Giles didn't know if it was the few demons scattered about the bar or the fact that Tucker had never been in a bar before, but the lad was impressed by Willy's. Well, there was no accounting for taste or lack thereof. Willy stepped over from the far side of the bar. “Look. I don't need no trouble.” Ah, good, it was always nice to be remembered.

“No trouble,” Giles replied. Willy didn't look reassured. “I'm merely introducing my friend here to the seedier side of town.” Willy winced at the insult but didn’t argue the point. “Tucker, this is Willy. Willy, Tucker. He'll be coming here from time to time, running little errands for me.” Giles pointed to a booth. “For example, Tucker, those are R'nyarak demons. Go talk to them.”

The lad’s eyes were as wide as saucers. “Aren't you coming with me?”

“Of course not. I have other business to attend to. You do remember what you're to ask about?”

“The Master. Angel.” The lad's voice was low but not too low to hear.

“Good. Go on then.”

The lad approached the demons, but slowly. The two R'nyarak didn't seem pleased but they were rather tame for demons. It was unlikely that they'd hurt Tucker. “Willy.”

“Y-y-yeah?”

“I would be terribly displeased if anything of a permanent nature were to happen to my assistant. That displeasure would, of course, be taken out on you.”

“I, I don't have any control over these guys. I just hand out drinks, you know?”

“You had better do more than merely hand out drinks. Tucker is looking for information, information I require. He'd better find it, and he'd better come back to me alive. It's on your head if he doesn't. Do I make myself clear?”

“Y-y-yes sir.”

“Good.”
Buffy beat Rupert to the funeral home. “Giles, it isn't even closed yet!”

“Well, we'll just have to wait.”

“Wait? But Giles …”

“Buffy, it closes at five. It's now only a few minutes to. We won't have to wait long.”

“But what if they don't leave right away? They've got those five bodies to fix up. That could take a long while.”

Gods but she could be tiresome. “Trust me, Buffy. Most people at the end of the workday go home.”

“But they might not be most people. I mean, there's a statistical likelihood that the are deviants from the mean, uh, mean deviants? Is that right?”

“And if they are, we will wait.”

“You could distract them and I could check while you're distracting them.”

Rupert pointed to a bench. “Buffy, sit.”

She glared at him but sat. After five minutes, she began grousing. “I don't see why we have to wait. I could sneak around. They'd never see me, but no, Mr. Doesn't Have a Life says we have to wait for them to leave on their own. Oh, I know.” She turned to Rupert. “Tear gas. We could tear gas the place and then they'd leave and then we'd get to investigate before, you know, three in the morning.”

Happily, before Rupert had to resort to explaining that, one, he had no tear gas on him and, two, Buffy would also be driven out by said gas, the two attendants left the funeral home. “Buffy, please, wait until they're out of sight.”

Rupert felt grateful that the building had only one morgue. If they'd had to expand their search further, he'd have likely tried to strangle Buffy. She looked at the rows of refrigerated cabinets, less than thirty cabinets in all which was surprising given the number of deaths in Sunnydale, and asked, “Do you want to do the honors or shall I?”

“Very amusing.” Rupert pulled the newspaper out of his briefcase. “Here is a picture of Mr. Borba, our most likely candidate for the Anointed One.”

Buffy peered over. “Ugh, so crazy tattoo guy ranks a religiously title?”

“Religious?”

“Anointed, sort of sounds like something that'd happen at church.”

Gesturing toward the cabinets, Rupert replied, “You were the one who wanted this done quickly.”

Buffy started at the rightmost set of cabinets and worked her way from the top down. “Hmm. Dead.” She opened another. “Also dead.” And a third. “Eww, parts.” She was about halfway through the cabinets when she stopped.

“Is there something?” Rupert stood up and walked over. It was a young boy. “Ah, yes, most likely Collin Banner.”

“Collin?” She sounded upset.
“Yes, you can check the toe tag if you want to be sure. He was also in the van.”

“He was one of the five?” Before he could answer, she continued. “You didn't say one of them was a kid.”

Rupert gently closed the cabinet. “Buffy, I'm sorry. It didn't occur to me. It should have. None of the others we are searching for are children. I know that doesn't make it any better, but there shouldn't be any more, um, surprises.”

When they reached the end of the refrigerated units, there was one name unaccounted for. “Andrew Borba.”

“He's the one we were looking for, right?”

“Ah, yes. He's a suspect in a double murder case. Of all of them, he's the most likely to be the Anointed. Are you sure there's no sign of him?”

“We checked all the cold not quite a casket things.”

“Cabinets,” Rupert told her. “They are referred to as refrigerated cabinets.”

“Whatever they are, we looked into each one. No Andrew Borba.”

Rupert glanced around the room. “We should check and see if he's elsewhere.”

“What, like in the offices?”

“Well, no, that seems unlikely.”

“So we're thinking this Borba is the Anointed but he's skipped already. We have no idea where to look for him, right? So I could just check later in the evening. Do a quick patrol before bed.”

“You should patrol now. This Anointed …”

“Okay.” She ran off before he could finish warning her against the Anointed.

“Buffy. Buffy.” He ran into the hall and called after her, but she was already out of sight.

Willy peered over the bar. “Please let the boy be okay. Please let the boy be okay. Please let …” He winced as Tucker took a roundhouse-ish swing at the Fyarl. Tucker missed. The Fyarl's punch didn't. Tucker skidded back six feet, fell over a table, and crashed into a chair. Willy ducked back down behind the bar as the Fyarl leaped toward the boy.

“Oh God, oh God, Giles is gonna kill me. Aunt Hildie was right. I should have become a monk. I could be sitting, right now, off in some monastery, calm, relaxed, working my way up to becoming a Siddha, just like uncle Bernie, but no, I had dreams. Open a club, the next Studio 54, be a big guy, except somehow I ended up here, in Sunnydale, trying to keep demons from ripping my throat out.” He heard another loud crash from the other side of the bar. The boy screamed and it wasn't one of those I'm gonna kick your ass you filthy monster kinds of a scream. No, it was more of a help my I'm dying here thing. “Oh God, Giles is gonna kill me. What do I do? Can't save the boy. The Fyarl'll kill me. Can't let him die. Giles'll kill me, but Giles isn't here. The Fyarl can kill me now. What's that saying? If you're falling off a cliff, you may as well jump; you can work out how to save yourself from falling in the next two seconds. No, that can't be right. If you're being chased by a frigging
Fyarl and you're at a cliff, you may as well jump. That's more like it, except for the being chased by a Fyarl bit.”

The lights above him dimmed. Something large, human-sized, smashed into the mirror and crashed down onto the bottles. Willy ducked, raising an arm to protect himself from the shower of broken glass and booze. The thing, whatever it was, fell to the floor. Willy scrambled away until he saw that it was the boy, Tucker. The kid was bleeding but nothing seemed broken, not yet anyway. “Come on, kid.” Willy got one shoulder under him and shoved him up into a crouch.

“Where are we going?” The words were mumbled but Willy had plenty of experience making out slurred words.

Willy half-dragged the boy toward the back door. “We're making a strategic retreat.”

The computer, sitting at the far end of the library table, seemed to be mocking him. Rupert had never felt any desire to learn how to use the infernal devices but his usual sources had turned up next to nothing on that Borba chap. He'd rather hoped Willow could turn something up at the start of her magic lesson but she'd had a test. Willow had rambled on when apologizing. Apparently that Calendar woman knew that Willow knew the material but was forcing her to take the test anyway, and Rupert couldn't push the issue. It wasn't as if he could explain why he wanted so much of Willow’s time. It wasn't as if he could explain magic to the computer science instructor. Willow had promised to stop by during lunch, which meant more time out of her training. How long did it take to eat a small tray's worth of food anyway?

When Willow did walk through the door, he deduced that she wasn't terribly concerned about the loss of her lesson time. She'd brought Buffy with her. “There might have been snuggling on the dance floor.”

“Oooh.” Gods, Willow was practically jumping up and down. “Snuggling. With Owen. Did you … uh, hi Giles.”

“Good afternoon.”

“Uh, right, I have magic lessons now so maybe, uh, Buffy, you should go.”

“Before Giles asks me to meditate with you. Good plan.” As she turned to go, Rupert called her back. Buffy frowned at him as she turned back. “Good plan but too slow on the execution,” she sighed. “Giles, I'm already meditating during homeroom. I don't need to lose my lunchtime too.”

“Ah, no,” Rupert replied. “Willow was going to search the computer for Andrew Borba, the missing corpse from last night. I thought you'd want to be here if she turned anything up.”

“Oh. Good plan.”

“I totally did find stuff,” Willow said as she pulled out papers from her backpack.

Ah, apparently she'd already worked her magic on that dreadful device. “You didn't miss your test, I hope.” He really didn't care but the words seemed called for.

“No, I finished that in fifteen minutes, which was good because the search took me a while. The police department's database had something about a missing corpse but they'd attached that data to the case number of the original crash. Since I'd already been through that file, I didn't look there right away.”
“But you did find something?” Rupert asked.

“I did, and it's not good. Borba had been in a funeral home last night, the Sunnydale Funeral Home, but his body, which had been in a viewing room, was gone this morning.”

“A viewing room.” Rupert turned his glare onto Buffy.

“Hey,” Buffy said. “It's not my fault he was in a viewing room. Why wasn't he in one of the cabinety cold box things? He was supposed to be with the other bodies, not off on his own.”

“So this Anointed One has escaped because someone had to rush off to meet a boy. I do hope that your date was worth unleashing a demonic creature set upon fulfilling an ancient prophecy.”

“Well, there were snuggles,” Willow said with a grin. One look at Rupert wiped that grin off her face. “Which of course weren't worth the whole evil vampire prophecy thing.”

“Which is what?” Buffy asked.

“What?”

“What is this ghastly prophecy?”

“Well,” Rupert said, “I don't quite know. I had been focused on killing the beast before it could wreak havoc.”

“Don't you think you should know what it's gonna do before you get all blamey?”

Rupert pinched the bridge of his nose. “Buffy, you can't ignore your duty merely because you don't know what a vampire might or might not do. The mere fact that this demon is mentioned in a prophecy suggests a dreadful outcome.”

“He's kind of right,” Willow said. “It'd have been better to kill Borba before he started in on evil machinations.”

“Willow! You're supposed to be on my side.”

When Buffy, unexpectedly, seemed to notice that Willow's apology did not convey actual remorse, Rupert interrupted before Buffy could remonstrate. “There are no sides, or there shouldn't be. There is merely the killing the vampire in an effective and timely manner.” Under his breath he added, “Or not, as the case may be.”

Buffy's glare told him she'd heard that last bit. “I could check the sewers. Go back to where I'd looked for the Master last time.”

“No, you barely made it out alive. Give me time to research the Master and the Anointed. I'll let you know when I've learned anything of value.”

After the girls had left, Rupert settled down with his books, barely noticing when the bell for the next class rang. About fifteen minutes later, Giles rose from Rupert's seat. The halls were empty. There was no one to see him slip a note into Tucker's locker.

Shortly before the next period was due to start, Tucker limped into the library. Giles had been expecting something along the lines of Tucker's black eye and split lip. He hadn't expected the broken ribs. Obviously the lad needed to learn how to duck. “Your first foray against the beast didn't go quite as well as you'd expected?”
“Huh?”

Giles decided to dumb down his questions. “What happened?”

“Demons don’t like questions.”

“As a rule, no, but still, you faced the beast and came out alive. Next time you’ll know to be cannier.”

Tucker blanched. “Next time?”

“You can’t mean to give up now. You live on a Hellmouth, boy. Learn to handle it or die.”

Tucker nodded as if that had made some sense. Of course, after surviving that harpy demon in the mansion and Miss French, learn or die would resonate with the lad.

“What did you learn last night?” Giles asked.

“Never go near those green demons with the horns.”

Strangling the lad would be counterproductive. “What did you learn about the Master?”

Tucker touched the bruising under his eye. “You think they told me anything?”

“You mean you got nothing out of them?”

Tucker didn’t even look remotely ashamed. Useless boy. “I see we’ll have to work on your interrogative techniques. Go on then. Get to class.”

“I’m late. I’ll need a pass.”

Can’t kill him. Eyghon values the git. Giles wrote out a late slip and practically threw it at the boy. “Don’t bother coming to the mansion this evening. I’m postponing your training.” The idiot didn’t even recognize the insult.

Kris had given herself plenty of time to get to the Sport and Tackle, buy the knife, and get home before the sun set. Unfortunately the clerk had gone missing. Meyer, the owner, had wasted her time by ranting on-and-on: I’m going to fire that boy; I don’t need this kind of sloppy work in my store. He’d wasted even more time hunting for the knife. Heaven forfend he admit it was missing. Over an hour's delay and Kris still didn't have the knife. She glanced both right and left before stepping out onto the darkened and almost empty street.

The car was parked a few blocks away. Okay, she could do this. It wasn’t as if vampires would be out-and-about on Main Street just after the sun set. It would take them some time to get from their lairs to their hunting grounds. Right, and demons didn’t live in two-story suburban homes except Miss French had. Kris picked up her pace.

The attack came not as she was passing an alley but from the doorway of the Banana Republic. Feeling a tug on her purse, Kris latched on with one hand while reaching the other around to grab at her attacker's wrist and twist. As he lost his hold on her purse, Kris saw it was just a kid, not one she knew even if he did look old enough to be a student at Sunnydale High. She broke off from him, settling into a defensive posture. “Are you alright? I didn’t break anything, did I?”

He came back at her with an uppercut. In the flurry of punches and blocks that followed, she
dropped the purse but did hold her own against the kid. He was fast but so was she, and his technique was sloppy. She was pushing forward, forcing him to retreat when he spit in her face. She blinked, a reflex, and when she opened her eyes again he was gone with her purse.

She stumbled to the Espresso Pump and ordered a mocha. “Oh, shit, wait. My wallet's gone. I've been robbed.” They were kind and gave her the drink to settle her while she waited for the police.

Fifteen years of training, she thought as she wrapped her hands around the warm cup. Fifteen years and I couldn't even hold my own against a scrawny kid. As she thought back, Kris could see that her training had been long on form and katas but short on brawling. It didn't make sense. If they were going to spend all that time training her to fight demons, why not train her to win?

Giles' darkest tomes were kept in a small study on the second floor of his mansion. The study itself was hidden by a spell. Tucker, for example, who couldn't see the doorway, would almost certainly never even suspect the study's existence. If Ethan had ever turned up at the mansion, he'd have ensconced himself in the library within ten minutes. Ethan, however, knew Giles quite well.

The far wall was obscured by monstrosities, bookcases made not from wood but from pressed wood pulp. Giles endured them because he'd been able to assemble them without help. He could have hired someone and then killed him, as was done with pharaoh's tombs of old, but unnecessary killing was inelegant, especially when one was still unfamiliar with the town.

Giles could hear birds chirping outside his window by the time he found anything relevant. “The amulet of, um …” He rifled through a dictionary. “Let's see. It could be power, authority. No, not quite. The word has associations with blood and bloodline. Hmm, dominance I think. The amulet of dominance of the line of Aurelius. Alright, and the next bit? Gives power to the, ah, user? Owner? Master? Possibly but I believe lord is a more likely translation. The lord of the amulet of dominance has power over any, or possibly all, vampires of the Aurelian line. The amulet controls the bloodline and can be used to diminish … sap … disable … weaken. Ah, yes, weaken. The amulet can be used to weaken any and all vampires of the line of Aurelius.”

Am image of the amulet appeared below the text. At its center three jewels, rubies most likely based on the text, had been carved into drops of blood. To either side stood two pale moons, one waxing and the other waning. The owner of this amulet could either energize or incapacitate any or all vampires of the Aurelian line at will. If only he knew how to find it.

The church had fallen, long ago, into the bowels of the earth. The remnants of the altar, one lone cross, stood propped up by the stone walls of the ancient cave. Thousands of candles did little to illuminate the darkness, but dead eyes don’t require much light. The bowl, filled with blood, sat in the hands of Darla, favored daughter, whose slow and steady steps underlined the gravitas of the ritual. From the far end of the cavern, she took one single step. Then another. Then another. The Master, seated on his throne, rolled his eyes. “Oh, could you please just get over here already.”

“Yes, Master.” Darla's serenity gave way to uncertainty as she scampered across the cave. Good, it was right that his children fear him.

She almost tripped as she knelt before him. “Careful.”

Head bowed, eyes to the floor, she trembled as she held up the bowl. The child, newly risen, stood calmly before the Master. Ah, there was a son worthy of the Aurelian line. No simpering acolyte he,
but a true vampire, standing tall – well, no, not tall exactly, or tall for a child perhaps – but unafraid.

The Master rose to his feet, dipped one finger into the blood, and marked the child's forehead. “And so it shall come to pass that a child shall be Annointed, marked by the will of the Master, and set above all to lead them.”

“Pork and beans. Pork and beans.”

At the words that echoed from outside the great cavern, the Master looked up from the ritual. “Huh?”

As if the words were his precursor, a vampire appeared at the edge of the great cavern. His form blocked the light from outside the cavern, casting a shadow over all. “The wolf has been set loose in the killing fields. He said I might, and I did. The lambs have been brought forth for the slaughter. Their bodies decay at my feet. Their strength flows through me.”

“Did someone lose a little lamb? You perhaps, Darla.”

“Lo, the great beast is upon them, drawn to his home soil to the side of the one he serves. His heart is that of a dragon, the serpent who tempted Eve, but his head is that of a lion and out of his mouth comes fire, smoke, and sulfur.”

She looked up and he could see her fear. “It wasn't me, Master. I swear. He's no Childe of mine.”

“He's mine.” The Annointed's words sounded clear and simple against the chaotic babbling.

“And lo, out of the mouths of babes, a voice of truth rising out of the earth, scourging …” He knelt before the Annointed.

“Yours?” the Master asked. The Annointed was supposed to serve him, not create his own court.

The Annointed lay a hand on the vampire's head. “This is Borba. He will foretell my coming, prepare the way so that I may prepare yours.”

“For the end of days approacheth and the rivers shall overflow with blood so that the earth shall be desecrated and unclean.”

“I'm sure that's quite fascinating,” the Master said.

“And death shall be upon the face of the deep as lamentations fill the air.”

The Master dropped into his throne. “Can't you shut him up?”

Cecil stared at the row of Georgian townhouses. The freshly painted white edging contrasted brightly against dark gray stonework of the upper levels. It was all quite ship-shape and orderly, and not what he'd been expecting from one of Rupert's old crowd. Worried he'd been misled, he glanced down at the name, Diedre Page, and matched the address. The name could be wrong, of course. There was only one way to find out.

Diedre Page looked like she'd never had a rebellious bone in her body. Her haircut was so conservative that it made Mother's look almost modern. She was wearing one of those sweater sets the old biddies seemed so fond of and an ubiquitous string of pearls. Granted Rupert had returned to the straight and narrow, or at least had appeared to, but his woman looked as if the naughtiest thing
she'd ever done was to hold back a tip for bad service at a local pub. Half-way convinced he'd been
given a bad name, Cecil dropped his cover story. “Hello, I'm looking for, well, I'm wondering if you
were ever acquainted with a Rupert Giles.”

She stepped back and slammed the door shut in his face. That settled it. She'd known Rupert. He
rang the bell again, pressing on it rather heavily, but saw nothing more of Diedre Page. Perhaps he
could stake-out her home, wait for her to emerge, and approach her in a public place, a shop perhaps,
someplace where she wouldn't want to make a scene. He turned back toward his car – a much more
comfortable place to wait – and saw a woman standing by the hood. She was something of a looker,
dressed rather casually in jeans and a t-shirt. Her clothes, specked with paint in a variety of colors,
suggested she worked as an artist. Cecil rather liked lady artists. They so loved getting the creative
juices flowing. “You upset Diedre,” she called out. “I didn't think that was possible.”

“I certainly didn't mean to.” He found himself regretting the full three piece suit he'd donned for the
interview. While he did cut a striking figure, he didn't want the lady to think he wasn't up for a bit of
fun. Her grin, however, suggested she wasn't put off at all. “You brought up her mysterious past,
didn't you?”

“Mysterious?”

“Oh, there's all sorts of wild stories.”

“You wouldn't mind sharing them, would you? Miss …”

“Isla.” She held her hand out, palm up. He brought it to his lips before giving his own name.

“And I'm Cecil.”

He had no idea what the inside of Diedre's home looked like, but Cecil was fairly certain that guests
weren't immediately greeted by an eight foot image of the owner. The fact that she, Isla, was naked
in the painting should have been tantalizing to say the least, but she was swinging a severed head and
the expression on her face, well, he'd seen images of Kali that were less intimidating.

She closed the door behind them, eliminating any easy access to the street. “It's an emulsion.”

“I beg your pardon?”

She nodded toward the image. “The technique, a light-sensitive emulsion on a silk screen, it creates a
photographic-like image.”

A photographic-like image, meaning she'd been photographed wearing that expression. Well, he
certainly didn't want to upset her. “It's quite nice.”

She raised one eyebrow. “Nice?”

“The technique. The image is, ah, quite realistic.”

She seemed to accept that. “Salome carrying the head of John the Baptist.”

It took him a moment to identify her incongruous statement as the subject of the painting. A ferocious
Salome. Cecil decided to keep his mouth shut. Telling her he preferred Moreau's Salome probably
wouldn't go over well.

Apparently uninterested in his opinion, she led him further into what should have been her living
room. He could see the floor was wooden under the tarp that covered most of the area. A large
canvas, bare he was relieved to see, covered most of one wall. From the ceiling hung a chandelier shaped rather like a set of large yellowish flowers. Happily there were no chairs which meant they were unlikely to settle in this room. “Take off your clothes.”

“I, er, what?” Granted, the woman was an artist but he didn't expect her to be quite so aggressive. Not that he disliked aggressive women, mind, but it was a tad disconcerting after that Salome image.


“A model?” Well, damn, perhaps she wasn't as aggressive as he'd thought.

“Tit for tat. Do you want to know what I know about Diedre?”

“I don't suppose you have a room I could change in?” She did expect him to change, right? She didn't want him completely unclothed?

“Sure, come on. I'll lay out something for you to change into.”

The room she led him to was full of, well detritus wouldn't be a bad term. Isla ignored the rack of costumes and started rummaging through a closet as Cecil sat on a faded green love-seat. An old dresser's dummy, lacking a face, didn't quite stare back at him although he did have the distinct impression it was sizing him up. “Ah, here we go.” Isla tossed a few items on the bed and vanished through the door.

Based on what she'd left behind, she'd fled before he could complain. The two items of, well he couldn't call them clothing now could he, wouldn't cover much. The one item, a skirt of leather strips much like ancient Romans wore in those old movies, hung down to just above his knees. The other, also leather, seemed to be a collar worn around the neck. “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes, hurry up.”

He felt a complete idiot, emerging from the room, but she barely glanced him up and down before dragging him to what seemed to be her studio. The area was reassuringly well lit by a number of spot lights, most of them aimed at a blank wall. Cecil was staring at the camera, set up on a tripod, when she shackled his wrist into a chain. “What the hell?”

She grabbed his arm. “Careful, you'll break it.”

“I damn well want to break it.”

“Look, it's nothing.” She held out the other chain. It wasn't metal. “I want shots of you bound but defiant before you break the chains. It's Sampson, you see, in the temple.”

Cecil looked over at the camera. It was aimed straight at him, rather like a gun. “You're going to shoot me wearing this? Mother would kill me.”

Isla waved away his words. “I'll be painting over the image. I can change the face. Nobody'll recognize you.”

The words weren't as reassuring as she presumably meant them to be. Once she had the photos, who's to say what she might do with them. On the other hand, if Mother did go off, he could always defend himself. She had sent him on this assignment after all. Somehow he was quite sure that argument wouldn't hold water.

“Now keep still.” Isla had various paints set out on a pallet and was holding a brush to his torso.
“What's this.”

“What's this.”

“Obviously Sampson has been whipped.”

As she proceeded to paint whip marks on him, Cecil wondered how being bound by a beautiful woman could be quite so dull.

“I heard it was black magic.”

“What?”

“Don't wriggle. Diedre, her mysterious past. Sex, drugs, rock and roll, but with a dollop of dark arts.”

“Black magic? Voodoo or some other hokum along those lines?” Voudoun was an ancient religion associated with powerful magics but Isla didn't need to know these things were real.

“I didn't say I believed it. I figured it was all part of that Satanic panic nonsense until I learned that someone had died.”

“Died?” No one, not even mother, had mentioned a death.

“Some young man, part of her crowd. Randy, Rudolph, Roger, an R-name anyway.”

“Do you know how he died?”

“Accident I think. Mrs. Fleming told me the lad was sacrificed as part of a dark ritual, but Diedre's bundt cake wins out over Fleming's every year at the church bake-off so you really can't trust what Fleming says, now can you? Diane Seed claimed it was a drug overdose, but Liz Riddington said the young man had gone off on some sort of drug-induced killing spree and had to be taken down before he killed again. I don't think anyone really knows, but they do all agree there was a death.” She stepped back to look at the wound she'd been painting, darkened the paint on her brush, and set to work again. “But that doesn't mean any of them are right.”

“And how many people have shared these stories with you?”

“Oh, a good two to three dozen. It's all I heard about for the first couple of weeks after I started attending local services.”

Cecil found himself hoping she'd paint more slowly. The sooner Isla finished, the sooner he'd have to start interviewing dozens of old church biddies.

“Hey, your interest's flagging.”

“My what?”

She put down the pallet. “Outside, in the street, you looked about ready to take me then and there. I need that look. The unbridled passion that tore down the temple.” She dropped to her knees and slipped one hand inside the leather skirt. “No underwear. You bad, bad boy.”

“How quickly can you get those photos done?”

Her grin promised many things, but it wasn't nice. “I have to finish painting you first. That alone will take quite a long time.”

Oh God, how did he always find the ones who were into torture.
“Delayed gratification,” she said as she rose to her feet. “It's good for the soul.”
Notes to remind readers of what's happened so far:

- The spell that removed Eyghon from this plane, killing Randall, left a mental connection between Rupert Giles and the demon. This means that Eyghon has been in Giles' mind for the past two decades. This has caused a split in Giles' personality: Giles and Ripper have split off to protect Rupert.

- Willow has an unusually high level of magic. Giles, in order to control that power, has put magical hooks into her that allow him to call on her magic at will. But, because she's unskilled, the magic does not flow as easily as Giles would prefer. Thinking that she, as a teenager, would be drawn to anything to do with sex, and wanting her to engage in meditative practices more often, Giles has led her to a book on Tantra. Willow, intrigued by the sex magic but a little too innocent to want to delve in, has decided to follow the books example of breaking taboos instead.

- When Merrick was Watcher to Buffy, it was decided that the next to Watchers to be assigned to the Slayer would be Roderick Ashworth and Rupert Giles, in that order. Giles, to get a Slayer sooner, invoked Eyghon to kill Roderick Ashworth. Cecil Ashworth took it upon himself to invoke a Council ceremony to call for vengeance. Quentin, brother to Cecil's mother, Antonia Ashworth, exiled Cecil to the Ashworth family mansion. Antonia set Cecil to investigate Rupert Giles' past. Quentin confronted his sister but, unable to get her to back down, now hopes she'll turn any information she obtains over to the Council, allowing them to take down Rupert Giles rather than having him killed herself.

- While investigating Giles' past, Cecil took up with Isla, an artist who lives across from Diedre Page. Isla filled in background info for him and took Cecil to her bed.

- Kris Mansfield, Principal Flutie's administrative assistant, has been investigating supernatural events in the school. Buffy, suspicious, knows that Kris had been kidnapped as a child and not discovered until her late teen years, but Buffy does not know that Kris is aware of Slayers and Watchers.

- Eyghon wants Tucker as a minion, much to Giles' frustration. The kid is real annoying.

- Giles, wanting his privacy from Rupert and Council spies (if any), has bought a mansion under an assumed name. Because of Eyghon's interest in the boy, Giles has allowed Tucker into the mansion. Andrew tagged along one night and inadvertently spilled the beans to Rupert. However Rupert has investigated Giles' actions in the past, decided they weren't too damaging, and is ignoring Giles' mansion.

Many thanks for helping me work out what Willow would consider taboo go to Gabrielle, Red Satin Doll, Restfield, Tei, Snogged, Punch Kicker 15, GilesCandy, papricasantiago, Niki 1988, and Baudown.

And a shout out to Gabrielle for telling me that the zoo guy's name is Dr. Weirick.

For those of you who, like me, prefer to read online stories in shorter chunks, In a Corner of My Soul is being posted chapter by chapter on fanfiction.net.
When she'd been twelve, Willow had bought a longer cord for her phone so she could flop down on the bed and still chat with Xander or Jesse. Four years later, it was still one of the best things she'd ever bought even if she didn't get to talk to Jesse anymore. Willow shook her head. Thoughts like that led to temptation – just like being stressed led to eating a whole pint of ice cream – and she had enough temptation at the moment. So, should she just switch to a shorter cord or call Xander back from the kitchen where she couldn't be tempted by the nearness of her computer? It really couldn't be calling out to her, could it?

Not studying for one day should have been easy, a piece of cake even. That Tantra book had talked about expanding your consciousness by breaking taboos, and Willow had been all-aboard the whole taboo-breaking train except choosing had been kind of tough. Smoking, that was a big taboo, but then she might become addicted to tobacco and come down with emphysema or lung cancer. Plus, the stink. There were things to smoke that weren't tobacco, you know, “weed” and stuff, but even if she wanted to, where would she get something like that? She was pretty sure she’d seen Sheila selling something, probably something illegal, behind the bleachers once and Willow had done her that favor, acting as lookout while Sheila went off to smoke, but drugs were even more addictive than tobacco and there'd still be all those health considerations. Drinking, alcohol that is, was supposed to be a taboo or at least illegal which was sort of like a taboo, but Mom and Dad let her have wine at the table on special occasions so drinking didn't feel all that taboo-like. Willow had thought she could start with something quick, like stealing a book from like the public library, but then what if someone had wanted that book and it wasn't there because she'd stolen it? Maybe she could steal a book and return it. The taboo was in the stealing, not in the keeping, right? But the library had those anti-theft systems so she'd probably have set off an alarm, gotten caught, and been sent to juvenile detention where she'd have picked up some really bad habits and not in a good expanding your mind kind of a way. She'd thought about stealing a book from the high-school library. That'd be an even bigger taboo since Mr. Giles was, well, not quite her friend, but he was teaching her magic and he depended on her to be responsible so, yeah, that would be a big taboo, but if she got caught then she'd have disappointed him and if she didn't get caught then she'd have felt all guilty. Willow had been twisting herself around all day and then Cordelia had made that comment and, well, that had settled that even if not studying wasn't a real taboo. Studying was just something she enjoyed doing. She could stop at any time. She could. She just had to keep her mind on other things like talking to Xander.

“... so I went to pick up The Punisher and do you believe they canceled it after only eighteen issues? And you're not listening to me at all, are you?”

“What? No, I'm listening. The Punisher. No more issues. Only, uh, didn't they stop running that about two years back?”

“Duh.” Willow could almost hear Xander roll his eyes. “They brought it back.”

“But not for long.”

“No,” he sighed. “Not for long.”

As the silence ran on, Willow scrambled for something to say. Xander beat her to it. “So, Buffy didn't seem jazzed for the zoo trip. What's up with that?”

Ah, good, she could always count on Xander to keep the chatter going. “Well, we are missing a whole day's worth of classes. I mean, we aren't even going to get to dissect a pig now because we'll
be missing the lab while we're at the zoo and Dr. Schaefer said there's too much to cover to make up that lab.”

“Willow?”

“Yeah?”

“I'm pretty sure Buffy doesn't mind we're missing classes tomorrow. I can tell you for a fact that I personally don't mind not dissecting a pig.”

“But pigs are a lot like humans, anatomically I mean, and it would be good practice if I ever decide to be a doctor, and besides, if we don't dissect pigs then the largest things we've ever dissected are frogs.”

“Which I am perfectly happy with but, tell you what, why don't we ask Buffy to bring home a vamp for you to dissect? They're almost like humans, right? More so than a pig at least.”

“Xander LaVelle Harris …”

“Hey, what did I say about using my middle name?”

“I am not dissecting a vampire. I mean, it wouldn't be dead, would it? Not dead-dead in which case it'd be dust and I wouldn't be able to dissect it. So, what I mean is, I'm not dissecting anything that's alive-like, or lifelike I guess I mean. I am not dissecting anything that would be complaining and possibly screaming.”

“Oh, sure, an undead fiend gets a pass but you can still attack me with a two ton textbook.”

“It wasn't a textbook. It was a Physician's Desk Reference, and that was an accident. Besides, I'm pretty sure it didn't break your foot.”

“Right, so when I'm limping and can't escape from the vamp Buffy's capturing for you to dissect …”

“Xander, I'm not going to dissect a vampire.” Ooh, but maybe a demon, one that was already dead. That would be sort of taboo-like, wouldn't it?

“Okay, okay,” Xander agreed. “No vampires. Oh, here's an idea. Maybe we can watch the lions feeding at the zoo and you can sort of take a look at the anatomy of whatever they're tearing apart.”

“Xander.” Oh God, she sounded like her mother, but did Xander really think they fed live animals to the lions?

“Or maybe not.”

Oh good, he didn't.

“So,” Xander continued. “No cribbing the anatomy off of the lion's piggy chow.”

No, but maybe they could dissect a pig in the science club. Since she'd come up with the idea, they'd let her do the actual dissection, right? Willow moved to her computer and tucked the phone against her shoulder. A pig was sort of like livestock so maybe she should start with the Department of Agriculture? No, that was probably only for living animals or for animals used for food anyway.

“Maybe you could watch, you know, an actual dissection at a morgue. A human, that'd have to be more human-like than a pig even.”
“It's called an autopsy on a human, and it isn't preformed at a morgue. Oh, but the Coroner's Office. Do you think they'd really let me watch an autopsy?” Even if they didn't, they had to know where you could get a pig for dissection, having done it in school. Maybe she should ask at a university.

“Okay, and with that I think maybe I'm done for the night.”

“No. No! We can talk about something else. Um, ice cream. We can talk about our favorite flavors.” Right, because anyone over seven wanted to talk about ice cream flavors.

“Willow. Do you know what time it is?”

“Um, almost ten.”

“Right, it's almost ten.”

“So?”

“You're usually off the phone and studying by 9:30.”

“Well, um, we've got that zoo trip tomorrow so there's nothing I need to study for right at this moment.” Uh oh, caught out. She couldn't tell him about the whole breaking taboos thing because then she'd have to explain about the Tantra book which would lead to sex magic even if she wasn't looking at that part of the book and, no, this conversation was so not going there. And anyway, it wasn't like not studying was a taboo. She chose to study most every day. And if one day she chose not to, then she didn't have to study just that one day.

“Willow, you always need to study. I've seen you studying at the start of summer vacation.”

“But there are studies that show students lose knowledge over the summer.”

“Come on, Wills, what's wrong?”

“Wrong? Why would anything be wrong?” Okay, and that high-pitched tone didn't give anything away.

“Willow?”

The silence hung heavy between them but if she started talking she'd start babbling and then it'd all come out: the Tantra book and the sex magic and the breaking taboos idea. No, no, no. Talking led to badness.

“You shouldn't listen to Cordelia. You know she's the devil, right?”

Cordelia? What? Oh. Oh! “What, just because she said that Sisyphus would get that boulder up the hill before I could get through a day without studying?”

“Let's skip that whole boulder part – 'cause what kind of sense did that not make? – and go with that bit where Cordelia said you couldn't go a whole day without studying.”

“Well, she's wrong. I can so not study if I choose to. I just don't usually choose to.”

“But you're trying to not study today.” It wasn't even a question. Xander knew her, well she couldn't say too well, but it was sort of annoying, sometimes, how well he knew her.

“Well, yeah.”
“And how many textbooks have you opened today?”

“Uh, two?”

“Willow.”

“Okay, three, but I shut them each right away before I could read anything except I did read a bit about the Revolutionary War but we’ve already covered that in class and it wasn’t anything I didn’t already know so I’m pretty sure it doesn’t count as studying.”

“And you’re on the computer now, aren’t you?”

“Um, well I’m just over at the UC Sunnydale sight, looking up info on their biology department to see if they could tell me, well …”

“Well what?”

“Well, I thought maybe they could tell me where I could get a pig, but that’s not really studying-studying. Dissecting it, that’d be more for fun than for school since we won’t be dissecting one in class.”

“Willow? Step away from the computer.”

“But …”

“So, ice cream flavors. I’m surprised you had to ask. Bubble gum, obviously, because then you have both ice cream and gum.”

Oh, good, she hadn’t had to explain about the taboo breaking and Xander was helping anyway. It wasn’t cheating if she had help, right? Not studying was still not studying even if her best friend was distracting her from the not studying.

As Cecil Ashworth approached Philip Henry's door, Lucas Miller watched from a car parked in the darkened space between two streetlights. His cigarette, held to be visible to passersby, was nothing more than a prop, a suggestion of why he hadn't left the car. He had no intention of lighting it. He'd learned the hard way that people notice scents. They might not realize they had, but if you trailed someone long enough any scent, unusual or not, would give you away. No one careless lasted long in Miller's line of work, and Miller had been a professional for more than thirty years.

The Ashworth boy was obviously an amateur but Miller had known that going in. Antonia Ashworth would not have hired Miller to both trail her son and pick up any slack on the boy's assignment if Cecil had been at all competent. The idiot had gone to Henry's home for Christ's sake. The last place to corner a subject was in his own house. Ashworth would have done better to have called on Dr. Henry at the office. He still wouldn't have gotten any answers, but at least Henry would have been forced, by the public nature of the arena, to present a veneer of politeness in the face of Ashworth's questions. At home he could slam the door in Ashworth's face. In fact, three … two … one. Ah, and there it was: slam!

Cecil Ashworth took a step back, glaring at the pale stonework, and shouted. “Fine then. It's not like I need your help. Deidre Page has told me all, and besides, that's the most awful 'stash I've ever seen. I think I'd have puked if I'd had to look at it another second.”

Page had told Ashworth nothing. He'd gotten less out of her than he had out of Henry. The slattern
who lived across the way from Page, well, Ashworth had spent quite a while in her home but it hadn't been all talk. Miller had the photos to prove it. Not that he was likely to use them. Cecil, by himself, was nothing, but one didn't take on Antonia Ashworth lightly.

Cecil stood in the street as if waiting for his bluff to pay off. It that was the case, he was doomed to disappointment. Henry wasn't coming out. God but the lad was an idiot. The only thing he'd been right about so far was Philip Henry's mustache. It was obvious that Henry thought it and the goatee made him look sophisticated. Another idiot, but at least Henry wasn't some high-born son dragging the Council's reputation down into the muck.

Miller blessed his decision to go freelance. If he'd stayed in the Council, Ashworth was exactly the kind of idiot he'd have been stuck working for, and if he'd had to work for an idiot like Ashworth for even half a day, he'd have killed the man. That was the kind of mistake that got one noticed.

After a few minutes, Ashworth returned to his car. Perhaps the lad hadn't been waiting for Henry. Perhaps he'd been hoping another artiste would take him to bosom and bed. If so, he was out of luck. Henry's neighborhood, more expensive and conservative than Page's, didn't house such blatant indiscretions. Miller followed Ashworth long enough to see him ensconced in a godawful water hole. They way the lad eyed the ladies suggested that Ashworth was done investigating for the evening. Good, that meant Miller could turn his own attention to Philip Henry.

Ten minutes on a computer gave Miller access to Henry's credit card records which indicated dinners for two at a fair number of restaurants that featured discrete dark lighting. Romantic, certainly, but especially so for a man slipping out from under a wife's watchful eye. Another fifteen minutes turned up the usual gifts – chocolate, jewelry, lingerie – and the home address of one Zara Wright, personal assistant to Philip Henry with the emphasis on the personal.

Breaking into her flat would be simple enough but unnecessary. Some men needed the extra motivation of a gun pointed at a loved one's head, but not Henry. A simple threat, a hint that Miller might tell the wife, should do it. Philip Henry would tell him everything his client needed to know. In fact, Miller's biggest problem would most certainly be getting Henry to shut up.

It was far too early to have to wait for his tea. And how long did a microwave take to boil a bloody cup of water? Too late Rupert realized he should have brewed his tea in his office. If nothing else it would have delayed his arrival in the teacher's lounge, where he was currently waiting for a ridiculously slow machine to go ping. In general, Rupert avoided the lounge but Principal Flutie, in his passive-aggressive way, had been adamant. “You see, Mr. Giles, you keep to yourself too much. The teachers won't be comfortable calling on the resources of the library if they don't know you.” Rupert had been floundering for a way to sound professional while saying that he didn't want to get to know, well, pretty much anyone at the school, when Flutie had added, “Good. I'll see you in the teacher's lounge tomorrow morning.”

At least his chances of interacting with anyone were slim. There were only two teachers present: Mr. Murdock, hidden behind a newspaper, and Miss Calendar, sitting with a half-eaten muffin crumbled before her. She was staring straight at him. Having left his Harrod's blend in his office, Rupert fumbled for a, ugh, Lipton's teabag. When he glanced up again, Miss Calendar was still staring. “You have mail,” she said.

“What?” It wasn't until she nodded toward the matrix of staff mailboxes that he understood what she'd meant. Flutie sent out messages instead of confronting the staff directly and, yes, there was an envelope in Rupert's box. It was, as he'd expected, from the principal's office. The notice, referring to the collection Rupert had brought into the library, contained phrases such as “arcane texts” and
“topics unsuitable for a high-school library.” The words were lackluster but the meaning was clear. Rupert was being told to move his books.

Rupert couldn't. The books were too valuable a research tool. They wouldn't fit in his apartment and the mansion, well, that belonged to Giles. It was most certainly out of the question. Almost grateful that the missive gave him a reason to abandon the tea, Rupert left to find Flutie.

Kris, Miss Mansfield that is, was manning her desk at the front office. She'd come on rather intense when they'd first met, so much so that Rupert had, for a day or so, thought she'd been flirting with him. Still feeling a tad uncomfortable around her, Rupert went for a professionalism that, he feared, came off as stuffy. “Ah, Miss Mansfield, is Principal Flutie in?”

Her nod, happily, carried nothing of that initial flirtation. “He's out back, behind the school, picking up a delivery. The pig's in.”

Pig? Ah, yes, Flutie's razorback.

The loading dock was empty but as he stepped back into the school, Flutie's words – “Hold still you little …” – led Rupert to an empty classroom. Rupert stopped in the doorway. The pig, donned with tusks and a ridged razorback, both obviously foam, as well as an ill-fitting helmet looked nothing like the dread creature Flutie had described. “I take it that's the, uh, mascot? Where on earth did you find the beast?”

Flutie picked up the pig. “An affinal cousin. He gave me a deal because of the relationship.”

“I didn't realize you were married.” In fact, he'd have sworn Flutie was single. The man certainly didn't wear a wedding band.

“A cousin,” Flutie replied. “My brother's wife's cousin.”

As Flutie approached Rupert, the pig started squealing and squirming. Rupert took a step back, into the hallway, and the squealing stopped. Flutie stepped into the hallway and the pig squealed again, squirming so heavily that Flutie lost control. The pig dropped to the floor and dashed away. Flutie chased after.

Rupert heard himself thinking, *the pig, he trembles before me.* He shook his head. There was no reason to be pleased. The pig seemed to be a huge waste of both time and resources, certainly, but he had no reason to want the beast to fear him.

Giles snatched consciousness way from Rupert and watched the pig dash out of sight. The animal could sense Eyghon? That couldn't be. It ran against everything Giles had been taught about demonic domination. Eyghon was attached to his mind, yes, but not manifesting in any way.

*Smarter than humans. Smarter than you.* Giles sensed that Eyghon was speaking of the pig. *But also stupid. Such a tiny morsel. Not worth my time.*

Damn Flutie and his argumentum ad baculum: if you want to keep you position in this school, you will remove your occult books. Rupert, who'd already decided not to ask for Buffy's help boxing up books, was less than pleased when she barged into the library. While Slayer strength and energy would have been useful, he knew she would have completely ignore any organizational processes he'd set up. Instead of limiting herself to moving books as he might have asked, she'd have started packing them, randomly tossing books into boxes in such a haphazard manner that it would have taken him weeks, if not months, to sort it out.
Buffy didn't even seem to notice the half-packed boxes on his desk. “There's something wrong with Xander.” He took her seriously at first but only until he realized what she was saying. “Xander's taken to teasing the less fortunate?” Perhaps if he moved to the card catalog, she'd realize he was, in fact, busy.

But no, she merely followed and kept talking at him. “Uh-huh.”

“And, well, otherwise all his spare time is spent lounging about with imbeciles.”

Rupert compared the card in his hand to what he'd found in the catalog. He knew it. The Rocnarthian Prophecies had already been packed. In fact they were almost certainly in that box on the checkout counter.

“It's bad, isn't it?” she asked.

“It's devastating. He's turned into a sixteen-year-old boy. Of course, you'll have to kill him.”

She followed him to the counter. Naturally. “Giles, I'm serious.”

Rupert peered into the box. Ah yes, there it was. The book of prophecies. This one might as well go to his apartment. “So am I,” he replied. “Except for the part about killing him. Testosterone is a great equalizer. It turns all men into morons. He will, however, get over it.”

Diving into the box, she pulled out three of the books. “There is something supernatural at work here. Get your books! Look stuff up!”

Aha, he'd been right. She was about to destroy his organized boxes. He grabbed the books and put them back into the box. “Look under what?”

“I don't know. That's your department.”

How delightful. Apparently it was now his business to pursue any and all of Buffy's wild ideas.

“The evidence that you've presented is sketchy at best.”

“He scared the pig.”

Giles turned away from the books and stared, unseeing, across the room. The pig had noticed Eyghon. Animals often tended to be smarter than humans when faced with supernatural creatures. But no, Buffy had to be overreacting. “Buffy, boys can be cruel. They tease. They prey on the weak. It's natural teen behavior.”

“What did you just stay?”

“Um, they tease?”

“They prey on the weak. I've heard that somewhere bef …” Giles watched fascinated as Buffy transformed a few normal if unsavory teenage behaviors into an outlandish conclusion. “Xander has been acting totally wiggy ever since we went to the zoo. Him and Kyle and all those guys, they went into the hyena cage. Oh, God, that laugh …”

“You're saying that, uh, Xander's becoming a hyena.”

“I don't know. Or been possessed by one? Not just Xander, all of them.”

“Possession?” Giles asked. “By an animal spirit?”
“You got something?”

“I’m not certain.” When Eyghon took over a body, the demon tore through it, burning it out quickly. When Eyghon had told Giles it wanted the entire Slayer line, Giles had reasoned that the demon wanted to burn through all possible Slayers, allowing demons free reign over the earth. Perhaps if he studied animal possession, Giles could learn how to control demonic possession so that it did not destroy the host. Ahmed’s treatise on …

Willow burst in, leaving the library doors swinging behind her. “Herbert! They found him.”

“The pig?” The touch of anxiety in Buffy's voice suggested she didn't want to know.

“Dead. And also eaten. Principal Flutie's freaking out.”

It was unlikely a demon had broken into the high-school merely to eat a pig. Animal possession. It was possible. “Buffy, you suggested that Xander and his friends had been possessed.”

“I wouldn't call them friends exactly.”

“Xander's been possessed?”

She sounded hysterical. He did not need this. “Willow, I need you to remain calm.”

“By a hyena,” Buffy confirmed. So much for calming the girl down.

“We do not know, at this time, what has happened, but circumstances do suggest …”

“We need to save him! What can I do?”

“I was getting to that,” Giles replied. “Buffy, bring one of these friends here.” The rare book cage was fairly sturdy. It should prove strong enough to contain a possessed human. Ahmed’s treatise on cults and aboriginal worship should prove invaluable, but he would need more information. “Willow, I'll need an online search. I'm not certain what we're looking for yet, but start with instances of humans behaving like or believing they are animals.”

“On it.”

“I'm afraid this will take precedence over your magic lesson.”

Willow looked up from the computer. “You bet'cha it does. I'm not letting Xander go all *Lord of the Flies.*”

“Buffy, why are you still here?”

“Shouldn't we wait until we know what's up?”

Gods, could the girl not obey one simple order without arguing? “Time may be of the essence. The power of demonic possessions burns through the body, destroying it. It's the reason vampires kill their victims before Turing them: a living host can not survive the transformation. Until we know for certain, we should assume that animal possessions have similarly catastrophic effects.”

“Right, I'll find Xander.”

“Catastrophic?” Willow called out from behind the computer.

Damn, he needed the girl focused on research. “I know you're worried but please continue with your
computer search. Xander will survive but only if we act quickly.” Willow's keyboard started clattering again. Good.

Wait. Buffy had said she'd find Xander? He turned to look but Buffy was already gone. Damn.

Buffy tottered under the weight. She staggered forward one step and stopped to steady herself. After a second staggering step, she dropped Xander to the floor. “Ugh, you have to ease up on the donuts or maybe on the pigs. Raw pork you should give up completely.”

She grabbed his jacket by the collar and stopped to listen. The hall sounded empty. She dragged him to the door and peered out. Yep, empty. Good, that should solve the problem of how to drag Xander to the library without being seen. At least he slid well. Clothes, it was the clothes. From now on she was only killing demons that wore clothes. It made moving the body so much easier.

“Buffy.”

She stopped and looked over her shoulder. “Owen.”

“Uh, what are you doing?”

“Um, right.” She let go of the collar as she rose. Xander's head hit the floor. “Oops. Um, there was this vending machine accident and Xander sort of got knocked out so I'm taking him to the nurse.”

“The nurse's office is back that way.”

“Of course it is.”

“Huh?” Owen seemed more curious than concerned. It was a bit disturbing actually, but useful because time was something she didn't have. She had to get Xander into a cage.

“The nurse is busy folding bandages, preparing in case there's, um, a plague.” Really? Plague was the best she could come up with? “And Giles? He's great at treating concussions. Learned it in the war.”

“What war?”

“I don't know. Some Britshy war.” She grabbed Xander by the collar. “Don't you have a class to be in?”

“It's my free period. Do you want help carrying him to the library?”

“Oh no, he'd be embarrassed. I mean, he got beat up. He wouldn't want anyone else to know.”

“I thought you said it was a vending accident.”

“I did? Oh, I did … because that's how embarrassed he'd be. He'd much rather you think he'd been knocked out by a vending machine.”

“Oh, um, right.”

Owen didn't look convinced but she really had to get Xander in the cage before he woke. She started dragging Xander away. Looking over her shoulder, she added, “So I'll, um, see you later.”

“Buffy.”
Oh, please not now. She paused but didn't let go of Xander's collar. “Uh huh?”

“I was wondering if you'd want to hit the Bronze tonight.”

“Tonight? As in tonight tonight?”

“Uh, yeah, that's usually when tonight is.”

“Can't. Studying. I've got that big history test, uh, next week. I like to get an early start on my studying.”

“You do?”

“Hey, I study! Well, no I don't, but I'm trying this thing where I'm turning over a new leaf. I'm being vegetative, but not in a doing nothing sort of way.”

“Oh, okay, but movie tomorrow, right?”

“Yes, of course, movie tomorrow.” If they got this hyena mess cleaned up by then.

Owen looked confused, as if she hadn't quite convinced him, but walked on. At the far end of the hall, Owen gave her a half-wave before turning the corner. Buffy yanked at Xander's collar, grumbling as she dragged him toward the library. “Xander Harris, if this going all dark path ruins my changes with Owen, I'll … well, no, I won't leave you all possessed, but you will owe me so much ice cream.”

A drawing in Rankin's *Studies on the Masai* depicted the results of animal possession. It wasn't good. “Damn.”

Willow looked up from her computer. “What is it?”

Giles dropped the book, open to an image of human suffering, onto the table. “Animal possession is more similar to demonic than I'd hoped.”

Willow, after one quick glance, blurted out, “We have to save him.”

Giles patted her shoulder. “We will.” No one had ever successfully removed a demon from its host. He had no reason to expect animal possession would be any different, but upsetting Willow gained him no advantage.

As Buffy entered, dragging Xander's body behind her, Willow ran over. “Oh God, what happened?”

“I hit him,” Buffy said. “With a desk.”

Damn, Buffy had gone out and brought Xander to him. He would have preferred one of the others. The girls would be upset if he killed their friend. He'd have to take more care than he'd anticipated.

“Lock him in the cage, please.”

“Good idea,” Buffy replied as she dragged Xander into the cage.

The library doors swung open. “Mr. Giles.” Gods, what a time for Miss Mansfield to call. If she'd seen Xander … “Could I have a word?”

He strode to the door and joined her in the hall, more to prevent her from seeing Xander than from
any desire to speak with her. As it turned out, she hadn't seen Buffy and Xander. "There's been an accident." She told him that Flutie was dead, killed by wild dogs.

"Principal Flutie? Are you sure?"

"I saw the body myself. The bite marks …" She collapsed against him, burying her head against his chest.

"There, there." He patted at her back until she composed herself.

As she started to brush tears away, he handed her his handkerchief. "Thank you." She took a deep breath and handed the cloth back toward him.

"You keep it. After what you've been through, I'm sure you'll need it again."

She took another deep breath. "There's to be a meeting, after school, for all the teachers and, uh, you as well. I'm not sure what …"

"I'm sure it will be … No, I don't suppose it will be alright, but we will get through this."

"Yes. I should go … There's more staff to be told."

"Of course, anything you need." He stepped back into the library before she was out of sight.

"Is everything all right? Willow asked. Glancing toward the cage, she added, "I mean outside of Xander and the hyena possession."

"Principal Flutie is dead. Eaten."

"Eaten?" Somehow Willow managed to look even paler.

"The official story is that wild dogs got into his office, but yes."

"But Xander didn't." Willow looked at Buffy. "He was with you."

Giles felt he should say something comforting. "That's a small mercy at least."

"Giles, how do we stop this? How do you trans-possess someone?"

You don't. He couldn't say that. Studying the hosts might still provide information he could use. "I'm afraid I still don't have all the pieces. There is a cult within the Masai, Primal's they're called, who take on animals, become possessed willingly. The accounts of their methods are a bit thin on the ground. There is some talk of a predatory act, but no description of the exact ritual. Although …"

Why hadn't he thought of this earlier? "The Malleus Maleficarum deals in particulars of demonic possessions which would, almost certainly, apply. One should be able to transfer the spirits to another human."

"Oh, that's great," Buffy replied. "Any volunteers?"

Giles had no interest in removing the spirits from the students, but he couldn't tell that to Buffy. "Oh, good point."

"What we need," she added, "is to put the hyena back into the hyena."
“None of my research so far has turned up any methods to, as you say, trans-posses the students.”

“But you said time is a factor.” Willow sounded terribly concerned. “They could start falling apart if we don't get to them in time.”

“Zoo guy,” Buffy said. “We need to talk to him.”

Did Buffy honestly believe a zookeeper had forced a possession onto the students? However, while the girls were off following Buffy's ridiculous lead, he would have time to investigate the spell. “You two go to the zoo. I'll stay here and see what I can learn from Xander.”

“Learn from Xander? But he's been knocked out.” At Buffy's glare, Willow added, “Not that I'm sure you didn't need to knock him out. I mean, that you did need to knock him out because I'm sure you wouldn't have if you didn't need to.”

“Believe me, I needed to.”

“I wasn't planning on interviewing him,” Giles said in response to Willow's question. “There are magics that can help me better understand animal possession. Without more knowledge, we can't help him.”

“Ooh, magic. Can I help? I mean, not just because it's magic but because I want to help Xander too.”

“Best leave this to me. Besides, I want you helping Buffy with the interview. You've been researching hyenas. Your input may prove invaluable in dredging information out of this zookeeper.”

“Meaning she might think of questions that I won't?”

“Um.” Willow's words interrupted Buffy's glare. “Not to rain on anybody's parade, but the zoo is a bit far for a leisurely stroll.”

Giles did his best not to wince as he pulled the car keys out of his pocket. “You've taken driver's ed, yes?”

Willow stammered. “Uh, yes, but I haven't taken the test yet. No license. I'm only allowed to drive under adult supervision.”

He tossed her the keys. “Best not be caught.”

“Giles, I can't do this.”

“I can drive,” Buffy interrupted.

“No,” Giles replied. “Willow, would you rather see Xander dead?”

“Oh.” He watched her take that in. “Okay.”

Giles waited until he was certain they were gone before injecting Xander. There, the boy wouldn't wake now. He drew blood and chanted as he mixed it with specific herbs. He unlocked the cage and drew symbols on Xander's face. A green mist came into view, shimmering around the boy. Giles thrust a piece of amber into the mist, only dropping it when it burst into flame. That cinched it. He hadn't been lying to the girls. Animal possession did have the same properties as demonic. If the hyena wasn't removed, Xander would die.
The studio was a few blocks off of Main Street in the middle of a row of stores. “Karate” was painted in red letters on the window and again displayed in impossible-to-miss white letters on a sign above. The limited space that Kris could see through the windows ended at a set of room-divider screens, black wood with white between. There was no one at the front desk but a young man, athletic and tanned, popped out from behind a screen when the bell jingled as she walked through the door.

“Hi, Kris Mansfield. I have an appointment?”

“Oh, sure, Sensei Brian's in back.”

Kris felt a flash of nostalgia as she took in the wooden floor, mirrors, and piled mats. The room was empty except for one man dressed in an informal and comfortable-looking black gi. Presumably he was Brian. He looked nothing like Lassiter, the man who’d trained her. Brian was short and wide where Lassiter had been tall and thin. Brian was older as well and more … the term relaxed came to mind. Brian's hair, graying and pulled back in a ponytail, was nothing like Lassiter's militarily precise haircut. Kris found it rather reassuring, all in all, given that she was almost certain Lassiter had lied to her.

“So, you have an appointment but not for a lesson? It says here you want an evaluation?”

Right, how to explain this? “I've studied but, well, I don't think I really learned to defend myself. I was, well I was mugged, by a kid, and, well, I should have been able to take him, I mean defend myself, and, well, he was a kid and I let my guard down and he got away with my purse.”

“Ah, you want to know how well you'd fare if attacked again.”

“You can do that, right? Your ad did say self-defense.”

“Yeah, I can simulate a set of real attacks.”

He started out easy, telling her how he was going to attack before moving in. “Alright, I'm going to grab your neck in a front choke-hold. You get out of it.” He wrapped his arms around her throat. She dropped her chin to protect her pressure point, grabbed both of his wrists, pulled him in, and kicked up at his chest. He continued with basic attacks – grabbing from behind, grabbing an arm – and then upped the game to attacking with weapons although he did use a wooden knife rather than a real blade.

When they switched to actual sparring, Kris found herself struggling to keep up. He took her down again and again. At the start of their last fight, he threw his hand at her face. It didn't hit but her eyes felt like they were on fire and the tears were so heavy in her eyes that she couldn't see. Blinking heavily, she felt more than saw him knock her to the ground. It took a good half-hour – she learned later – and a damp cloth before she could open her eyes. “What the hell was that?”

“Black pepper. I don't know what kind of cocktail hour classes you've been taking, but in the real world enemies don't fight fair.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your form is good and I'm sure whatever katas you've learned, you've got them down one-hundred percent, but you don't follow through. Even with the basic attacks, you respond once and stop. On the street, you don't stop until your opponent is on the ground and not moving.”

She could see what the man meant. Lassiter had trained her to spar, to perform katas, but not to fight. Kris shook her head. It didn't make sense. Why would the Council want a Slayer who couldn't defeat
demons? Had they always known she wouldn't be called? But then why train her at all?

If she couldn't win, she should leave Sunnydale. Instead Kris found herself asking about lessons.

That force field still surrounded the mansion, which was pretty cool, sort of like that field around the Death Star and all except the mansion didn't seem to have any thermal exhaust ports so Andrew hadn't been able to be all Han Solo and take the field out. Waiting by the door didn't seem so safe. He wasn't quite sure why. There was something creepy about the house, but he really, really wasn't allowed to be alone at home after he'd burnt those hamburgers. It wasn't fair. He'd been trying to help, to get dinner ready. It wasn't his fault he'd fallen asleep.

From the woods, Andrew heard a screech, the sound of something small dying. His feet took off. As he hit the street, he turned left. Maybe he'd find Mr. Giles in Restfield.

He'd run six blocks before he had to stop, bending over, panting heavily, his hand holding the stitch in his side as if the pressure would make it hurt less. Okay, so maybe he didn't need to keep running, but he really wasn't supposed to be alone. There was a shortcut he knew. It was sort of isolated but it'd get him to the cemetery a lot faster. It would cut off enough time that he could walk the rest of the way. Okay, that sounded good.

Only it wasn't so good because he turned a corner and walked through a gap in some bushes and it wasn't as isolated as he'd thought because there were these two couples and maybe they were necking or something because they were all on the ground but then one of them growled and he sort of thought he saw drool so maybe they'd been sleeping but why would they be sleeping outside?

He stepped away, moving backwards, keeping his eyes on the two couples who, and, okay, that growling must have been his imagination because they went back to sleep or whatever it was they'd been doing, at least they were laying back down and not rising up to chase him but of course they wouldn't be chasing him because, you know, it was night and they were just bummed that he'd woken them up.

Andrew wanted to run again but that didn't seem like such a good idea. Maybe he should take the longer way to the cemetery. There was another sort of shortcut that he could take but maybe it'd be better to take Main Street. It'd be longer but there were lights and people and maybe Tucker would be there and maybe Tucker wouldn't mind if he stuck around him until it was time to go home.

Main Street was emptier than he'd expected. There was only one guy and he was walking down the middle of the street and he was talking, to himself Andrew guessed, and he was kind of loud. “And my head shall be filled with song! And that song shall ring with the lamentations of the dying, and their cries will fill the sky with weeping sorrow.”

Okay, and maybe Main Street wasn't such a great idea either.

“I can smell you.”

The scary guy could smell someone? Who could he smell? Andrew's gaze darted around the empty street. There wasn't anyone around except … Oh.

“I'll suck the blood from your heart. He says I may.”

Andrew backed against the door of the sporting goods store. If the door were open, he could get in and hide because of course the big scary guy wouldn't just smash through the window, and why was the guy shouting something about pork and beans?
Before Andrew could think that through, there were two big scary guys. The new one turned to look over his shoulder and shouted “Run!” but their faces got real ugly, bumpy or something, and Andrew couldn't move. The new one rushed the other and Andrew couldn't look so he shut his eyes, turned his head, and covered his face with his hands.

“I thought I told you to run.”

Andrew peered out from behind his fingers. Only one of the scary guys was there, the one with the spiked hair and dark jacket except he seemed to be brushing dust off his jacket. Whatever had been wrong with his face, well, Andrew figured he must have been imagining it because the bumps were gone. The guy looked up and Andrew ran. From behind he though he heard the word “Idiot.”

The Council knew of no reliable method to test for demonic possession. Giles, studying for his second Ph.D., had discovered a footnote in Carl Guthman’s *Treatise on the Nordic Gods*. The information in that footnote had sent him to a church on the Faroe Islands. The monks had not parted with their knowledge willingly, but Giles knew of a spell that, when chanted in the presence of demonic possession, would cause amber to burst into flame. Giles glanced down at the chunk of charred resin. It seemed that animal possession had the same characteristic.

He’d been disappointed at first but it might be that he could turn this to his advantage. It was possible that research into animal possession could enhance his understanding of demonic possession. Perhaps if he looked further into the Masai …

His name sounded, sung out in two separate tones, high then low. “Gi - les.” He glanced at the cage but Xander was still unconscious. That left one explanation. Xander’s pack had come for him.

Hyenas were scavengers. They gave way to predators. Eyghon was a predator but the students were fully possessed; Giles wasn’t. Facing them down would most likely prove suicidal. Giles slammed the cage shut and dashed for his office. He hadn’t made it even half-way across the room when the windows shattered in. He’d almost made it to the door when one of the possessed students grabbed at his shoulder. Giles spun and kicked the boy straight on, giving himself another twenty seconds to race into his office and slam the door behind himself. The children raged at the door but couldn’t get in. Giles had know when he’d arrived in Sunnydale that the high-school was vulnerable. He’d warded his office. A fully grown, enraged Fyarl might get through those wards, but these students wouldn’t.

Giles watched through the office’s window as the possessed students tore apart the cage and sniffed at Xander. When they couldn’t wake the lad, they left, or appeared to. Naturally he couldn’t be certain the students had left. Giles remained in his office until he heard his name again, but this time called out in a human voice.

“Buffy?”

She was standing in the library, staring at the glass. Willow, on the other side of the torn cage door, checked Xander’s pulse.

“I’m guessing we had visitors,” Buffy said.

“The other possessed students. They came looking for Xander.” Buffy glanced between the cage and Giles as if trying to work something out. Giles answered her unasked question. “I hid.”

“Go you.”
“Did you learn anything at the zoo?”

“The zookeeper . . .”

“Dr. Weirick,” Willow interrupted.

“Huh?”

“The zookeeper, his name is Dr. Weirick.”

“Uh, right, anyway, he said he can work out the ritual, which means we need to get Xander over there ASAP. Willow, wanna help me pull him out? You go for the arms. I’ll grab the legs.”

“He what?” Giles asked.

Willow, leaning down to grab Xander’s arms, stopped halfway and looked over. “Dr. Weirick,” she said. “With what you’d told me about the predatory act, he said he knows what needs to be done to get the hyenas out of everybody.”

Giles glanced down at Xander and then over his shoulder to the broken window. “I see. But the other students, we’ll need them at the zoo as well, yes?”

“I’ll handle it,” Buffy replied. “Once Xander’s in the car.”

Giles held open the library door as the girls dragged Xander into the hallway. “You two go on,” he said. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“Giles, we don’t have time.”

“Just one minute.”

Once the doors had swung shut, Giles stepped into the remnants of the rare book cage, opened the cabinet, and pulled out a dagger.

Xander was already laid out in the back of his car when Giles joined the girls. “You two get everything set up,” Buffy said. “I’ll bring the hyenas to you.”

“Be careful.”

“I will.” With that, Buffy was gone.

“Right, let’s get going ourselves.”

As Giles navigated the streets, Willow kept checking the back seat. “Should Xander still be knocked out? How hard did Buffy hit him anyway?”

“I’m sure he’ll come around soon. Could you, um, help me navigate? I’ve never been to this zoo.”

“Oh, sure.” He hadn’t actually needed her help - the zoo was only a few blocks away - but it did keep her from asking questions about the boy.

They half-carried, half-dragged Xander toward the hyena house. “It sure is dark,” Willow offered.

The display itself, the one containing the hyena cage, was well lit. A ritual circle, laid out in red paint, already marked the floor, much as Giles had expected. “Here’s good,” Giles said just inside the doorway. They put Xander down. “Willow, you go back and watch for Buffy.”
“Are … are you sure?”

“Yes. We’ll need to know when she’s on her way.”

Giles waited until Willow had vanished into the dark corridor before calling out. “Dr. Weirick? Doctor?”

Weirick stepped out in full ritual regalia. His blue robe seemed almost pedestrian when contrasted to the stylized skull painted in blue and white on his face. “Of course, the, uh, Masai ceremonial garb. Yes … Very good. Are you, uh, otherwise prepared for the trans-possession?”

Weirick nodded. “Almost.”

Giles gestured toward the sacred circle. “How terribly frustrating for you, that a bunch of school children could accomplish what you could not.”

“It bothered me, but the power will be mine.”

Weirick swung his staff. Giles dodged to the side, moving in closer. As he grabbed the staff and yanked it, Weirick lost his balance. Giles shoved the staff back, straight into the man’s stomach. Weirick doubled over. Giles grabbed one arm and twisted it behind Weirick. “Listen and listen well. We don’t have much time. There are entities stronger than hyenas, more powerful. I can get you that power but only if you do as I say.”

Weirick remained remarkably calm. “And what is it you want me to do?”

“Remove the hyena spirit from those children.”

“And how will we be performing the predatory act? Whom will you kill? One of your own?”

Giles pulled out the dagger and held it to Weirick’s throat. “I believe I won’t have to kill you.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“It is a gamble, I admit, but my knife is already at your throat and I do have a certain experience with these situations. I’m fairly certain you will survive. Do we have a deal?”

Weirick nodded. “I get the power if we succeed.”

“Yes.”

Willow ran in calling his name. “Giles, Giles.” She stopped at the edge of the room, taking in Giles’ knife at Weirick’s throat. “What is this?”

“Get out of the way.” Giles nodded his head left, toward an alcove. “Hide over there.”

She looked worried but did as he asked.

Buffy ran in and, like Willow, stopped short. The students, growling, gathered around her. Giles held the dagger closer to Weirick’s throat. “Now would be a good time.”

“YU BA YA SA NA!”

The eyes of each of the students flashed green. As Xander’s head raised, Giles thought the drug had worn off, but the boy’s eyes flashed green and then his head fell back to the floor.
The students looked confused and then ill. One of the girls ran off with her hand across her mouth as if she were about to be sick. The others slinked off after her. “That appears to have been successful.” Giles let Dr. Weirick go.

“That was sort of wiggy,” Buffy said. “You holding that knife to his throat.”

“Based on my conversation with Willow, I had deducted that the predatory act could be more symbolic than actual.” In fact it was the intention to kill that made the act predatory, but he wasn’t about to share that with Buffy. Let her think he’d never meant the zookeeper harm.

“I’m glad it worked without anyone having to do, you know, anything icky,” Willow chimed in.

Buffy walked over to the hyena cage. “So, what do we do with this guy?”

Giles exchange a glance with Weirick. “I believe a bit of research is in order. It’s possible the transpossession ability can be arrested. In the meantime, I believe a good lock, one strong enough to keep students out, should be sufficient.”

Apparently the way to Miss Deidre Page was through her luscious neighbor. After their third date, Isla had called and invited Cecil over for tea. “Deidre's agreed to see you. I don't know if you'll learn anything useful, but straight from the horse's mouth has to be better than rumors and gossip.”

Tea with Miss Page. Cecil almost felt as if he were being taken home to meet Isla's mother except, of course, Isla and Deidre weren't related. Still it felt like something real couples did, sit down to tea with an old fogey. Cecil was surprised at how distinctly untrapped he felt. Mother had once suggested that young women might use ploys to get their hands on the family jewels. Cecil had never quite seen the point. The family didn't have much in the way of jewels, except for Cecil's personal and he was perfectly happy to have any number of young ladies get their hands on those.

He took his time dressing, finally picking a pale gray dress shirt, a notched lapel plaid blazer in a darkish shade of green, and a comfortable pair of light wool trousers. If the women who ran church socials were anything to go by, he'd have Miss Page eating out of his hands in five minutes flat.

“I do like this one better than the last two. At least he knows to keep his mouth shut when he chews.” A half-hour into tea time, and Miss Page was still referring to him as this one.

Isla smiled as if he'd been praised. It was possible that Isla actually enjoyed the rounds of subtle insults directed as Cecil's person. “He's very good with his mouth. Another biscuit?”

The look Miss Page directed at Isla suggested she'd caught the sexual innuendo. Cecil felt his cheeks go pink.

“So you're here to ask about Ripper, is that it?”

“About Rupert Giles, yes.”

“I don't know Rupert Giles. I only know Ripper, or I should say knew Ripper. I haven't seen him in, oh, more than two decades now, and haven't wanted to either. Are you part of that council?”

Cecil startled at the question, spilling tea onto his trousers. “Part of what?”

As Isla patted at the spill with a napkin, Deidre went on. “That group Ripper returned to. Oh, Ethan told me. Something about a council, something to do with watching although Ethan would never say
what they were watching. I guess it's just as well. Probably nothing I'd want to know about.”

She'd heard about the Watcher's Council? “This Ethan you mentioned.” Cecil skimmed through his notes. “Would that be Ethan Rayne?”

“Going to look him up? Ethan will be so pleased. He just adores pretty young things. You'd better bring a gun, if you care at all about your life.”

“This Mr. Rayne knows things?” About the Council for one. He might have just the information Cecil needed.

“More than I do,” Miss Page agreed. “Whether he'll tell you or not, that's another question.”

“You've opened up, Deidre,” Isla said. “I mean, you've never shared any of this with me before. I'd imagine Cecil could get this Rayne to do the same.”

“More likely Rayne'd be opening him up, and almost certainly not in a way he'd enjoy.”

“What kind of thing wouldn't he tell me?” Cecil wondered if he should bring up the dark magic rituals. He didn't want Miss Page to clam up.

Miss Page's laughter made the room seem just a bit darker. “Oh, he'll tell you all about the sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll.” She looked at him over her tea cup before finishing. “And the black magic. Ethan will go on and on about all that, if you're interested, possibly if you're not. He might even tell you about Randall, but he won't discuss Mary.”

“Mary?”

Miss Page sighed. “After Ripper returned to university, Ethan still kept tabs on him. Apparently Ripper fell, hard, for some local girl. Ethan wasn't pleased.”

“You don't mean that Giles and this Rayne fellow …” It was too disgusting to consider.

Isla's laughter seemed too light and airy for such a dark subject. “Cecil, I didn't realize you were so bourgeois.”

“I'm … I'm not,” Cecil stammered. “But he's so …” Old, Cecil wanted to say, but age didn't make a difference with that kind of thing, now did it? “So Ethan won't talk about Mary because he's jealous.”

“Oh no,” Miss Page replied. “Ethan won't speak of Mary because she died. Torn apart by wild animals. Once she was dead, she became enshrined in Ripper's heart: the perfect love. Mary Magdalene, the cheap two bit whore who wouldn't have lasted a week with Ripper giving way to Mary the Madonna, and all because she'd died. Or at least so Ethan says. But then again, he's biased.”

Dismembered by beasts. Demon attacks, those the Council and Slayer didn't prevent, were generally attributed to beasts. Demons rendered bodies in ways no human, sane or not, would ever consider. “Do you know this girl's last name?”

Miss Page paused as if thinking on it. “No. Ethan might. If he does, he won't tell you. Perhaps some of Ripper's university friends, assuming he had any, might know.”

“Of course.” Isla played mother, warming up their tea. Cecil added sugar to his cup. “This Randall you mentioned …”
Miss Page interrupted before he could finish. “I won't speak of Randall. Ask Ethan. That he might talk about.”

It was only after he'd brewed a cup of the substandard tea on offer – Lipton indeed – that Rupert realized Principal Flutie's death meant he no longer had to start his day connecting with the rest of the staff. With any luck the next principal would be less touchy-feely. Rupert was definitely looking forward to being ignored.

The quickest way back to the library took him through a covered walkway, an open space that ran along the second level of the high-school. Rupert was looking forward to a nice cup from his Harrods stash when Xander's voice, rising from a set of nearby stairs, interrupted his reverie.

“I ate a pig? Oh, my God! I ate a pig? I mean, the whole trichinosis issue aside, yuck!”

“Well, it wasn't really you.”

“I remember going on the field trip, and then going down to the Hyena House, and next thing Mr. Giles is holding a knife to some guy's throat.”

Giles stopped and stepped into a shadow so he could listen without being seen. He wondered why Xander was lying about having no memories of the possession. Not that it truly mattered. It was the lie itself that interested Giles. It was something he could turn to his advantage.

“That was creepy,” Willow agreed, “even when I knew it was just the predatory act to get the hyena out of you.”

“I didn't do anything else, did I, around you guys or …”

“Owen.” Buffy's voice called out loudly, covering the last of Xander's sentence.

“Hey, what's up?”

“Just getting to class,” Buffy replied in that same overly-cheerful voice.

“Yeah,” Willow agreed. “We should get going. We're gonna be late. Uh, we'll see you at lunch, Xander.”

“Cool! Oh, hey, going vegetarian! Huh?” Xander raised two thumbs as he walked backwards.

“Why's Xander going vegetarian?” Owen asked.

“Oh that's nothing,” Willow replied. “He'll have forgotten all about it when he has to choose between a salad and a cheeseburger.”

The girl didn't notice Xander wincing at her words. Giles waited for the rest of the children to walk out of hearing range. Once Xander was alone, Giles stepped into view. “I've been reading up on my, uh, animal possession, and I cannot find anything anywhere about memory loss afterwards.”

There was panic in Xander's eyes. Good. “Did you tell them that?”

“No, and we can keep it that way.”

“Keep it that way? Oh, yes, please.”
“If you will do me one, small favor.”

“Favor? What kind of favor? You don't want me to shelve books again, because I thought we'd agreed that I'm hopeless working out what goes where.”

Giles did remember. Rupert had spent a good two days resorting books after Xander had reshelved them. He was, however, fairly certain the lad had done it on purpose to avoid ever having to shelve again. As a tactic it had worked, but it had made for a couple of frustrating days for Rupert. Looking to get a bit of his own back, Giles replied, “I merely want to perform a few tests, work some spells over you, to ensure there has been no permanent damage.”

“Permanent damage? What do you mean permanent damage?”

Giles hid a grin. “I'm certain it's nothing but better safe than sorry, yes? You do have a free period this afternoon, don't you? Why don't you stop by the library then?”

“But, I mean, if we're talking permanent damage, shouldn't we do these tests, oh I don't know, sometime that's more like now?”

“This afternoon will be fine.”

Xander arrived so quickly after the bell that he must have sprinted from his class to the library. “So what kind of permanent damage are we talking about here?”

“I take it neither of the girls have explained the dangers of demonic possession?”

“Dangers? Um, that'd be a big no, but it's okay, right? Because I was possessed by a hyena, not a demon.”

“Demonic and animal possessions are similar in many respects.”

“Such as being dangerous exactly how?”

“The power of a non-human spirit can be too much for a human body to encompass. The body responds in a variety of ways, usually involving illness, deformity, and death.”

“Death?” Xander shrieked. “But we got this hyena thing out of me right? There should be no death, none at all.”

“That's what we're here to determine. Sit down please.”

Xander paled as Giles brought a hypodermic needle out from behind the counter. “What's that for?”

“I'll need some of your blood.”

Xander half-fell into the chair.

“Don't worry. I'll only take a small bit.”

Xander remained blessedly and unexpectedly silent as Giles drew the blood. “Stay there. This won't take long.” Giles chanted the words to an ancient spell as he mixed the blood and herbs into a sticky elixir. Xander winced back as Giles brought a blood laden finger up to his face. “Stay still. The markings need to be exact. Or would you rather die?” Xander remained still. The aura that became visible looked completely human. Giles handed Xander a chunk of amber and waited to see if it
would burst into flame. It glowed but nothing more than that.

“It's glowing. Why's it glowing? What's that mean?”

“You're fine, Xander. The glowing is a natural reaction of the amber, under the influence of this spell, to a purely human aura. I see no residue of the hyena spirit in you.”

Xander jumped to his feet. “Oh thank God. I gotta tell you, G-Man, I was getting a bit worried …”

“I'm not done.”

“Huh?”

“There are more tests. Sit back down.”

There were other tests Giles needed to perform, tests that would allow him to determine how the hyena's spirit influenced a human body, but Giles had planned to work them on one of the other students who'd been possessed. He generally tried to avoid working the darker magics around Buffy's friends. It was the G-Man comment that had changed his mind. The boy deserved a bit of torment. Giles did despise that nickname.

The entrance to the hyena exhibit was blocked off with faux-police tape. The words caution, closed, and positively no admittance were prominently displayed. Given such enticement, it was a wonder that more of the students hadn't dashed in on the day of the zoo trip.

Weirick had all the supplies waiting. It didn't take long to set them up, but the man proved impatient.

“Aren't you ready yet?”

“Almost.” Giles adjusted the last of the six mirrors he'd set up at the edge of the room. Once the angles were just right, the spells on each mirror would reflect off of each other, capturing an image of any magic floating between them. After the transpossession, Giles would be able to review the images at his leisure. There, that was it. The mirrors were exactly placed. Giles turned to examine the rest of the space. The girl, Heidi, squirmed against the chains that bound her at the center of the circle. She appeared to be screaming from behind the gag. The boy, Kyle, his arms spread-eagled against the wall, had been hung high enough that his feet didn't touch the ground. It would make him easier to manage once the hyena had taken over his body. “Alright,” Giles said. “Now.”

“I still don't see why we can't put the hyena into me.”

Gods but Weirick was obsessed. “Demonic energies are the bane of mortal life, and I understand that we are working with animal energies, but in this context they function in the same manner. The hyena's spirit will, sooner or later, tear apart the body it inhabits. I believe I can mitigate those effects but you'd do well to wait until I fully understand the technique.”

“And why should I believe you?”

As part of their alliance, Giles had given Weirick access to his mansion, well to certain rooms within his mansion. “You are welcome to check in on the boy as often as you'd like. The deterioration should begin to be visible in less than a week. Within two weeks he'll be dead unless we remove the spirit from his body.”

Weirick nodded as if taking in Giles' words. “Alright.” The blue and white painting his face seemed more silly than terrifying although Heidi screamed so loudly she could almost be heard from behind
the gag as Weirick approached her. Although perhaps it was the machete she feared more than the man. Weirick raised the knife with a dramatic flourish. Heidi's chains rattled as she tried to move. Her blood splattered across the floor. Weirick stepped out of the circle. “YU BA YA SA NA!”

As Giles stared into the closest mirror, green energy flew across the room and settled into Kyle. Interesting. The spell was quite efficient. There was little extraneous energy.

“Did you learn what you needed to?” Weirick asked.

“It's a start.”

“You said I'd have a demon filling me with power.”

“A demon would burn you out in less than a day,” Giles replied. “Unless I can learn how to mitigate the effects.” The man wanted to hold Eyghon forever. It was absurd. No human frame could encase demonic energies for more than a day or two. Nothing Giles could do would change that. Weirick needn't know however. “I can arrange to transpossess you with a demon's energies for an evening. Next weekend perhaps? But it can't be in Sunnydale. And you'll need a specific tattoo.”

The quad had never seemed so bright and cheerful. When she'd moved to Sunnydale, Buffy'd thought she'd fit in with the popular crowd, but it just hadn't worked out. Mostly because they were mindless, spiteful bitches who didn't think about anyone but themselves. But now here she was, walking, if not hand-in-hand at least side-by-side, with Owen. “The future's so bright, I gotta wear shades.”

“Huh?”

And, okay, Owen didn't get the pop culture references, but that was an old one. “It's a song. Timbuk 3? MTV?”

“Oh, I don't follow a lot of pop music.”

It was nice that Owen didn't mind when he didn't get stuff. “It's not a particularly good song. Not much of a song at all, and the video was awful.”

“So, I was wondering about last night. You didn't hate it, right?”

That was the nice thing about Owen, one of the nice things, he cared whether or not she had fun. Angel didn't care about fun. He was all, let me be cryptic and then run away. “I didn't hate it.”

“You're not just saying that?”

“Nope. It was like velvet, all soft and nice. Velvety.”

“The horror movie was velvety?”

Oh, right, hack 'n slash. “Well, the blood was fake and it looked like they, um, might have used velvet to get that texture for some of the gore.”

His grin made even the sun seem dim. “You're such a mystery.”

“Mysterious me. Yay.”

“No, it's good. I like wondering what you're thinking.”
“I like that you like wondering what I'm thinking.”

There didn't seem to be much else to say, which was good because he was being all Oweny until he pulled out his pocket watch, and then he was still Oweny because it was Oweny to own a pocket watch. “I've gotta go. Don't want to be late for the first meeting.”

“Right. School literary mag. You go do that.”

“I'll see you tonight, at the Bronze?”

“I'll be there.”

“Great.” He smiled at her again.

Buffy stood and stared as he vanished around a corner.

“So, the movie went well?”

“Willow, you minx. How long have you been there?”

Buffy followed as Willow started toward the fountain where Xander was sitting. “Long enough to wonder what you saw last night.”

“Something, a movie. There was a guy and a knife. He died. And there was some other guy who was supposed to be his dad I think.”

“So you didn't love the movie.”

“No, but I loved being at the movie with Owen. That counts, right?”

“Definitely.”

As they joined Xander, Tor slinked by, looking over his shoulder as if something was chasing him. “Has anyone else noticed,” Buffy asked, “that the rest of the hyena-possessed gang don't seem to be doing so well?”

“They did eat the principal,” Xander said. “That's gotta be enough to give anyone indigestion, even Kyle and Tor.”

“But they don't remember that,” Willow said. “I mean, you don't remember, so why would they?”

“Of course, no memories, but, um, they were probably told about the whole pig thing. Maybe that's what's wigging them out.”

Buffy scanned the campus. “I haven't seen Kyle all day.”

“Count your blessings.”

“Xander, that's not nice.”

“Well, Wills, neither are they.”

“I'm sure they're okay,” Willow added. “They did lose a couple of days, I mean with not remembering and all. That's got to be wigsome in and of itself.”

Buffy continued scanning the campus. “I guess.”
The town of Seaview, an hour-and-a-half up the coast, differed from Sunnydale in only one important particular. It had no Slayer. Weirick had located a home, near the shore but hidden from its neighbors by vegetation and curving roads. The single occupant, an aging man, someplace in his seventies from the look of him, had been easily overwhelmed.

Giles had debated whether or not he should even bring Tucker. The lad was far too attentive when it came to the darker arts, but he was also lazy. The Latin of the ritual would be beyond him. It was safe enough and Giles preferred to have a minion perform the banal work. “You're certain we won't be interrupted?”

“I've been watching the place all day. Nobody comes up here.” Tucker nodded at the old man. “Anyway, if you're worried, we could beat the info out of him.”

“That won't be necessary.” Weirick leaned in close to the man. “He doesn't have any friends left, much less relatives concerned enough to check up on him.”

When Weirick had suggested a specific home, Giles had wondered if he had a connection to the occupant. Apparently the old man was someone who'd wronged him. Something to do with the zoo perhaps? “They can't trace you through him, can they?”

Weirick's shock would have been laughable if it were only his skin on the line. Apparently the idiot didn't realize he'd given away that he knew the old man. “No. No. It's been months. There's nothing to connect us.”

“Fine.” Giles should have known better than to let someone else pick the victim, but it was too late. The old man had seen his face. “You, set up the ritual space.”

Tucker grumbled but spread out the cloth with Eyghon's Mark. In the zoo, Weirick had set out the ritual space in paint, but Giles couldn't afford to have this mark seen. Weirick's Mark, now that was permanent. It was a risk, tattooing it onto the man, but it was insurance of a sort. If Weirick did decide to betray Giles, the demon could be drawn down into him and left there to eat the man from the inside out. It was a last resort, one Giles hoped he'd never have to use. The amount of damage that Eyghon would inflict in the area, before Weirick's body wore out, could draw the Council's attention. “Are you ready?”

Weirick nodded.

“Bring him.” As Tucker dragged the old man from his chair into the sacred circle, he rough-handled the man more than was necessary. He really was a malicious little brat. No wonder Eyghon wanted Tucker.

Giles held the man tightly to him. “Ex inferiore voraginibus sedete Eyghon resurgere. Agit de tenebris cor mundum Eyghon resurgere. A pessimo corde Eyghon resurgere.” He drew the knife quickly, cutting off the man's whimpers, sending the blood spurting across the demon's sigyl. “Consurget Eyghon. Consurget.”

Weirick writhed as the power transformed his body, and Giles wondered if Eyghon would, this time, finally kill him. If he didn't constrain the demon, it would have been destroyed decades earlier, but demons weren't big on logic or restraint. Eyghon had attacked him once, but hadn't killed him. As on the previous four times Giles had released Eyghon, it left him behind for more enticing targets. Weirick/Eyghon ran for the crowds partying on the beach. Youth. Sex. Drugs. They drew Eyghon like a siren's song.
“Cool. Can I follow?” Tucker sounded excited. Damn. Giles had hoped this show of power would teach the lad obedience, would show him what could be turned against him if he didn't obey. Giles should have known it would only excite the idiot.

“Certainly not.” Better to harness the lad's destructive power. He tossed the cloth, inked with Eyghon's mark and spattered with blood, to Tucker. “Here, burn this. Make certain there's nothing left but ash.”

“I don't see why he gets the demon,” Tucker grumbled. “I've been working with you longer than he has.”

“Because he's provided me with invaluable assistance. You have turned up nothing on either the Master or Angel. Prove your worth and then we'll see.”

Tucker didn't stop grumbling but he did keep his complaints down to a low mutter. Giles sighed. It was going to be a long night.

After he'd interviewed Miss Page, Cecil had forgone talking with any of the old biddies she might have told her stories too. He'd had his info from the horse's mouth. Why bother talking to … other mouths? … other parts of the horse? Cecil paused to shake the image out of his head. The point was, there were more interesting avenues to investigate. Ethan Rayne had been a hard one to turn up. In the end, Cecil'd had to actually offer money to the barkeep of some sordid dive.

The address took him to Wapping. The neighborhood seemed a bit dodgy but there was a new high-rise visible down the way and parked cars lining the road. The broken windows on the side of the auto shop suggested it had been abandoned long ago, but the metal gate had been unlocked and pulled to one side. Presumably some one was in, but Cecil doubted that someone wasn't Ethan Rayne.

Thinking back to Miss Page's words, Cecil wondered if he shouldn't consider himself lucky that he hadn't found the man. “Going to look him up? Ethan will be so pleased. He just adores pretty young things. You'd better bring a gun, if you care at all about your life.” Cecil couldn't imagine he'd need the cross in his right jacket pocket. It was the middle of the afternoon after all, and nothing Miss Page had said had suggested this Rayne fellow had been Turned, not that she would have known, being a civilian and therefore ignorant of the true facts about vampires.

“He just adores pretty young things.” Miss Page's words suggested that Rayne would consider Cecil himself a pretty young thing. Granted, Cecil was no hulking bruiser, but he wasn't a doe-eyed pansy either. He could take care of himself. Patting at the cross, Cecil wondered if he shouldn't have brought a gun, but no, this Rayne, assuming Cecil had even found him, couldn't be as bad as Miss Page had suggested. As Cecil knocked at the door, the metal frame rang hollowly. No one home. Ah well, he'd tried. Time to switch to some other tack.

The door opened. “Took you long enough.” The man was both taller and slimmer than Cecil. For all that his jacket was tossed over one shoulder, the man's suit had an Italian feel. It certainly didn't belong in an abandoned auto shop in Wapping. The shirt, a maroon so dark it was almost black, had a silken sheen that suggested femininity. The man – Ethan Rayne? – couldn't hurt a kitten. Cecil was sure of it.

“I don't believe I'm the man you're waiting for.” Cecil's search had been discrete. Rayne wouldn't have known Cecil was hunting him.
The man's moue suggested disappointment. “Then you're not Cecil Ashworth? How unfortunate. You look like you'd be ever so much fun.”

Bring a gun if you want to get out with your life she'd said, but Miss Page knew nothing of Cecil’s extensive training in the martial arts. Perhaps Rayne had been a threat in his younger days, when he'd been at the top of his form, but the man before Cecil just couldn't be dangerous. Still, how had the man known his name?

“Ah, I see that you are Mr. Ashworth. Uncertain how I outwitted your guerrilla tactics? I'm afraid stealth just isn't your forte. Please, do come in.”

Cecil's estimation of Rayne as a source dropped considerably. According to Miss Page, the man knew about the Watcher's Council which would suggest an esoteric knowledge of demons, but Rayne had invited him into the shop. Granted Cecil was standing in a spot of sunshine, but those in the know were in the habit of never offering verbal invites. Any black magic this man had been a part of would most likely have been drawn from that Crowley nonsense. Cecil followed Rayne into the shop.

The first room was empty, long stripped of any machinery and tools that had been put to use in its heyday. “The office, sparse as it has been left, is the most comfortable room.” Rayne led the way but then paused just outside the door. “After you.”

Cecil took one step into the office and fell to the floor. It took all his energy to turn and look up at Rayne. The man was chanting. Cecil's mind moved slow. The words … he should know these words … the words … words … were … Sumerian. A spell of binding. Ethan's chant released the fog in Cecil's mind but he couldn't seem to scramble away.

“Stand up.” Cecil rose. He couldn't help but rise to his feet, but he watched Rayne as he stood. The maroon shirt had seemed slightly feminine just minutes before but now the dark color reminded Cecil of dried blood. The slight smile gave way to a dark grin. “What ever shall we do with you?”

Rayne walked around him, staring so intently that Cecil, although still clothed, felt naked before him. “Hmm, you did come looking for Ripper.” Rayne leaned in close and whispered. “Do you know what he liked to do to pretty young things like you? I doubt you'd even believe how many young men we left torn and bleeding … but of course purely physical delights are far too unrefined for a scion of a Watcher's line. I could invoke something into you. Poor naive child, you are a virgin with men, yes? There are so many dark demons that would just eat you up. I'm afraid it would be …” Rayne paused and shrugged. “ … unpleasant for you, but the high I would get to experience. I could just float for days on it.”

Cecil found himself leaning over the desk with no idea of when he'd been moved. The room, which had been dark, was lit by dozens of candles, and Rayne was robed, holding an ancient tome, one that seemed to be bound in human skin. “What do you think of Dylylarth?”

Cecil's head jerked. He stared at the sorcerer, for Rayne most certainly had to be a dark sorcerer to know that name, but couldn't speak.

“Yes, not nearly dark enough. Granted there wouldn’t be enough left of you to scrape off the pavement, but he’d leave your soul completely untouched. No, we need a demon who'll corrupt you, take over your mind and soul but still let me play with your body, and after we can let you go, running home safe to Mama but you’d hardly be safe yourself by then. Do you think your Watchers would kill you out of mercy or keep you to study?”

It wouldn't be just any Watchers. It would be Alan Wyndam-Pryce. There would be no mercy.
Cecil's heart sank. Rayne would infect Cecil with a demon and Wyndam-Pryce would study him, torture him, for as long as he could keep Cecil alive.

Rayne turned a page. “Ah, Eyghon. Now that would have a certain symmetry, sort of an alpha and omega feel. I don't suppose they'd tell Rupert what demon you'd been infected with? Probably not. Unfortunate, that.”

“Please,” he wanted to say. “Please, I've done nothing to you. Please let me go.” He lips wouldn't move.

There was a sound of pounding, it seemed to be coming from inside his own head, but no. Cecil turned to listen. It was hollow, sounding much like the knock he'd made at the front door ages and ages ago.

Rayne turned to listen as well, which meant it wasn't in Cecil's head. “Backup?” Rayne asked. “I hadn't thought you smart enough, or was it you? Did Mama provide a chaperon, someone to keep you out of trouble?” He slammed the tome shut. “Ah well, so much for my fun then.”

Cecil listened to the pounding, wondering how long it would take his rescuers to get through.

“I could still kill you, you know.”

Cecil jerked his head up to stare at Rayne.

“But why bother. It's not as if you'll ever know anything. Even such a simple task as turning up Ripper's dirty secrets – and believe me, they are legion – is beyond you. Do take a word of advice. Run home to Mama. Stay safely hidden under her skirts. It really is the only thing you're good for.”
Angel

Chapter Notes

Note: Many thanks to Gill O for Brit-picking this chapter. She put in far more effort than I had any right to expect and I truly appreciate it.

Note: Thanks to Gill O and Il Mio Capitano for help with terms Giles might use for a police officer.

Note: And more thanks to Gill O, for pointing out that Long John Silver had a peg-leg and not an eyepatch. Buffy's mistake was originally mine!

What went before

- **Eyghon in Giles’ mind**: Eyghon is connected to Giles by a process called domination. Unlike possession, in which a demon takes over a human host, domination entails the creation of a psychic bond between the demon and its host. The demon does not inhabit the host but is, instead, connected to the host’s mind. The demon is, in effect, always in the back of the host’s mind, whispering directly into the host’s thoughts.

- **Giles’ split personalities**: Under the stress of Eyghon's influence, Rupert's personality has split into three. Rupert is closest to canon Giles and has the least contact with Eyghon. Giles is the personality in charge of protecting Rupert. Ripper takes care of any dirty work Giles needs done. To keep Eyghon from tormenting Rupert, Giles has agreed to give Eyghon access to the Slayer line.

- **Willow’s breaking taboos**: Giles, in order to control Willow’s power and make it his own, has put magical hooks into her that allow him to call on her magic at will. Because she’s an unskilled magic user, her power does not flow as easily as Giles would like. Meditative practices would improve the flow of her magic. In order to get her to meditate more often, Giles has introduced the girl to Tantra (in a “please don’t look at this forbidden book” kind of a way. This story is not going into a squicky adult/youth sex direction.) He expected she would take up solo sex meditative practices such as energy orgasms. Willow, intrigued by the sex magic but a little put off by them as well, has instead chosen to follow the book’s idea on breaking taboos.

- **Giles studying students possessed by the hyena spirit / Weirick invoking Eyghon**: When removing the hyenas from the students, Giles and Weirick came to an agreement: Weirick would help Giles study the effects of hyena possession by putting the hyena spirit back into one of the students and Giles would help Weirick gain the power he craved by possessing him with a demon. Because Giles used a modified ritual, Weirick’s possession did not last. Weirick, not satisfied with the deal, is invoking Eyghon into himself.

- **Who is Antonia Ashworth and what’s her vengeance deal against Giles all about?**: When Merrick was Buffy’s Watcher, the Council decided that the next two Watchers to be assigned to a Slayer would be Roderick Travers Ashworth and Rupert Giles, in that order. Giles, to gain access to the Slayer more quickly, invoked Eyghon to kill Roderick Ashworth. Antonia Ashworth, to prevent her son Cecil’s death by quest for vengeance, has taken over that quest for vengeance herself.

- **Well then, who is Cecil Ashworth and why’s he after Giles?**: Roderick Ashworth was Cecil’s uncle. Cecil believes that family honor demands
vengeance.

- **Okay but what about this Miller who’s meeting with Antonia Ashworth?**
  Cecil comes off as an ineffectual idiot. Antonia, worried that Cecil will be harmed on this vengeance quest, is allowing Cecil to think he’s building up evidence against Giles but it’s really Miller who’s doing the useful leg work. Miller is also in charge of keeping Cecil from getting hurt, a full time job in of itself!

- **Kris Mansfield:** Kris is the principal’s administrative assistant. She’s been investigating supernatural events in the school, for example Amy’s attacks on the cheerleaders. Buffy’s suspicious of Kris’ interest in these events but so far the only interesting info Willow has turned up is that Kris had been kidnapped as a child only to be found in her late teen years. Buffy does not know that Kris is aware of Slayers and Watchers.

- **Buffy’s homeroom in the library:** Giles set this up without giving Buffy a head’s up. Buffy is taking homeroom in the library. Giles expects her in an hour early so she can meditate. That's going about as well as you'd expect.

- **The Amulet of Dominion:** Giles has learned of an artifact, the Amulet of Dominion Over the Line of Aurelius, that will allow him to weaken any or all vampires of the Aurelian line. He plans to use this artifact to kill both the Master and Angelus, but he needs two items of information. First, the spell that activates the amulet and, second, the location of the amulet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Willow, for the third time, reviewed the books she'd pulled out for first period. Should she bring two notebooks? She probably wouldn't even use one, but what if she had an idea but didn't have the right notebook to write it down in and lost it forever? As she reached into her locker, a hand darted out and grabbed her wrist. “Xander!”

“Put the books back.”

“But …”

“Willow, we're going to the auditorium. You know, big announcement, new principal, no class this period.”

“But what if there's nothing to do? What if they get started late? Are we supposed to just sit there and do nothing?”

“Yes! That's the whole purpose of auditorium. You schmooze. You snooze. You don't study. Isn't that right Buffy?”

As Willow turned and gave Buffy a little wave, Xander grabbed her books and shoved them into her locker. “Hey!”

“Hi guys, what's up?” Buffy glanced between the two of them. “You're bookless. Why are you bookless? Better yet, why am I not?”

Willow pointed. “See, Buffy's got her textbook and her notebook too.”

“Because we have class,” Buffy replied as if stating the obvious. “You know, that place we go to learn?”
“Or in my case, pretend to,” Xander said.

“Oh, didn’t you hear?” Willow asked. “Next period is canceled. We're meeting the new principal. Wait, how did you not hear? It was announced during homeroom. Were you late? What's wrong? Why were you late?”

“No lateness, just meditating in the library instead of being in a homeroom I could actually enjoy. I probably just fell asleep and missed it. Meditating that early? So not my thing. Actually, meditating anytime, so not my thing.”

“Let me take those off your hands.” Xander stuffed Buffy's books into Willow's locker and swung the door shut.

Buffy grinned. “No class. Nice. So, what do we know about this new guy?”

“His name's Snyder,” Willow said. “That's about it.”

“I hear he used to be a prison warden.”

“Xander!”

“Hey, that's what I heard. He was too heavy on discipline for the California penal system and so they made him a high-school principal instead.”

Buffy laughed as they joined the crowd heading down the hall. “You made that up.”

“No, really, I got it from Ted Davis who probably made it up or maybe hallucinated it.”

“Hallucinated?”

“He's a big stoner,” Willow replied.

“Well,” Buffy shrugged. “How bad can he actually be?”

They took seats about a third of the way into the auditorium. “Do we have to sit this close to Cordelia?” Willow asked. “We can probably hear her from here and I sort of prefer not to.”

“What?” Xander's look said Willow was nuts. “She's like three rows up.”

“Two rows and anyway, I like sitting closer to the front.”

The lights dimmed over the seats and brightened on the stage. “Too late to move now,” Buffy whispered.


The man waved toward the wings as if calling someone out to join him. Miss Mansfield scuttled over. “Can't we illuminate the seats?” he asked. “If one of those hoodlums pulls a gun on me …” Feedback squelched through the room as Miss Mansfield's hand shot out and covered the microphone.

A bunch of the students started hooting at the stage. “We can hear you.” Someone made a rat-a-tat-tat noise as if firing a machine gun.

The man squinted at the crowd.
“With that lighting, he can't see us, right?” Buffy asked.

He and Miss Mansfield seemed to be having quite the energetic conversation. Throwing her hands in the air, the secretary bolted off the stage. The lighting didn’t change but the man started speaking anyway.

“As you thugs may have heard, I am your new principal. You will address me as Principal Snyder. I understand my predecessor wanted to make this school a pleasant experience for you. He wanted to be your friend. Well, that's the kind of liberal, messy thinking that gets people eaten. I do not want to be your friend. The purpose of school is to instill discipline, and that's what I intend to do. If you have a problem with my policies, well, don't because I don't want to hear it.”

Principal Snyder slowly turned his head as if he were scanning the student body. But school's supposed to be about knowledge and learning, Willow thought. He stopped and seemed to be glaring directly at her. Or discipline, that's good too.

Xander, and how could he be ignoring the principal like that, wagged a finger at Buffy. “No more burning down gymnasiums for you, missy.”

“It has come to my attention that Sunnydale is rife with violence: gangs on PCP, drugs hidden in lockers, smoking in bathrooms. This will stop on my watch. From now on, gang colors will be prohibited on campus. You may no longer wear the following: blue, black, green, brown, or purple. Oh, and red accessories are also unwelcome in my school. That will be all.”

The lights rose as he strode off the stage. Cordelia's voice, complaining of course, carried throughout the room but Snyder didn't seem to notice. “I know he didn't say black. How can he expect me to not wear black? It's the most slimming color.”

“And purple,” Harmony moaned. “I just bought the cutest purple blouse.”

“Harmony,” Cordelia interrupted. “What did I say about purple?”

“Oh, that it's slimming?”

“That it's meant for royalty. Who's the queen?”

“You are.”

“Who gets to wear purple?”

“Nobody apparently.”

“We’ll just see about that.”

“Okay,” Buffy said. “That was odd.”

“And you two mocked my theory that he used to be a prison warden.”

“You know you can't wear blue jeans anymore, right?” Willow replied.

“What?”

“That's true,” Buffy agreed. “According to the new warden, blue's right out.”

“He's a principal, not a warden,” Willow said.
“In this case, I'm not so sure there's a difference.”

***

When Weirick had uncovered the room, it hadn't been the squalor as much as the room’s outright existence that had left him dumbstruck. That as modern a zoo as Sunnydale’s would have an abandoned storage space, even one full of the detritus of decades, was as surprising as it was useful. It had taken him days to clear the space. An Egyptian fruit bat, badly preserved, had crumbled at his touch, adding to the dust. The posters describing the decreasing habitat of the black rhinoceros had been easier to clear away although they had sent dust bunnies flying when he'd picked them up. The multicolored mats, artifacts from some extinct play area, were cracked and rigid where they should have been pliable. They were also too large to move without being seen. He'd had to wait for the cover of darkness to discard them.

The paint, so ancient it flaked off at a touch, he'd attacked with soap and water. The concrete floor he’d mopped with bleach. Weirick didn't need the room to be pristine, but he did want it clean before he started in on the desecration.

For the Primal ceremony, the sacred circle had been red, his robe blue, and his face painted both white and blue. Nothing he’d read had said Eyghon’s color was black, but that had been the color Giles had tattooed on his arm so Weirick had chosen black paint for the mark, not a glossy black that would reflect light but a dark pit of a black.

Eyghon’s mark, taller than it was wide, possibly depicted a stylized demon with two arms upraised although what the curled whorls might be, Weirick couldn’t tell, not that it mattered. The mark had to be drawn out exactly. He didn’t have to know what, if anything, it meant. Weirick marked the space carefully, measuring and laying out the image in chalk first.

Before dipping the brush into the paint, Weirick thought back to the night on the beach. He’d been filled with Eyghon’s power. He’d followed the light, the bright splash of a beach fire, an illusory flash of safety on a darkened coast. He’d followed the sound, rock boom boom booming in a primal pulse. But most of all he’d followed the scent, the spice of sex in the air.

Weirick dipped the brush into the paint and started from the bottom, from the curved claws of Eyghon’s feet. On the beach, he’d stepped out of the darkness, behind his first victim, had wrapped two claws around as if hugging from behind, and in one movement had ripped through both neck and gut. He’d faded back into the darkness before the slow-witted ones had realized they were under attack. The boy had fallen to the ground and then the screaming had started.

He dipped the brush again and started on the first of the whorls. Once his prey had started running, he’d stepped into the light. The blind ones, slow ones, had-fallen-to-the-ground ones, hadn't seen him in the darkness. He'd wanted them to know what was coming. He’d strangled one with the guts of another. He’d shoved a heart into a mouth until a boy had choked on the blood of his lover.

Weirick carefully painted the arms raised in victory. The last of his prey, a girl, miraculously alive, he’d dragged to the shoreline and further so that the salt-laden waves had lapped over her dying body, fallen back, and then lapped over her again. Those screams, ah, yes, he’d almost been able to taste those screams. But the power had faded and the call had drawn him up the hills to the room where the dark priest, the one who was no true disciple, had waited. Not yet, Eyghon had whispered when Weirick had thought to kill. I have need of this one, but you may call on me again.
Weirick stood over the mark he had painted. The dark image seemed to call out the demon’s name: Eyghon, Eyghon, Eyghon. Weirick stood and knew his time had come. “The power will be mine.”

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The hyena's spirit had ravaged Kyle's body as fiercely as any purely physical beast could have. The skin around the boy's joints, inflamed and red, practically pulsed. His muscles, twisted and clenched, could no longer hold him upright. His throat, too sore to support screams, gave forth little more than faint whimpers. Giles calculated that if this decline continued unchecked, Kyle would be dead in two, possibly three, days.

The other lad, Tor, Giles had carried in that evening. He'd dumped the boy on a drop cloth in the center of the basement, far from the cage. Unlike Kyle, Tor was heavily drugged. Valium, Giles had learned, sedated the body without restricting its energy flow. On the drop cloth, Giles had painted an ancient symbol, one which would direct free-flowing energy into the cage.

The chant, ancient Greek, flowed easily from Giles' tongue. Even heavily drugged, Tor reacted to the pain as his energy flowed, quickly and visibly, into Kyle. In less than a minute, Tor was dead. Kyle's skin, while still ruddy, was no longer inflamed, and his body, no longer clenched in agony, lay sprawled across the concrete.

The ritual had worked. The influx of Tor's life energy had stabilized the possessed body although the benefit wouldn't last. The hyena's spirit would soon start overwhelming Kyle's body again, but the ritual was a step in the right direction. Periodic infusions of life could slow and even reverse the deterioration of a possessed body. The next step would be to stop the transfer of energy before it killed the donor. If that proved possible then a magic user, if powerful enough, might be used to keep a body from deteriorating for months, possibly even for years. Once he understood the process, he'd have to try with that Madison girl.

An image of Willow flashed through Giles' mind. “No,” he said. “She's mine.”

Giles fell, screaming. Whose? the demon asked.

“Yours. She's yours.”

The demon kept him there, gasping in pain for what seemed an eternity, although the hour wasn't terribly late when Giles rose from the floor to stumble out of the mansion. As he parked below his apartment, his head was still throbbing, but that wasn't unusual after one of Eyghon's punishments. His answerphone, blinking unmercifully, didn't help ease his headache.

“Giles? It's Buffy.” She gave her name as if he couldn't recognize her by voice alone. After a pause, she continued. “I guess you're not there? Um, we were attacked outside the Bronze by three vamps. Well, no, I mean I was attacked. Angel stepped in to help. So by we I mean me and also that Angel stepped in to save me.”

Save her? The Slayer shouldn't need help with three vampires. Perhaps he should rethink her training regime.

“Giles? These vamps? They were hairy strong.” Her voice became muffled as if she'd stepped away from the phone to speak with someone else. Three guesses as to whom she'd be discussing a vampire attack with. “I mean the vamps were strong,” she continued. “Stronger than usual. They had me
pinned. If Angel hadn't stepped in, I don't know what would have happened.’” After another pause, she added, “Um, I guess I'll see you tomorrow.”

Three vampires strong enough to defeat the Slayer. Giles thought of bed and sighed. Apparently he was spending another long night at the library. And Buffy'd had another visitation from the mysterious Angel. Damn!

***

Willow ducked behind a parked car and stared at the brick expanse of the high-school. Maybe she shouldn't have worn the Hello Kitty t-shirt, but she was trying to break taboos and gang colors were not allowed which sort of made them taboo, right? This t-shirt, with the white silhouette of Hello Kitty, was the only black she had. Did the bow count as a red accessory if it was part of the design on the shirt?

She had to move. The bell was about to ring and then she'd be late. She'd never been late. What if they called home and Mom wanted to know why she'd been late? She couldn't explain that it'd been because she was worried about wearing gang colors to school. But what if they sent her home because she was wearing gang colors? A bell rang. She had only ten minutes to get to class. Willow darted across the street and dashed up the stairs, dodging other students. Maybe if she kept moving nobody'd notice she was wearing gang colors.

All through homeroom, Willow could feel everyone's eyes on her even though no one said anything. I'm getting away with it, she thought. This isn't hard at all. In fact, it feels sort of powerful. Hey, yeah, rebel here. What are you staring at? Never seen a powerful rebel woman before? Wait, was Xander saying something? “What?”

“I asked if you were up for a bit of cockroach slaying this evening. You know, fumigation party? Bronze?”

“Oh, um, sure.” Hey, maybe she could wear black to the Bronze. Oh, um, except black clothes and red accessories weren't taboo outside of school.

“Do you think Buffy'll be there?”

“Why wouldn't she?”

“More to the point,” Xander added. “Do you think she'll be too busy mooning over Angel to notice me? Us, I mean us.”

Ooh, Angel wore black, lots of black. Was it the black that made Angel so mysterious in that slightly dangerous kind of a way? Maybe that's why nobody had commented on her t-shirt. Maybe she was giving off a dangerous mystery-woman vibe.

“Willow. Willow!”

“What?”

“What do you mean what? You're totally zoning out. What's wrong with you today?”

“Nothing. I just have a lot of thoughts in my mind as I sometimes do.”
“Yeah, but they usually don't make you quiet.”

Ooh, maybe the black was making her taciturn just like Angel was taciturn. Wow, this taboo breaking thing was really effective if it was changing her this fast.

The bell rang before she could explore this idea further. As they walked to class Willow glanced from side-to-side, looking to see if anyone was turning away from her t-shirt. She hadn't caught anyone at it, but they sort of had to be what with black being a taboo color and all. Maybe the black was sort of projecting itself ahead so everyone knew to look away before she could spot them at it or … or maybe they were gossiping about her. Maybe it was all over the school that she, Willow Rosenberg, was not only wearing a taboo color but also getting away with it.

“Well, and look who's all gang-colored up today.”

Oh, Xander finally got the courage? Oh, no, he was talking to Cordelia.

“Like I'm going to let anyone tell me what to wear.” Cordelia had on black pants, a purple shirt and, over that, a blouse in a pattern of purple, blue, and silver.

Willow looked around. Everyone was staring at Cordelia. Nobody had even noticed the black t-shirt or Hello Kitty's red accessory. But why wouldn't they? It was a very black t-shirt, almost entirely black with just a touch of white. Maybe Hello Kitty acted as a kind of cuirass, a kind of body armor, except rather than blocking swords it blocked gazes so that nobody saw she was wearing a taboo color. Or maybe it was just her, Willow Rosenberg, invisible girl.

***

Rupert woke with a crick in his neck. High-school furniture did not make for a comfortable bed. Blurry-eyed, he glanced up at the clock before jumping to his feet. It was well into first period. Knowing that Buffy was categorically unable to let him sleep, he could only conclude she'd missed homeroom. Had she been attacked on patrol? Was she still alive? The halls flew by in a blur as he raced to her class. As he peered through the window, he saw her sitting there, next to Willow and behind Xander, barely paying attention to the lesson. He knocked on the door and asked if he could see her in the hallway.

“Giles! What are you doing? You can't just walk into a class and ask for me. It looks bad. It looks suspicious, like why are you paying so much attention to me?”

“You missed homeroom.” He was bluffing. For all he knew she'd been to homeroom, found him sleeping, and had decided to skip her meditation session.

“I was late. Didn't get in until first period. Sorry. You try getting out of the house on-time when you're sneaking around and hiding a guy in your bedroom.”

“You were what? Hiding a man from your mother? Buffy, I know you want to have a life outside of Slaying but bringing home a young man, on a school night, right under your mother's nose …”

“It wasn't a guy, it was Angel.”

Oh, and that made it better.
“After he saved me. I couldn't let him go outside. What if those three vamps were still waiting?”

“Saved you? Three vampires?”

She peered toward his skull. “What? Did you hit your head last night? Three unusually strong vampires? Angel saved me? I thought you were looking stuff up.”

Damn. Why couldn't the bastard who took over his body ever leave notes? “Ah, of course. I left the library without my morning tea. Still a bit groggy. But I was worried when you didn't make homeroom.”

“Worried, huh?” She crossed her arms and stared up at him. “First period's gonna end in about ten minutes. You're just checking up on me now?”

“Unlike you, I was working all evening, researching.”

“Come up with anything?”

Damn. He hadn't looked at the books scattered across the table. “We'll discuss it at lunch.” She didn't look convinced. “You ought to get back to your class.”

Three vampires, unusually strong. He could only hope that the relevant texts hadn't been reshelved.

***

Recalling the last time the children had been in the library while he was eating, Rupert waited until Buffy’s lunch period had started before ordering his own meal to ensure that his food would arrive after she was firmly ensconced in her next class. There had been absolutely no need for her to insinuate that his wilted rocket was some sort of slime demon. She'd even turned her nose up at the Yellowfin Tuna dusted with Herbes de Provence, asking if his fish, a gourmet delight of a meal, wasn't a tad too stinky. Never again. Even if he had missed breakfast, he could wait until after their meeting to eat his own lunch.

Setting down the phone's receiver, he heard Xander calling from the other room. “Giles? You here?” Rupert rolled his eyes. Where else did the boy expect him to be?

He stepped out of his office and cringed to see Xander inadvertently dusting the library’s table with orange … Giles wasn’t sure what it was, food presumably given how the boy was shoving the offending substance into his mouth. As Xander reached into a bag - orange and red with the word Cheetos blazoned across in bright yellow lettering - Rupert thought about grabbing a paper plate but then thought better of it. A plate was far too small to contain that orange mess of dust. He’d stepped behind the counter to hunt up a newspaper when Xander, oblivious to his presence, spoke up in a girlish falsetto. “Oh, Angel, I'm cold.” The falsetto gave way to something deep but mocking. “Well here, baby, take my jacket. Looks better on you anyway.”

When Rupert, joining Xander at the table, stepped into his line of sight, the boy leaped to his feet, tossing orange somethings high into the air. They fell not only onto the table but onto two of the chairs and the floor as well. “Jeez, G-Man, can't you wear a bell?”

“Xander.” Rupert pinched the bridge of his nose. Did the boy always have to devastate his library? “Shouldn't you be having your lunch, such as it is, in the cafeteria?”
“Buffy said we'd be going over the three ugly vamps who'd attacked her last night.”

Expecting that Xander wouldn't think to clean up after himself, Rupert went to fetch a broom and dustpan. He returned to find Xander picking up the loose crisps and tossing them out, the ones from the floor at least; the others he seemed prepared to eat. “Here,” Rupert said, handing the broom and dust-pan over. “This will make the clean-up easier. If we're discussing vampires, shouldn't Buffy be here?"

“They're still at Willow's locker, gossiping about Angel and his perfect hair and his perfect jacket which Buffy won't take off.”

Rupert had walked to the far end of the table, far from the orange dust, but Giles stopped before he could sit down. “Angel was at the Bronze?” Buffy hadn't told him that. In fact, she'd flat out told him Angel had appeared after she'd been attacked.

“Huh? No, no, she was just wearing his jacket because apparently she can't take it off.”

“That's Angel's jacket she's been wearing?” That would explain why it was too large for her.

“Yeah, and who goes around exchanging clothes on a balmy night anyway?”


“See?” As Xander dumped the bits of pseudo-food into the trash, orange flakes fell from the dustpan onto the floor. Giles decided to ignore it for now. No need to distract the boy at a crucial moment. “Me either,” Xander continued. “I'm big with the not trusting, but the girls, they think he's the cat's pajamas.”

“Would you be willing to, er, share any information you learn about Angel?”

Xander dropped the dustpan by the bin. “You want me to spy on him?” He sounded pleased.

“I don't want you following Angel himself. We don't want to arouse his suspicions, but if either of the girls happen to mention any useful details to you, I'd like to hear them. Buffy knows I don't share her high opinion of Angel.”

“She knows I don't like him either,” Xander said.

“But you're a student where I'm a figure of authority. She'd share things with you that she'd never tell me, and of course if Buffy were unwilling to share information, it's likely Willow would.” Given the girl's inexplicable infatuation with Xander, Giles didn't believe she could keep anything from the boy.

“Oh, yeah, that's true,” Xander mused. “Deal.” Xander held out his hand and they shook on it. Giles resisted the temptation to wipe his hands clean of the orange dust.

“Have you learned anything about Angel?”

“He's buff,” the boy replied. “She'd never said he was buff. Oh, and Willow said something about a tattoo, uh, on his back.”

“How does she know that?”

By his expression, Xander hadn't wondered about it. “Not sure. It's new info though. It wasn't a
subject of conversation before today."

“Buffy must have seen it last night, at her house.”

“Yeah, at Buffy's house, that makes …” Xander's voice rose in outrage. “He was at her what?”

“Apparently he'd spent the night.”

Xander's indignation was all that he could hope for. “Oh, well, that's just … I mean, what was she thinking, bringing him home?”

“I'm sure I don't know, but back to this tattoo.” He should get a description before Buffy arrived. She certainly wouldn't appreciate his investigation.

“First they're swapping clothes and then he's spending the night …”

“Xander.”

“Who knows what kind of shenanigans they'll get up to next …”

“Xander!”

Xander shut up but stared at Giles as if he were the one being unreasonable. “What?”

“This tattoo, do you know anything more …”

“Hey Giles, what's the sitch?” And of course Buffy arrived, with Willow trailing behind, at the worst moment possible.

“You brought Angel into your house? A guy you know nothing about, and he was in your house?”

“Well, yeah,” Buffy said as she and Willow crossed the room. “Those guys were still outside, or, well, they might have been. He slept over.”

“He spent the night? In your room? In your bed?”

“Not in my bed.” Buffy didn't sound amused. “By my bed.”

“That's so romantic,” Willow added. “There all night and a perfect gentleman.”

“Buffy, c'mon, wake up and smell the seduction. It's the oldest trick in the book.”

“What?” Buffy asked. “Saving my life? Getting slashed in the ribs?”

“If we could,” Giles interrupted. “I'd like to get back to the three vampires you failed to defeat.” With a grimace, he brushed orange dust off the book he'd left on the table. He opened it to the page he'd marked. “Did they look like this?”

“Yeah. What's with the uniforms?”

“It seems you encountered the Three. Warrior vampires, very proud and very strong.”

“How is it you always know this stuff?” Willow asked. “You always know what's going on. I never know what's going on.”

“You didn't spend the night engaged in research.”
“No,” Willow replied. “I was sleeping.”

“Alone, right?” Xander added. “Unlike someone we could name.”

“What is it with you?”

Giles interrupted before Xander could tear off on his obsessive tangent. “I understand you saw a tattoo.”

“Oldest trick in the book,” the boy muttered.

“Well, yeah, but it wasn’t because Angel was being all seductive.” Buffy glared at Xander until he wilted before her. “God, Xander. He was injured, and I was there with bandages and stuff.”

So much for avoiding Xander’s tangent. “Would you describe the tattoo please.”

“Black ink, no color. ‘The letter ‘A’, a capital letter, not a small one, and above that, um, a sort of bird, but not really a bird. I mean, it had feathers, sort of, but its feet were more like animal feet and its head, well, it had animal ears?’”

“I don’t suppose you could provide a tad more detail about the ears.”

“Huh?”

“Rabbit ears, cat ears, giraffe ears?”

“Ooh, ooh, big floppy elephant ears?” Willow inserted excitedly.

“Uh, I don’t know,” Buffy replied. “Ear ears. You know, like animal ears.”

Was the girl honestly that unobservant? “So good to know you were paying attention. Anything else?”

“Like a distinct lack of shirt?” Xander muttered.

Giles beat Buffy to the punch. “Xander!” When he had the boy’s attention, he added, “Finish cleaning up your mess.”

“What mess?”

Giles pointed at the trash can.

Staring at the bin, Xander said, “I ask again, what mess?”

“The dust from your nasty orange things. Get it off the floor.” Xander stared at Giles, not moving. “Now!”

“All right, all right, no need to get your panties in a bunch.”

Giles turned back to Buffy. “What else did you notice about this tattoo?”

“Nothing, that’s it.” She turned her glare on him. “Hey, wait a minute. You’re researching Angel. You still think he’s a baddie.”

“Buffy, I’ve explained my reservations …”

“Shouldn’t we be worrying about, oh I don’t know, the real threat? These Three guys?”
“Not really. The Three, having failed, will offer their own lives in penance.”

“You mean they’re gonna kill themselves?” Willow sounded upset. “Which, I mean, okay, fewer vampires, so good, but, um, also sort of icky.”

“With vampires, ritualized murder is more likely but, basically, yes. I’m more concerned about the Master. He’s trapped and I therefore assumed he wasn’t a danger to Buffy, but given that he’s called on the Three, I’m afraid I must revise my opinion.”

“Giles? English?”

Willow replied. “Because we defeated the Master at that Harvest thing, leaving him trapped in that magical bubble, we thought he couldn’t do any more damage, but now we know he can.”

“Um, yes, thank you Willow.” Giles turned to Buffy. “We must step up your training with weapons. We will work an extra hour each night until this situation has been resolved.”

“An extra hour? Giles, I don't have time now.”

“Buffy.”

“Fine.” She grabbed her bag. “But I'm getting to class before you decide to give me anything else to do. Oh, unless you want to work this extra hour in during the day, say during biology?”

When Giles declined, Buffy sailed out with Willow in her wake.

“You should give her more to do.”

“What?”

Xander had, surprisingly, removed all the orange dust from the floor. “Buffy. If she has time to run into Angel outside the Bronze, then she can make more time for Slaying, and I’d really, really appreciate if you didn’t tell Buffy I said that.”

***

The journals of past Watchers could not be kept in the high-school library where anyone might get their hands on them. Unfortunately that left Giles' research into the Master at a temporary standstill. He’d considered returning home, abandoning the library for the remainder of the day. It wasn't as if the students actually borrowed books. But he'd scheduled a sparring session with Buffy after school. Perhaps one of the texts to hand might have something on that tattoo she'd described.

He found nothing on the tattoo. By the end of the school day, his research had devolved into skimming through *Fallen Angels and Spirits of the Dark*, a text so inaccurate that it only missed being incomprehensible because absolutely no one could have organized it into a coherent whole.

And so Buffy's arrival actually came as a relief. “One Slayer reporting for fighting practice,” she said with a militarily snap before adding a muttered “as if I really need it” just loud enough that he could hear.

Giles took a deep breath, releasing only some of his anger, as he rose to his feet. “Buffy.”
“But Giles, I don't need extra training. Those three vamps …”

“The Three nearly defeated you, and yet you expect me to believe you're prepared for battle?”

“I, uh, fine. What do you want me to do?”

“Start with punching: jabs, cross punches, and uppercuts. A thousand of each.”

For a moment he thought she might object but she dropped her books onto the table and started in on her training exercises. Her speed and technique would barely have been called adequate in a Watcher much less in a Slayer. Giles found himself wishing that Lothos had managed to kill this Slayer. Unfortunately the past couldn't be changed. To make up for her inadequacies, he added even more training time to her schedule. It was his duty to keep the Slayer alive and by the Gods, he would do so.

Unfortunately the additional training meant that Giles returned to his research later than he'd expected. By the time he'd set himself up in the mansion's library, the clock had struck seven. It was close to striking two before he found a relevant entry, a reference to one Aaron Main, a dark sorcerer who had used a tattoo to create the seed of a curse. The text didn't clearly describe what that might mean but it did lead Giles to a journal written by Main himself. It took nearly ninety minutes to find the relevant passage, dated 13 November 1803.

The convent of Blessed Saint Bridget had conjoined both prosperity and piety in perfect harmony before the arrival of the damned beast, the vampire Angelus, son of the ancient and dread Aurelian line. Wreaking his evil on all who dwelt there, the demon spared none, killing all from the Abbess on high down to the lowliest urchin living in the village nearby, not deigning to spare my daughter, my darling girl who, having rejected the dark magics I had devoted my study to, had given her life to God. The demon took her from God and took her from me. I vowed to have my revenge.

The location of this boastful and dissolute creature was not difficult to ascertain. After only five nights, he separated himself, temporarily, from his companions, other vampires I had no quarrel with. The trap took patience in its preparation but once sprung, the vampire was under my control. Using arcane arts I called down the vengeance of God himself and sealed it with a great marking: Aleph, the beginning, under a creature of myth, the Gryphon, that mighty beast which combines of Our Lord's strength in the body of a lion and His all-seeing vigilance in an the eye of an eagle. God's will shall never lose sight of Angelus until he stands in the very path of God's wrath and then the curse which I have laid upon him shall come to its full fruition. The fool laughed when I explained my great purpose. Let him laugh. The humanity that he'd discarded, as one sloughs off a worn strumpet in the street, that humanity shall devour him in the end.

But I cannot lay the blame for the destruction of the convent solely at the demon's feet. I cannot lose the dread fear that it was a punishment for my sins meted out on innocent flesh and so, now that I know my daughter will be avenged through God's grace, I have renounced my evil ways and will spend the remainder of my life praying for this wicked and dissolute world under a vow of silence.

Giles grabbed the phone. He had to warn Buffy. He wasn't certain what this curse might be, but he was certain that Angelus, one of the most dreaded vampires ever documented, was Buffy's Angel. She picked up on the first ring. “Buffy, this Angel …”

“… is a vampire.”

“You knew?” No, she couldn't have. “How long have you known?”

She spoke in a monotone. “After patrolling. He was still here.”
“Did he hurt you?” Did he kill you? Are you still my Slayer? No, she couldn't be both speaking and dead. Vampires didn't rise immediately.

“Uh, no. He left.”

“Pack a bag. I'll be right over.”

“What?” Her monotone gave way to a shriek. “I can't just leave.”

“Buffy, your home isn't safe. You've invited a vampire in. You'll have to stay here until you've slain him.”

“My mother lives here. I'm not leaving her alone.”

“Buffy, listen to me . . .”

“No. I'm not even sure he's evil. He could have killed me. He didn't.”

“Of course, because vampires never toy with their prey.”

“No, Giles. Something's going on here. I need to know more.”

“Know more? Fine! In 1803 he destroyed an Irish convent. He killed every single person in the local village, down to infants in their cribs. Is that enough or shall I describe how he raped the nuns before murdering them?”

“No.” He had to strain to hear her. “You don't have to describe the . . . anything. But there's something off. He didn't even hurt me Giles, and he could have. I need to know why before I can even think about killing him.”

She hung up. Giles found himself staring at the phone. She wanted information? Fine. He'd give her information. He turned to his books. “What do we know about Angelus?”

***

Giles had taken Buffy's habitual lateness into account when organizing his ammunition. Out of the hundreds of documented incidents attributed to the vampire Angelus, Giles had pared down to the few dozen most likely to unsettle a teenage Californian girl. He'd just settled the last book in place as she swung through the library doors with not only a coffee to hand but some sort of revolting sticky delicacy as well.

“Giles, I know what you're going to say, sugar bad, but I need the whole extra boost to keep me awake for that meditation thingy.”

Did she honestly believe they wouldn't be discussing Angelus? “As you will, in fact, not be meditating this morning, I'm certain you will have no trouble remaining awake.”

“We're sparring?”

Those two words told him she was being deliberately dense. Still, if she had chosen to be this recalcitrant, it might be best to ease into the subject. He gestured to the library's main table. “Would I have laid out this many books if I'd meant to spar?”
Buffy fell into her chair with a pout. “Giles, you know I'm no good at research.”

“Not research per se. I took care of that last night. Think of it more as a …” Hmm, lecture might not be his best word choice given Buffy's lack of interest in academic pursuits. “… information sharing.”

“That sounds like fun.” Buffy took a bite of her cake as she rolled her eyes.

“Hair-raising, more likely.” He remained standing. A height difference, higher over lower, suggested authority. Although he did not need a volume to hand, he picked one up and opened it as if to read. The written word had an authority that mere speech did not. “In 1753, the destruction of a small town not far from the port city of Galway triggered an investigation by … well, the Council sent a team to investigate. Evidence suggested the involvement of no more than two or three vampires.”

“Vampires?” She dropped her breakfast and folded her arms across her chest.

Right, don't use Angelus' name just yet. “The fledgling, one Liam Conneely, is believed to have caused most of the damage. It is not uncommon for fledges to go on rampages just after they've risen.” No one had ever proven that Angelus had been behind that specific attack, but that was hardly Giles' concern at the moment. The attack had been attributed to Angelus. That was enough. Giles didn't need proof to convince Buffy. She would believe what he told her.

“Liam had reserved the most gruesome deaths for his own family as, again, is often the case with fledges. Evidence suggests the mother had been half-hanged multiple times.”

“Wait,” Buffy said. “Half-hanged?”

“Yes, a rope is pulled tightly around the victim's neck but then slackened when the victim loses consciousness. The victim is revived and the rope is tightened again.”

“Ugh, so it's like being killed over and over?”

“Exactly. We believe the father was forced to watch. While the mother's death was relatively easy, a mere snap of the neck …”

Buffy interrupted again. “This Liam snapped his own mother's neck?”

“Buffy, you've been a Slayer for more than a year. Please tell me you're not just now learning how vicious these creatures can be.”

“This is about Angel, isn't it?”

Giles returned to the book. “An elaborate design was stitched onto his sister's skin. Given the contortions of her corpse, the threads had been stitched into living flesh. It's not clear what tortures were performed on the father before he was eaten, alive, by rats.”

Buffy leaped up from her seat. “Giles, I do not need to hear this.”

Giles picked up a second book. “In the convent of St. Gobnait, thirty-two nuns were raped and killed, presumably in that order. The Abbess, skinned alive, seems to have been saved for last …”

“Giles. No.”

He picked up another book. “Valentine's Day. Nailed a puppy to the …”

“I don't need to hear about the puppy.”
“Yes, you bloody well do! You can’t disregard your duty merely because one of these creatures has blinded you to …”

“He's Angel, isn't he? This Liam, he's Angel.”

“In the late eighteen-hundreds, two girls were killed and laid out, as if sleeping ….”

“That's enough.” Buffy bolted from the room, leaving coffee, cake, and even handbag behind.

“Buffy! Wait.” By the time he'd reached the hall, she'd vanished. Gods. He'd expected her to be disturbed, disgusted possibly, but not seriously discombobulated. Did she honestly believe she cared for this monster?

***

Buffy would have thought with that 'hyena taking over Xander' thing that she'd had enough of wild animals, but when she ran from school, her steps took her to the zoo, which was a lot more hectic than the last time even taking into account that whole transpossession ritual. Police blocked the entrance, keeping out a crowd of what mostly seemed to be people who'd been in the zoo based on the souvenirs: t-shirts, caps, balloons, and stuffed animals. A teacher, calling out to a bunch of high-schoolers, trying to draw them away from the entrance, didn't seem to be having much success. Three guys were standing on tiptoe as if the extra inch of height was really going to give them that much more of a view. Another, who'd climbed the decorative fence, had one foot on a dolphin and another on a bear's back.

“Hey, you! Get down from there.” It was zoo guy doing all the shouting. He had to know what was up. Buffy waved to get his attention but he must not have seen because he ran over to talk to the cops. Buffy stepped closer, hiding herself in the crowd, to listen. “The Hyena House has been checked. My assistant, Hickman, went through the basement of the Visitor's Center while Kawaguchi and I checked out the other levels. I'd suggest focusing the search on the enclaves of the carnivores. If she's hidden in some nook in the bird enclave, she'll be safe until we find her. If she's someplace where a tiger can get at her, we want to find her sooner rather than later.”

The officer seemed to agree with zoo guy's suggestion. “All right. Let's spread out.”

Buffy, noting the direction zoo guy had headed off, raced around the side of the zoo until no one was in sight and leaped the fence. Right, now to find zoo guy without getting caught. The foliage wasn't really leafy enough to hide her well. Luckily everyone was too busy running around to notice. When she did find him, he and some other guy, younger and also wearing a zoo t-shirt, were heading toward the grizzly bears. It didn't look like younger guy was about to up and vanish so Buffy stepped out of the trees. “Hey, the zoo sort of just emptied. What's up with that?”

She could see zoo guy recognizing her. “Kawaguchi, you go on,” he said. “Get Hickman to help you get started on the bear enclaves while I escort Sarah sunshine here to the exit.”

Zoo guy waited until Kawaguchi was out of sight. “What are you doing here?”

Buffy wasn't sure why she felt defensive. “Nothing, I mean, I was in the neighborhood and I saw the big police presence. What's up? Please tell me it isn't the hyenas.”

After glancing toward the bear exhibit, zoo guy motioned Buffy to follow him the other way. “The
hyena's are locked up tight. It's just a lost child. I mean, it's not that a lost child isn't serious, but children wander off all the time. She'll turn up, safe and sound.”

Buffy thought about Angel, but he couldn't get at the girl during the day and he'd been with her last night. “When did this happen?”

“Her mother reported it about ten minutes ago.”

Good, not Angel. Still, something didn't feel right but there wasn't anything obviously wrong. It was subtle, nuanced. Hey, score with the vocab word. “You always call in this many cops for business as usual?”

“I didn't say we weren't worried. Obviously we want to find her as quickly as possible. You never know. There are all kinds of freaks out there.”

Buffy was reminded of the Stranger Danger lectures they'd had in elementary school. “Oh. Ugh. Are you sure she'll be okay?”

“The quicker we find her, the better.” They turned a corner and – hey! – zoo guy had led her back to the entrance guarded by the three cops she'd seen earlier. Zoo guy raised his voice so the cops could hear. “Which is why I need you to exit the zoo. We need to focus on finding this girl.”

Buffy found herself on the other side of the cops. That hadn't been friendly. Zoo guy knew she was the Slayer. He should have wanted her help, except, maybe, then he'd have to keep explaining why some random high-school girl was part of his search team.

Catching one of the cops staring, Buffy wandered across the street, wondering if she should bring this to Giles. Right, because Mr. 'don't trust your instincts Buffy' was going to be any help. It didn't seem right, standing here and doing nothing, but zoo guy probably had the sitch covered. It was the middle of the day and public. Not a hot spot or hot, uh, time for demonic activity.

***

As Owen climbed the steps to the front door, he hoped it'd be Buffy, and not her mother, who answered. Parents didn't seem to like poets and, granted, he wasn't a poet himself but he seemed to be tarred with the same brush. It wasn't fair. They all just assumed he'd go all Byron on their girls, but Emily Dickinson had been a virgin her whole life and she was as much a poet as Byron. Maybe Buffy hadn't mentioned the poetry to her mother.

Owen knocked on the door. He stood and waited. The lights were on but nobody came to the door. When he pushed on it, to knock again, the door opened. “Buffy? Hello?” Still, no one answered. He stepped into the house, wondering if he shouldn't lock the door behind him. This wasn't a bad neighborhood but still, leaving it unlocked when nobody was around, that didn't seem like a great idea.

He heard a noise, something hitting the floor, from further into the house. As he stepped forward, Owen wished he had a weapon, a bat or something, but that was stupid. This was Sunnydale. Nothing ever happened here.

But when he stepped into the kitchen, something was happening. He saw a guy, a big guy, holding onto a woman. She was sort of draped over the guy's arms. Maybe she'd fainted?
“What's going on?” At Owen's words, the guy looked up and he growled, he actually growled, and there was something wrong with his face. “Hey, are you okay?”

The guy vanished so quickly, leaving the woman – Mrs. Summers? – on the floor, that Owen wondered if he'd imagined it. The blood, however, that wasn't imaginary. He squatted down and put his fingers to the marks on her neck. The blood was still wet. “Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.”

Phone. He had to phone, uh, call, um, someone. 911. That was it. He had to call 911. “What is the nature of your emergency?”

Oh God. “There's a woman, she's on the floor. She isn't moving and there's blood, not a whole lot, just a little, but she isn't moving and I'm not sure she's breathing.”

“Could you give me the address.”

Address? Oh God, what was the address? He could go out front, check it, but then he'd have to put down the phone.

“Sir, the address?”

“Hold on.” He left the phone dangling. It was dark outside of the house, hard to see the numbers. He ran back to the kitchen. “1630. It's 1630.”

“Sir? I'll need the street name as well.”

Street name? Oh God, he should know that. He'd just walked past the sign. Think. “Uh, Ravel, um no, that's not it. Raveler? Uh, Revello. Yeah, that's it. 1630 Revello.”

As he waited for the paramedics, he felt dazed, almost lost. He'd found a blanket on the couch and had put it over the woman to keep her warm. He'd checked her breath. He kept checking her breath and then the paramedics were there and they took the woman away.

Owen didn't get in the ambulance. He wasn't family. He didn't know Mrs. Summers. He didn't even know if the woman was Mrs. Summers. “You should find her family,” the paramedic had said. “Send them to the hospital.”

He didn't know where Buffy was. She was supposed to be here. It didn't feel right, being in her house by himself, but she'd said she'd be here. He would wait.

It didn't feel right, waiting in her house. He didn't know where she was. Maybe if he left he would find her.

But he should stay, because she was coming to the house, and she'd want to know about the woman and the ambulance. She'd want to know as fast as possible, which is why he should go to find her. Or maybe why he should stay.

***

The nurse had refused to answer Rupert's questions, leaving him ignorant of Mrs. Summers’ status, but had directed him to the fifth floor waiting area. She hadn't warned him about the copper. Before Rupert could swerve down another hall, Kris Mansfield had spotted him and waved him over. “Mr.
Giles, thank goodness you're here.” She called to him loudly, destroying any chance he'd had of concealing his presence from the officer she was chatting with.

Behind the pair, Rupert spotted Willow, Xander, and some other lad – Owen he believed – in the waiting area. All three remained seated but Willow gave him a wave.

“Who's this?” The constable, glancing up from his notes, seemed so young that Rupert found himself wondering why the lad wasn't in high-school himself.

“Our school librarian,” Kris explained smoothly. “He's mentoring Buffy Summers, the patient's daughter. I'd rather not speak out of turn but you should know that Miss Summers’ transcripts from Hemery High, well, she was something of a problem student. We're trying a pro-active approach to prevent her from repeating past mistakes.”

“So the girl might have had something to do with this attack?” Giles winced at the words. The last thing he needed was police interest in the Slayer.

“Oh, no. No,” Kris protested. “The doctors labeled it an accident. As Buffy's mentor, Mr. Giles is here to help her through this difficult time.”

“As such,” Rupert interjected, “perhaps I could speak with Buffy.”

“Can't. Doctor's orders. Patient needs her rest.”

“Buffy's not ready to leave her mother's side,” Kris explained. “Perhaps you could wait with the students?”

Having no desire to draw more police attention, Rupert agreed, but he did wonder why Kris had stepped in to protect him. As he joined the children in the waiting area, Xander, showing unexpected astuteness, drew Owen off in search of snacks. Rupert turned to Willow for information. “What happened?”

“Buffy's Mom was attacked in their home. The doctors said something about her falling on a barbecue fork but Owen's the one who found her and he said someone was there, a guy with a bumpy face.”

“Angel.”

“Yeah,” Willow agreed. “That's what Buffy thinks too but Buffy's Mom, in her official statement, mentioned a girl, someone who's helping Buffy study for her history exams, but I'm the only one helping Buffy study for history and I wasn't there.”

“How badly was Mrs. Summers wounded?”

Willow shrugged. “She lost some blood but she's up and talking, well, not up because she's still in bed and the doctors are talking about keeping her here overnight, but she seems okay from what I saw. I mean, we didn't have an extended conversation or anything. I just saw her being wheeled into her room, but …”

“Willow!” Gods, did the child have to be so bloody gabby? “Why did you call Miss Mansfield?”

By the size of Willow's eyes, she was trying to use them to project her innocence. “I didn't. Nobody did. Well, none of us. I don't know how she knew to be here.”

“Did you tell her I was on my way?”
“No, there wasn't time. We were all worried about Mrs. Summers and then she was wheeled out and the police showed up right after. Oh, you can ask her yourself. It looks like she's done talking to that officer.”

Giles looked up to see that Kris, having divested herself from the plod, was heading over. “Willow, perhaps you could see where Xander and that other lad have gone off to?”

“But Giles …”

“Please. I'd like to speak with Miss Mansfield alone.” Willow pouted but did as he'd asked.

“There was blood loss but it wasn't fatal.” Kris succinctly gave him the pertinent information but didn't answer his main question.

“Why did you imply that you'd called me?”

He'd shocked her. “You can't become a suspect. Your work is too important.”

His work? Giles grabbed her arm. “What do you know of my work?”

“You're the Watcher. Miss Summers, Buffy, is, I believe, the Slayer.”

They were drawing attention. As Rupert released her arm, it all came together. “You're a Defunct.” Potentials past the age of Calling, known as Defuncts in the Council nomenclature, were discouraged from hunting demons. Despite that, history was full of Defuncts who'd refused to let their training go to waste. They tended to die young.

“Yes.” Her face flushed as she admitted it. Of course it would. Defuncts tended to think of themselves as failures. Some Watchers encouraged such thinking.

He should report her to the Council, but she could be of use to him. If he did lose his Slayer, a Defunct might still provide access to the Slayer line. “I won't go to the Council if you'll help me.”

She looked afraid. “How?”

“For now, I need to speak with Buffy. I'll need privacy. If the children return, distract them.”

Kris called Buffy out to the waiting area and stood watch at the far end as he sat with his Slayer. Buffy looked pale and shaken. “I'm going after him.”

“You are most certainly not.”

“Giles, he attacked my mother. He could have killed her.”

“But he didn't. He left her alive. Why? For you to find. I know you don't want to hear this, but that's Angelus' modus operandi. He plays games with his victims. And we certainly don't know what role the young woman, the one your mother mentioned, plays in this. It's most certainly a trap and you are not going.”

“Try to stop me.”

Damn, he should have known better. All that information he'd given her on Angelus had triggered her Slayer instincts. That had been the intended effect but not now, not when the demon had laid a trap. “Then I'm going as well.”

“Giles.”
“You're not waking into that obvious a trap without backup.”

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Giles found himself clambering after Buffy through a chain link fence. What the hell had he been thinking, allowing Rupert to follow Buffy into such an obvious trap? Not that he could allow her to go alone, obviously. “Buffy, could we have at least tried a less surreptitious approach?”

“How?”

“It's a trap, Buffy. Angelus knows we're coming. There's no need to be sneaky.”

“I'm not being on-purpose sneaky,” she said with a glare. “I'm just trying to figure out where he'll be.”

“Someplace obvious,” Giles said, gesturing toward the Bronze.

At the sound of breaking glass, they turned and stared at the second floor. Buffy, walking forward first, found a metal ladder, one attached to the Bronze's painted brick exterior, and started climbing. “I'll try to unlock the door.”

“Don't bother. I can get myself in.”

She paused a few feet up the wall and looked down at him. “What're you going to do? Break the door down?”

Rolling his eyes at the girl wouldn't do any good. She might not be the sharpest pin in the pincushion, but she didn't respond well to sarcasm. “I'll pick the lock. It's how we got in the night of the Harvest. Remember?”

“Oh, right.” She started climbing again. “Give me five minutes.”

As if he would leave her alone with Angelus that long. A few exterior lights, shining in through the windows, lit the Bronze's interior but not well. Giles wondered if he shouldn't hit the lights. The vampire was expecting them. It wasn't as if they had the element of surprise on their side. Before he could decide, something grabbed him from behind.

A hand slapped across his mouth. An arm held him close. Giles struggled but couldn't escape, couldn't scream, couldn't warn Buffy. Something like relief swept through him. It wasn't as if they had the element of surprise on their side. Before he could decide, something grabbed him from behind.

“Shh, we don't want to miss the show.” The whispered voice sounded feminine. Darla more than likely.

As he stood there, waiting for death, possibly his own, Giles felt a darkness rise in his mind. Eyghon, looking through his eyes, didn't like what it saw. Mine. The demon's voice thundered in his skull.
Save her.

I don't know that I can.

Mine! Obey!

Giles felt pressure building in his head. I can't save her if I'm incapacitated. The pressure faded.

“Animals I like,” Buffy was saying.

Angelus stepped out of the shadows with a growl. “Let's get it done!”

The fight moved too quickly for Giles to follow in that darkness. “Do you think he'll kill her?” Darla asked. “A hundred years ago, my money would have been on Angelus. Oh, but he was a beast then, but he's been domesticated since, and he loves her. I don't think he could kill someone he loves.”

Love? What kind of game was she playing at? Vampires couldn't love.

Giles could see them now: Buffy and Angelus. The vampire's visage gave way to his human mask. “C'mon. Don't go soft on me now!”

Buffy had a clear shot. This could be it. She could kill the vampire. She missed. “Little wide.”

“Why?” Buffy asked. “Why didn't you just attack me when you had the chance?”

“Oh shit.” Darla sounded as frustrated as he felt although far less terrified. “They're fucking talking!”

Angelus spoke of a gypsy curse, one that had restored his soul, and Giles wondered if it could be true. It did jibe with what he'd read in Aaron Main's journal: the humanity that Angelus had discarded would devour him in the end. No, Giles didn't believe it. No human soul could have remained sane under the weight of a demon's memories, and the vampire obviously hadn't been devoured by guilt.

As Buffy bared her neck, Giles could only stare in horror, but Angelus didn't attack. In that moment Giles knew it didn't matter whether or not Angelus had a soul. Buffy trusted the vampire, a creature of cunning, someone who might see through Giles' own plans for the Slayer. If they survived the night, Angelus would have to be dealt with.

“Not so easy as it looks.”

“Sure it is!” Darla, stepping forward, held Giles tightly to her, using his body as a shield.

“Let him go.”

“Aw, poor little girl, did you forget us? This is your Watcher, isn't it? Should I turn him?”

Buffy stepped forward. “Take me instead.”

Darla laughed. “Swap you for the Watcher? I don't think you understand how this works. You both die.”

Giles felt fangs at his throat but Darla didn't bite. Playing, she must be playing with Buffy, teasing her, but the vampire wouldn't hold back forever. Giles found Angelus staring at him. The vampire held Buffy's crossbow. With Giles' eyes on him, Angelus glanced at the arrow stuck in the wall. Giles didn't believe he could trust Angelus but had no other options. He nodded.
Giles brushed dust from his clothes as he stood. Angelus had saved him. Giles didn't know why. What was the demon playing at? Buffy, staring at Angelus, was obviously entranced by the demon. Ah, and that would be why. Oh yes, he would definitely need to deal with Angelus.

And then the darkness inside Giles' skull grabbed and started squeezing. Giles fell to the floor screaming.

***

Dodging the nursing staff was more difficult than it should have been. “Giles,” Buffy insisted, “you passed out. You need to see a doctor.” Facing outward to address the room, she shouted. “Can we get some help here?”

Giles yanked her arm, dragging her to the lifts. “Buffy, the staff are busy enough. I. Am. Fine. A mere touch of migraine, nothing more.”

“Migraines aren't a mere touch of anything. They're more like a sledgehammer to the head.”

He walked into the lift, turned, and raised one eyebrow at her. “Are you coming?”

“Only because I don't want you passing out alone in the elevator.”

“Buffy, if you must worry about anyone, worry about your mother. She'll have anaemia. You'll need to keep an eye on that.”

“But she'll be okay, right?”

“Yes, Buffy, your mother should be fine.”

When they arrived at the room, it seemed as if Joyce was better already. Kris and the three children had crowded into the hospital room. Either the doctor had decided that Joyce was well enough for company or all six of them, now that he and Buffy had returned, could expect a severe reprimand from one of the nurses.

“Oh, hey!” Willow noticed them first and made space for Buffy by Joyce's side. “Everything's okay, right? I mean, of course it's okay because you just went to check that the house had been locked up because we're pretty sure the ER guys didn't think to.”

“Yeah, it's good.” Buffy caught on more quickly than Giles would have expected given how stupid she'd been in the Bronze.

“Oh, honey, did you check to see if the stove is off? When your friend was there, I was planning to make a snack. I don't recall if I left it on or not.”

“It's fine.”

Giles made a note to check the stove himself before Joyce returned to the house.
“So it's all good?” Willow obviously had no idea how to be surreptitious. Of course, Buffy's responses of good and fine did leave a fair number of the details to the imagination.

“It is getting late,” Giles said. “And I doubt the nurses will let us all remain all night. Perhaps some of us should be heading home?”

“I'm staying,” Buffy said.

“I'd expected nothing less.” Giles turned to Kris. “If you'll drop Mr., uh, Owen home, I'll take Willow and Xander.”

Of course they couldn’t leave immediately. A good fifteen minutes meandered by before they were out of the door, and Giles suspected it would have been longer but Buffy was too focused on her mother to gossip with Willow, which left him to explain the incident at the Bronze to the children.

They were barely out of earshot of Kris and Owen before Xander started in. “What went wrong?”

“Xander, we don't know anything went wrong. Buffy said it was fine.”

Giles cringed as Xander, ignoring the door, jumped into the back of his Aston Martin. He made a note to keep the top up when carting students around. There honestly wasn’t enough room for such shenanigans and he shuddered to think what Xander's boots were doing to the leather.

“She didn't look fine.”

“Angel's alive,” Giles said.

“He got away?” At least Xander was properly appalled.

“Not as such,” Giles replied. “Buffy let him live.”

“But he's not evil, right?” Willow sounded anxious. “I mean, yeah, vampire, but he's had plenty of chances to kill Buffy and he hasn't.”

“Right,” Xander replied, “because evil guys never toy with their prey like, um, cats.”

“Did you just say that Angel's a cat?”

Time to put a stop to the inane banter. “I'm afraid Xander is right.”

“Angel's a cat?”

Giles gripped the steering wheel tightly. “No, that he's toying with Buffy. Angel, or Angelus as he's more commonly known, is a master manipulator. He's infamous for toying with his prey, for days when it's purely physical torment, but up to months for psychological manipulations.”

“So he's the cat and Buffy's the mouse. Great.” Did Xander have to keep up that cat metaphor?

“But Buffy's more than a mouse. She's the Slayer. She can take him.”

“She could still be a mouse if they had a Tom and Jerry thing going on. That Jerry, man, he's vicious.”

“By bitter chance,” Giles interrupted before the nonsense could continue, “Buffy's fallen for his game of cat and mouse.”
“But, are we sure he's evil?”

“He's a legend, known for his savage villainy. His first act, upon being turned, was to torture and kill his entire family including a younger sister, still a child. He's obsessed with innocence. The torments he's inflicted on nuns alone, well, the details would take me weeks to describe.”

“Right,” Xander agreed. “We're onboard with the he's evil train. So what are we gonna do about it? If Buffy's not gonna kill him, are we gonna do it ourselves?”

“We wouldn't stand a chance against such a savage creature. No, I'm afraid we'll have to convince Buffy.”

***

So much of the world hid its deadly nature behind a mask, Bob thought as he looked over a tray of substances collected from the earth’s deadlier offspring. The Amanita genus of mushrooms includes death caps which are also known as destroying angels for their deceptively innocent facade. John Crow beads, bright red seeds, especially attractive to children, sometimes worn as jewelry to deadly effect, kill after several days of nausea, vomiting, and convulsions. White baneberry, whose fruit resembles doll's eyes, while harmless to birds can cause cardiac arrest. Mistaking water hemlock for wild parsnip can lead to seizures and death. Milkweed butterflies, for example the Monarch, are full of residual poisons from when they, as caterpillars, fed off of the poisonous milkweed. The jewels of the rain forest, the poison dart frogs, sparkle with a rainbow's worth of colors. The flamboyant cuttlefish, brightly colored, are so toxic they are safe from commercial fisheries. The pufferfish, on the other hand, innocuous in appearance until it puffs itself up in size, is considered a delicacy. A mere taste can cause death. Alice had eaten one. They'd been out for the night, two fools on an adventure, one small bite to add a piquant touch of danger to their evening. He'd had the ring on him but he'd never gotten the chance to offer it, never gotten the chance to ask her to change her name to Weirick. If he'd had the power, he could have prevented …

Bob shook his head. None of that mattered anymore. Nature was deadly, too deadly sometimes, unreliable if one meant to merely incapacitate. Chloroform, while produced naturally by seaweed and certain fungi, was made usable by man. Synthesized and poured onto a cloth, it could keep even a child quiet long enough for her to be bound, gagged, and hidden. He'd told the police that his assistant had searched the basement and they'd believed him. Assuming, after their unfruitful search, that the child had been taken away from the zoo, they’d moved their pursuit elsewhere. His ritual wouldn’t be interrupted.

She'd been bound, alone and in the dark, for hours but the girl still squirmed as if she might escape. His zookeeper outfit didn't present as fearsome a facade as had his Primal garb. Now those clothes would have terrified the prey. It made no difference. There were other means of achieving fear. He held his knife to the girl's throat. “Don't move.”

Much of the world hid a deadly nature behind a mask of innocence. Bob could relate. So few saw behind his own facade, the friendly zookeeper, there to help. The girl, for example, had come right up to him once she'd realized she'd lost her mother. She knew better now.

“From the lower depths, rise Eyghon. From the dark soul at the heart of the world, rise Eyghon. From the corrupt heart, rise Eyghon.” His knife tore through the girl's throat. Her blood spurted, drenching him, covering him with life-giving, death-giving liquid. “Rise Eyghon. Rise!”
As Willow glanced around the Bronze for a table, she felt, well, not afraid exactly because Buffy was standing right next to her, but it was scarier here after hearing Giles' lecture on Angelus' evil ways and also because Buffy had almost died here, and how could Buffy have let Angelus just walk away anyway? “Is it usually this dark?”

“I don't know.” Buffy seemed distracted but maybe, being back at the scene of the crime so to speak, she was starting to see Angelus for the big evil that he truly was. “Oh, look, there's a table.”

They sat and it didn't seem like Buffy was going to start the conversation so maybe it was time to convince her that Angelus really was a big bad. But how? Buffy already knew he was a vampire which meant that evil pretty much should be a given. “So, have you heard from, uh, him?”

“Angel?” Buffy said with a shrug. “No, but I don't know that I expect to. I mean, he's mystery guy, only showing up when there's danger.”

Sure, because he'd be bringing the danger with him, except that he hadn't, not with that Harvest or with that fork-for-hands vampire or with that Anointed One prophecy. No, she had to think clearly. Giles had said that Angelus was evil and he'd given more than enough, ugh, gruesome evidence. “Are you sure you want to see him? I mean, he is a vampire and they do tend to be, well, evil, uh, sort of.” Buffy looked hurt. Oh, God, she was the worst friend ever!

“It's not like that. He could have killed me plenty of times and, anyway, he did save Giles.”

“But.” No, if she pushed then Buffy would look even more hurt.

“But what, Willow?”

“Nothing.”

“Spit it out.”

“But Mr. Giles told us … Well, there were lots of stories and stuff, I mean not stories but history, history and evidence. There was plenty of evidence. That bit with the puppy alone …” She shuddered and wished she hadn't. You didn't see Buffy shuddering at the big bad evil.

“Angel's not like that anymore.”

“But, how can you be sure because, correct me if I'm wrong, but how many vampires join the side of good?”

“Willow,” Buffy snapped. She stared for a moment and then sighed. “He's got his soul now, okay. There was this whole gypsy curse deal and he's not evil anymore and, anyway, I don't know how to explain it but I just feel that he's okay. I trust him.”

God, she was the worst friend ever, doubting Buffy! “Then I trust him too.”

“You don't have to.”
“No, but I do. I mean, if you trust him, well, you have those Slayer senses so you probably have a good reason to trust him but no real way of explaining it, so it makes sense that you trust him but can't explain why. So, I trust him too.”

You'd have thought that agreeing would have made it less awkward but they just sat there, neither of them with anything to say, until Xander popped up out of nowhere, drumming his hands on the table. “Ah, the post-fumigation party.”

“Okay, what's the difference between this and the pre-fumigation party?” Buffy didn't seem completely interested but at least she was trying.

“Much hardier cockroaches.”

Buffy grinned at Xander's joke. Oh, good, it was going to be okay except there was Angel, lurking in the shadows. See, and that's why she thought Giles was right. Angelus was all shadow-lurking except that all of the Bronze seemed like one big shadow so maybe he couldn't help it.

“Your Mom's okay?” Xander asked.

“Yep, home safe and sound. I even made tea with lots of honey for her throat.”

Should she tell Buffy that Angel was there? She probably should but what if Giles was right? Maybe it'd be better to say nothing and just pretend she hadn't seen him.

“Oh, who invited the evil undead?” Or Xander could bring it up.

“Angel?” Buffy turned so fast her hair whipped behind her to catch up.

“What just happened?” Xander asked as Buffy ran up to Angel. “I thought there was a consensus: vamps evil.”

“Buffy doesn't think that Angel is, evil I mean.”

“So we're just letting her walk over and chat with him now?”

“Well, maybe she's right. She is the Slayer. She might have a better sense of these things than we do.”

“Willow, I thought you got it, or do you not remember Giles’ big speech on the rapes, torture, dismemberment, …”

“I know! I know.” Willow couldn't stand to see Xander look at her that way. She stared at Buffy who was still talking with Angelus. “It's just, when Giles says all that, I agree with him, but then Buffy says that she trusts him and, well, I agree with her. My mind's like one of those balls at the end of a string of elastic, being paddled back and forth.”

“I'll make it simple. Vamps evil. Angel is a vamp. Therefore, Angel should be dust.”

“But Giles says one thing and Buffy says another, and I can't choose between them.”

“Hey, what am I? Chopped liver?”

“Shh. Buffy's coming back.”

Xander started in on Buffy before Willow could think of what to say. “So, consorting with the enemy, how's that working out for you?”
Buffy's chair flew back with a loud screech. “Saved Giles’ life.”

As Buffy stormed off, Willow called after. “Where are you going?”

“Sorry, Willow, but I need to bail. Mom's alone. After that whole hospital thing, I should be with her.”

Willow watched as Buffy dodged through the crowd. “Good job, Xander. Straight out attack. Great way to convince her.”

“Oh, and being all wishy-washy – maybe Giles is right, maybe Buffy is – that's so convincing.”

Willow rose to her feet, making a lot less noise with her chair. “I'm going to see if Buffy will walk me home. There's a lot of scary things out there.”

“Yeah,” Xander muttered. “And one of them goes by Angel.”

***

As Buffy pushed the library doors, swinging them open, she noticed that Giles didn't glance up from whatever dusty old book he'd gotten caught up in. It was nice not dealing with his snark first thing in the morning, but she'd meant to come in late, unlike most mornings when it just happened, and she'd meant for him to notice. How was she supposed to yell at him for riling up Willow with his big anti-Angel lecture if he couldn't even be bothered to look up from his book?

Maybe this called for a subtle approach. Peering over Giles' shoulder, she made a face. “Eyghon? Ugh, has this guy even heard of soap and water?”

He slammed the book shut and jumped to his feet. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Um, homeroom. Remember? I'm here each morning because apparently you think sleep is evil.”

“Oh, is it that late?” He didn't even bother to glance at the time before telling her to meditate.

She followed him to the check-out desk, ready to ask about that Eyes Gone demon, but the newspaper stopped her cold. That girl from the zoo was still missing. Buffy stared at the photo. She was so young. How come nobody had said she was so young? “They haven't found that girl yet?”

Giles' face shifted from distracted to not pretty in two seconds flat. “You knew? You were aware that a child had gone missing from the zoo and hadn't bothered to tell me?”

She felt sick. She'd been there. She could have helped, but zoo guy had said it'd be okay. “I figured she'd turn up.”

Okay, if Giles could look any more disappointed she didn't want to know. “Were you born an idiot or have you taken too many strikes to the head? A child goes missing and it doesn't even occur to you that I might need to know?”

“Well, zoo guy said that kids go missing all the time but always turn up.” Had he actually said always? Maybe he hadn't, but he hadn't been all that worried.

Giles' fist slammed against the counter. “I don't give a damn what Weirick said. You work for me.
You inform me. Always. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

“Yes.” Maybe this wasn’t the best time to bring up Giles' little chat with Willow about Angel. “It couldn't have been a demon anyway. When she got lost, it was the middle of the day.”

There was something about the way Giles shook his head that left her feeling two inches tall. “Do you know nothing of your calling? Demons can be evoked – no, I suppose that word's too intellectual for your limited capacity. Demons can be called into the world.”

“But …”

“But what?” His words were so abrupt she wished she hadn’t interrupted.

“But demons are already here, in the world I mean.”

“Not all demons exist on this plane, and those that don't can be called here. The ritual to evoke most demons requires a level of purity as its focus, an innocence found only in a child.”

“Wait, so someone put a demon into that little girl?”

Giles sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Buffy guessed she'd gotten it wrong again. “Of course not. Whoever evoked the demon drew it into himself.”

Okay, that had to be slightly better than putting a demon into a child, right? “Somebody made himself into a demon? On purpose?”

“Yes. There's a kind of power that can only be acquired by drawing a demon into one's body.”

Buffy wished she'd skipped the mocha and donut. Letting a demon into yourself? Okay, vampires, but that was forced, not something people actively asked for. “Okay, this guy needs to die. How do I find him?”

“You don't.”

“What do you mean I don't?”

“The demon's not a permanent resident in the human host. It's almost certainly gone by now.”

“So, I should go to the zoo.”


“But that's where the girl went missing.”

“Whoever took her grabbed her from a public place and wasn't caught. He won't have been stupid enough to have kept here there.” Meaning she was stupid for thinking he would.

“There might be clues.”

“And what could you turn up that the police haven't already found?” And there was the snark. Had she really been missing it earlier?

“There's got to be something I can do.”

“You can meditate.”
There was no way. “After that? I can't.”

Giles looked like he was about to hit the desk again but then something let go in him. “I'll write you a pass. You can run laps on the track until first period.”

While Giles wrote up the pass, Buffy stared at the newspaper, at the photo of the girl. It could have been a picture of herself at that age. “What happened to her?”

“What? To whom?” Giles glanced at the paper. “Buffy, you don't want to know.”

Buffy dropped her bag at her locker on her way out of school. Sure, she could do what Giles wanted and lap around the track, or she could check out the zoo. Giles didn't have to know.

***

Jenny, peering through the window in the door of the library, found Rupert lost in a dusty volume. Of course he was, she thought. He could be a real fuddy-diddy but then, rarely but it did happen, something in him switched on the sex appeal.

“Knock knock.” He slammed the book shut. That was rude. If he wanted to keep whatever it was that big a secret, he shouldn't be reading it at school. Hmm, so what did he want to keep secret? He hid the book away in a bag as she approached the table, but she'd seen enough. It was a book on demons. He had demon books scattered all about the library though. What made that one special?

“What do you want?”

Hmm, rude again. “Well, England, I thought I'd come and see you lording over your fief.”

“I'm not lording over anything.”

“Oh, come on. You think of this library as your fiefdom, which is why you don't want students in here. You seem to think books should be kept under lock and key.”

“I'll have you know that I take my duties as librarian seriously. Naturally books are to be shared. They're crucial to the propagation of knowledge. And of course I want students to visit the library. That's why it's here. That's why I'm here.”

They stared at each other for a long moment before bursting into laughter. Rupert handed over a handkerchief so Jenny could wipe the tears from her eyes.

“Fine,” he said. “I did hope this position would allow me to avoid students. You've got me there.” When he started wiping at his tears with his hands, Jenny returned the handkerchief. “But, just to be clear, I do not consider books too precious to be read. Well, some are obviously. Those that are rare should be protected, but I do believe that books, in general, should be available for public use.”

She'd been ready to drop it, but if he was going to push the subject. “Which is why you hid that book away the moment I entered the room.”

He brushed a hand through his hair, and damn but it was a sexy move. He knew it too. She could tell. Jenny crossed her arms and stared him down. “Merely a bit of private research,” he said. “Nothing I want to share until I've finished the work.”
When he asked, again, why she was there, it was an obvious attempt to get off the subject of the demon book, but she let him get away with it. “The Saint's showing at the Sun Cinema this weekend. I thought you might want to go. Granted it won't be up to Moore's version, but Val Kilmer isn't a bad bit of eye candy, which I'm just realizing isn't the best argument to convince you.”

“On the contrary, I'm perfectly happy spending a few hours goggling eye candy. I make time for you, don't I?”

“Just for that, you're buying the popcorn.”

***

Giles watched from the library doors, presumably looking like a besotted fool, as Jenny strolled down the hallway. He shouldn’t have made the date, but he’d been so elated when she’d first walked in that he’d found he couldn’t resist. Victories, after all, should be celebrated.

She stopped and waved before vanishing around the corner. Feeling relatively certain she wouldn’t interrupt again, he returned to the book and translated the text to be certain. “The Bellitorian ritual grants the amulet's master dominion over vampires of the Aurelian line. He may empower or weaken them at his will.”

At last he had the ritual, and now, once he had the Amulet of Dominion, he could destroy both Angelus and the Master. He could rip away their strength, leaving them defenseless against even a mere human. Giles didn’t, unfortunately, have the amulet, but magical items tended to be traceable if one knew how. Not that he did know how to trace that specific amulet. It would almost certainly take days of research merely to track down the amulet’s locator spell. Damn! Did nothing ever go smoothly?

This research would require volumes he’d stored at the mansion. He wasn’t about to waste an entire day twiddling his thumbs at the high-school while his research could be moving forward, but he did have a meditation session with Willow that afternoon. She wasn’t coming along as smoothly as he’d hoped. Apparently the girl was too timid to try the Tantric practices. Perhaps if he started her back on magic lessons, she’d realize her focus needed more practice. Right, so he couldn’t leave school for the whole day, but he could collect a few books and bring them to the high-school. In addition, the trip would give him a chance to stop at the zoo to discuss Weirick’s indiscretion.

He arrived before the zoo had opened, but Giles had never allowed a little thing like a locked gate to hold him back. Weirick had shown him the side entrance, one used by the staff. The lock was easy enough to pick. A closed zoo, however, did not necessarily equal an empty zoo. “Hey, you! How’d you get in here?” The three young men approached him as a group. “You’re not supposed to be in here.”

Giles had found that nothing threw off aggression like asking for help. “Ah, good, I was hoping someone could help me. I have an appointment with, ah, a Dr. Weirick. Could you direct me to him?”

“Oh.” The young men stopped short. “Dr. Weirick. He’s expecting you?”

“Of course.”

One of the lads led Giles to the office. “Uh, sir? This man said he has an appointment?”
If Weirick was surprised, he didn’t let it show. “Oh, sure, send him in.”

An eclectic mix of weapons, relics of ancient cultures, appeared on display about the room: a Spanish lance-head with such an elaborate design etched into the metal that it must have once belonged to someone of status; a wakizashi which looked to be from the Muromachi period; a scabbard, weaponless, but carved with runes suggesting it had been crafted to enclose a soul chaser, an ensorcelled blade created to hunt demons.

Giles closed the door and slammed the newspaper onto Weirick’s desk. “Are you insane?” Tapping a finger onto the girl's photo, he added, “Am I correct in presuming you killed her?”

“You can’t keep Eyghon caged. He wants to be free.”

The man’s eyes seemed to glow with an unholy glee. Gods, the idiot was more dangerous than he’d imagined. “This has nothing to do with Eyghon. You wanted the power. You took it and made a mess in your own backyard which, honestly, I could care less about except that it’s also my backyard. You do realize that if the Slayer’d found you, you’d be dead?”

“Or she would.”

“You little shit. Do you honestly believe you could kill a Slayer?”

Giles grabbed Weirick’s collar and pulled him close, but the man shot a punch at him. Giles twisted and the punch barely grazed his ribs. He shoved Weirick away. The man had the temerity to laugh. “Eyghon could kill her.”

Eyghon wants her alive, Giles thought. Or possibly not. The demon, enshrouded in human flesh, would have lost any sense of reason. His longer-term goal would have given way to the thrill of the hunt. “You know nothing. You killed that child here, in your own zoo, didn’t you? What happens if the police find her? What if they find you?”

“Then your name will be on my lips. If they capture me, I will implicate you.”

Giles left him there. The man was mad. Worse, he was on his guard. Giles shouldn’t have confronted him. Now Weirick would be almost impossible to kill.

He was angry enough to blaze out of the parking lot but drawing attention to himself this close to the zoo, especially if Weirick's victim was ever found, was far too irresponsible. He drove carefully and quietly until he spotted Buffy standing just outside the zoo’s front entrance. He pulled the car over but didn't bother to yell. He laid on the horn. Buffy leaped about three feet into the air and was facing him when she landed. “Giles.” He could see her trying to work out how to explain why she wasn’t running laps around the track, or, no, hold on. He checked his watch. No, she was missing first period. “You know,” she said. “I’m always surprised to see how nice a car you have. A bit above a librarian’s pay grade though, isn’t it?”

“Get In.”

She joined him in the front. As he peeled off, he could feel her eyes on him. “I know you didn't want me at the zoo, but there could have been clues, something only a Slayer would have noticed.”

Gods, he needed to keep her away from the zoo. Who knew what would happen if she ran into Weirick again. “Believe me, there are no clues.”

“But how could you … oh! You went to the zoo to look for clues, didn't you? But …”
“What is it Buffy?”

“What didn't you bring me? Two eyes, better than one? Um, I obviously mean sets of eyes because how many people have only one eye, other than Long John Silver.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Giles took a deep breath before replying. “Long John Silver had a peg-leg. His eyes were fine.”

“Huh?”

“You referred to the pirate, Long John Silver, from Treasure Island. The character was missing a leg, not an eye.”

“Really? Are you sure? Because I thought …”

“Buffy.” His tone was perhaps sharper than it should have been but it did shut her up. How had he been distracted by pirates of all things? “I've been training to be a Watcher since I was a lad. Believe me, I didn't miss any clues. And we can't have you dodging out of school for no reason. Do you honestly believe Snyder will be as forgiving of your lapses as Flutie?”

“Oh, yeah, Flutie, really easy going.”

“I want your promise, Buffy. Leave the zoo alone.”

“But Giles …”

“Now.”

“I promise.”

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One wall of the Ashworth family library had been denuded of books to create a gallery for the taxidermal invasion otherwise known as the old mad Lord's unfortunate obsession with the avian physique. A good third of the books had been moved to what had once been a minor drawing room. Antonia, unfortunately, did not have the authority to return the books to their rightful place. Her father-in-law had stipulated in his will that his heir leave the birds on display exactly as they'd been in his lifetime. Her dear departed Vernon had made no such stipulation in his will but Cecil would not be moved on the subject. His grandfather had wanted the birds on display in the library; there they would remain.

Cecil's fondness for the collection had been anchored the night the lad, a mere child of six at the time, had stolen one of the birds, a snow bunting, from the display. How he'd managed to open the case remained a mystery, but by the time they'd noticed, Cecil had latched onto the stuffed bird as if it were the most delightful toy. In fact, he'd treated it rather like a teddy bear and had named it Snowflake, which had spoken highly of the boy's cleverness given that snowflake was a colloquial name for the snow bunting. His grandfather had been obstinate, demanding the bird be returned to its case, but Cecil had won in the end, talking his grandfather into allowing him to keep the bird as a toy.

“A Professor Miller to see you, my lady.”
“Yes, thank you Geoffrey. We're not to be disturbed.”

The minor Watcher families, those that had never risen to the ranks of the Council, provided a solid pool of men who knew their place. Miller's haircut, the coarseness of the weave on his tweed jacket, and even his mannerisms all suggested he was just such a low-level operative. He wasn't, but very few knew it. Antonia gestured toward a pair of leather chairs. “Please, join me.”

“My lady.”

The servants had been told that Miller had requested a chance to visit the library. Geoffrey certainly knew better, but Antonia knew that Geoffrey wouldn't talk. “I suppose you know why I've invited you here.”

She saw a hint of a smile on Miller's lips before he replied. “One hates to put forward one's own conclusions.”

“Humor me.”

“Your son met with Alan Wyndam-Pryce not long after Jeremy Taylor had compiled data, information relating to demonic attacks that had occurred in the vicinity of Rupert Giles. Taylor is now reporting to another of the Wyndam-Pryce clan, a man who is acting as Travers' agent in this matter.”

“Ah,” Antonia nodded to acknowledge the confirmation. “I knew Quentin had suborned the lad.”

“Mr. Taylor was in a difficult position.”

Antonia waved that off. “Yes, yes, I'm not about to take it out on him.”

“Given that your son attempted to invoke the Mortem Filium on Rupert Giles for his part in the death of Roderick Travers Ashworth …”

“You heard about that?” If word of that event ever got back to any of the Gileses, open warfare wouldn't begin to describe their response.

“The information hasn't been widely spread,” he said.

“Very well. So you understand what I'm asking of you.”

“To compile evidence against Rupert Giles.”

“You're not to kill him.” She wanted to be quite certain he understood that.

Miller nodded in agreement. “Of course not. Revenge isn't half so sweet when your adversary isn't alive to feel the sting of your victory.”

“Good. I'm glad you understand. I've been preparing a place for you. Are you familiar with the Scanning Project?”

“The preservation of our most ancient tomes.” His voice held the ringing tones used by its proponents to describe the project. In a more sedate voice, he added, “by scanning them into a digital database.”

“Naturally there are no priceless books in the field but by the Council's charter any member can be called upon to present any book for processing at any time.”
“I'm to be assigned to Sunnydale.”

“You're assigned to Rupert Giles. You'll leave within the week.”

***

Buffy leaned across the fence and scanned the grassy – um – grass, the dark rocks looming overhead, as well as the shortish water slide. The zoo really was dead at night. The otters were either invisible in the dark or off someplace where she couldn't see them, most likely the second. Otters were too cute to be demonic.

As she continued down the path, scanning for clues relating to the missing girl, she passed a tank full of water. The manatee, also off sleeping apparently, was, well, not as cute as the otters but not really ugly. When they'd been here for their school trip, Buffy hadn't seen the appeal. It just swam about. Slowly. So not fun.

The seals she could at least see but they were little more than dark blobs on dark rocks. Also asleep. She came to the end of the aquatic exhibit and to a sign telling her to head right for the big cats or left for the bird house. She turned left. Some of the cats might be awake – they were as nocturnal as house cats, right? – but the birds were closer to the exit.

She'd been certain that her Slayer senses would turn something up that others had missed, but Giles had been right. She hated to admit it, but there were no clues here, nothing to tell her what had happened to that missing girl, or at least none she could see in the dark. She might as well move on to her regular patrol.

At the edge of the zoo, to the left of the main gate, Buffy stopped to look over the park. A girl had gone missing here and she'd done nothing to stop it. Well, she couldn't have stopped it because the girl had been missing when she'd arrived, but she could have pushed her way into the search. She could have found the girl where the police had failed. Maybe her Slayer sense would have tingled or something.

Jumping over the fence felt like giving up, but the zoo wasn't offering up any clues. Maybe killing a fledgling or two would cheer her up. It didn't. Two cemeteries and three dusted vamps later, the guilt still hung heavy like a lump of lead in her heart. Maybe she should up her patrols, add in an extra cemetery each night or maybe mix up her routes so she'd be less predictable.

“Hey, get off of me.” The shout came from outside the cemetery. Maybe it wasn't a demon attack. Maybe it was a normal fight or mugging. Let's see. Sunnydale. Hellmouth. It was probably a demon attack. She heard a scream. Maybe she should get her ass in gear and save that guy.

He'd been knocked to the sidewalk or maybe he'd fallen, and what was he doing walking so near a cemetery late at night anyway? The way the vamp was leaning over him suggested the guy had been knocked down and … hey, that vamp was blocking her view of the guy. If she got between the guy and the vamp, she could stake it without him seeing and wouldn't have to explain why his attacker had vanished into dust.

As she yanked the vamp by the back of its suit jacket, the demon flailed for its footing. She stabbed the stake through its heart and, presto, dust! All her kills should be so easy. Now all she had to do was convince the guy on the ground that mister three-piece business suit had been a crazed druggie
on PCP.

She turned, looked down, and stopped. Owen, still sprawled on the ground, stared up at her.
“Buffy.”

Chapter End Notes

Edited 8/20/16: The Cheetos Xander's eating in the library were originally described as "orange foodstuff" but I wasn't sure that made it clear he was eating some type of a chip / crisp so I decided to be more descriptive.
What went before:

- **Eyghon in Giles’ mind**: Eyghon is connected to Giles by a process called domination. Unlike possession, in which a demon takes over a human host, domination entails the creation of a psychic bond between the demon and its host. The demon does not inhabit the host but is, instead, connected to the host’s mind. The demon is, in effect, always in the back of the host’s mind, whispering directly into the host’s thoughts.

- **Giles’ split personalities**: Under the stress of Eyghon’s influence, Rupert’s personality has split into three. Rupert is closest to canon Giles and has the least contact with Eyghon. Giles is the personality in charge of protecting Rupert. Ripper takes care of any dirty work Giles needs done. To keep Eyghon from tormenting Rupert, Giles has agreed to give Eyghon access to the Slayer line.

- **Willow’s breaking taboos**: Giles, in order to control Willow’s power and make it his own, has put magical hooks into her that allow him to call on her magic at will. Because she’s an unskilled magic user, her power does not flow as easily as Giles would like. Meditative practices would improve the flow of her magic. In order to get her to meditate more often, Giles has introduced the girl to Tantra (in a “please don’t look at this forbidden book” kind of a way. He expected she would take up solo sex meditative practices such as energy orgasms. Willow, intrigued by the sex magic but a little put off by them as well, has instead chosen to follow the book’s idea on breaking taboos.

- **Giles studying students possessed by the hyena spirit**: When removing the hyenas from the students, Giles and Weirick came to an agreement: Weirick would help Giles study the effects of hyena possession by putting the hyena spirit back into one of the students and Giles would help Weirick gain the power he craved by possessing him with a demon. Because Giles used a modified ritual, Weirick’s possession did not last. Weirick, not satisfied with the deal, is invoking Eyghon into himself.

- **Antonia Ashworth**: When Merrick was Buffy’s Watcher, the Council decided that the next two Watchers to be assigned to a Slayer would be Roderick Travers Ashworth and Rupert Giles, in that order. Giles, to gain access to the Slayer more quickly, invoked Eyghon to kill Roderick Ashworth. Antonia Ashworth, to prevent her son Cecil’s death by quest for vengeance, has taken over that quest for vengeance herself.

- **Lucas Miller**: Working for Antonia Ashworth, basically spying on Giles.

- **Kris Mansfield**: A Potential who’d never been Called.

- **Buffy’s homeroom in the library**: Giles set this up without giving Buffy a head’s up. Buffy is taking homeroom in the library. Giles expects her in an hour early so she can meditate. That’s going about as well as you’d expect.

- **The Amulet of Dominion**: Giles has learned of an artifact, the Amulet of Dominion Over the Line of Aurelius, that will allow him to weaken any or all vampires of the Aurelian line. He plans to use this artifact to kill both the Master and Angelus. He already has the spell that activates the amulet but does not know the amulet’s location.

- **The little girl**: Buffy had a chance to join a search for a missing girl at the zoo but
Weirick led her back to the gates because he planned to sacrifice the girl to invoke Eyghon into himself. The girl's still listed as missing but Buffy's feeling guilty that she didn't save the girl.

- **Xander asking about Angel:** Giles asked him to get info on Angel from Buffy and Willow
- **Catherine Madison:** In “The Witch”, Giles put a frog’s mind into Catherine Madison's body and sent her soul to a hell dimension so she couldn’t return to threaten his Slayer. Note: I had originally intended to kill Owen in this story but thought it'd warp the plot too much. Buffy'd be too overwhelmed by introducing him to the demon side of Sunnydale and then not saving him from it. So, I thought I'd kill some other character. That sub-plot went away but thanks to Rahirah, Il Mio Capitano, Quaggy, and Felicia Craft for giving me ideas on whom I could kill off.

Buffy stared at the body. No, not body, boy as in boy sprawled on the ground as in Owen. As in Owen who'd just seen her stake a vampire. As in Owen who brushed his pants as he rose to his feet – more worried about clean clothes than almost dying said a part of her mind – and asked, “Did you see that guy? It's like he vanished into a puff of smoke.”

“Smoke? Uh, no, it's nighttime, as in it's dark. He ran off. Really. You just couldn't see 'cause it's dark.”

“Buffy.” He pointed up. “We're under a streetlight.”

“Right, which is lit because it's night and, uh …” She glanced around, hoping to find a distraction. “Hey, burgers.” She curled her arm through his. “You hungry? I'm famished.”

He pulled his arm away. “Buffy, I saw you fight that guy. And then I sort of saw him vanish?”

“Hunger will do that to you. Makes you see all kinds of wacky things. Things that aren't there. We should eat.” Buffy stopped and cocked her head. Was that … growling?

As she turned, the vamp leaped over the cemetery fence. Damn, he must have been a pole vaulter to get that much height. With Owen between them, she couldn't get to the vamp before he'd grabbed Owen by the collar, raising him so high that Owen's feet dangled above the ground. “You,” the vampire snarled at Owen, “you I'll let live just long enough to see me break your pretty little …”
Who the hell was he calling little? Buffy staked him clear through the heart. Oops, and she should have made him drop Owen first. “Ow!” he said, again from the ground. Rising, he brushed at his clothes. “What is this? Dust?”

Ashes, Buffy thought. “I try not to think about it.”

As Owen glanced around, Buffy could see him putting events together. He brushed at his jacket. Dust drifted into the air. “Is this all that's left of that guy?”

Distracting him with burgers obviously wasn't going to work. What next?

“What's going on, Buffy?”

She really should have a cover story. Hey, maybe she could work on one in homeroom. That had to be way more important than meditating, right? Maybe she could even stretch it out …

“Buffy.”

“Right, well, you see, there's something you don't know about me, that nobody knows about me. Well, no, not nobody, 'cause Giles knows and Willow and Xander …”

“Buffy, just tell me.”

He took the whole Slaying unholy forces of evil talk better than she'd expected given that she'd never expected to be telling him, but then he started walking away without saying a word, without even looking at her. It sort of seemed like he was leaving her, as in breaking up with her. She scrambled after him. She couldn't just leave him walking on his own. She had to make sure he got home safe, right?

When he stopped she was sort of afraid to look at him, afraid of what she'd see in his eyes, so she stared up at the cemetery gates. The name, Restfield Cemetery, arched over the gate but the words sort of swooped down at the right as if death were some kind of slippery slope or maybe it was supposed to represent a descent into death but if it were death wouldn't you want to be ascending into Heaven? Maybe the gate's designer didn't have a high opinion of people.
“So that thing.” Owen paused to glance at her. “Vampire?”

“Vampire.”

“He came out of a grave?”

“Sure.” When Owen just looked at her, Buffy added, “He was a bit dirt-covered so, yeah, he probably just dug himself out of a grave.”

“And you were hunting vampires?”

So not the time to bring up other demons. “It's called patrolling, but yeah.”

“And how do you kill them?”

“Crosses, garlic, stake through the heart.” Probably best to skip that whole decapitation with a spoon story. And fire. No need to mention burning down the gym. “Oh, and sunlight works too but, you know, it has to be daytime.”

“Do you do this often?”

Right, say goodbye to any future dates. “Every night.”

“That's so cool!”

“Uh, what?”

“I never thought nearly getting killed would make me feel so … so alive! When can we do it again? Tomorrow?”

“Uh, no.”
“Day after … or, uh, night after? Any time, I'm ready.”

“Owen, you don't seem to see how dangerous …”

“But that's what makes it so amazing! I finally understand that line by Emily Dickinson, 'Death sets a thing significant.' My life, it's like I've never lived before, like I've been empty. No, not empty, hollow. I've been hollow and now, now I'm so energized.” He took her hands in his. “We can go again tomorrow, right?”

Maybe if she lightened the tone a bit, he'd calm down? “I was kinda hoping for a normal date. You know, catch a movie?”

“But after, we could do your patrolling thing after.”

“Uh, maybe.” Home. She should get him home. In the light of day, after a good night's sleep, he'd realize how much danger he'd been in or maybe he'd just think the whole thing had been a dream. Either way, he'd give up this whole patrolling idea, right?

* * *

Human skin, stripped from living flesh, had been processed in long-forgotten rituals to bind this dark tome. It wasn't the type of book often found in a living room. In fact, only scions of high-Council lines still knew the secrets of translating proto-Elamite.

The text had been translated many times over the centuries. In fact, it had been one of those translations, in which the ritual had been renamed the Rite of Bellitorius by some medieval arse of an alchemist, that had sent Giles searching for the original. The rite, the version that had been translated into Latin, had been attempted before. In the mid-thirteen hundreds, the threat of the Aurelian line, vampires that had floated like detritus into Europe in the wake of the Red Death, had been deemed too great. Roger Giles, then head of the Council, had performed the ritual himself. A dozen good men had died at the hands of Aurelian vampires. It wasn't his primary motive, but if Giles succeeded, their deaths would be avenged.

The cuneiform looked as dark as dried blood on the ancient pages. Giles, translating as he read, found the clue he'd been looking for: to rule over those who feast on the blood of men. Yes! This had to be it, the spell that would allow him to control any vampire of the Aurelian line. Angelus
would no longer present a threat to his Slayer.

Perhaps a small glass of Glenlivet to celebrate? Giles glanced at the clock. Gods, it was almost evening and he hadn't eaten since breakfast. Food first. He was already feeling almost too giddy to translate. There was no need to make himself tipsy as well.

He was halfway through a quick stir-fry when he heard a knock at the door. Before responding, he locked the text he'd been translating in a wall-safe and then hid the safe with magic. With the ancient text secured, Giles turned toward the door but before he could answer the knocking turned to pounding. “Give it up, Rupert. I know you're in there.”

Jenny? What was she doing here? Giles pinched the bridge of his nose. Rupert had arranged a date. Of course he had. Giles could make an excuse but … even if he did translate the ritual that night, he couldn't act on it until he'd found the Amulet of Dominion. While he did have an idea on how to locate the amulet, he'd almost certainly need access to a vampire of the line. With Angelus pretending to play nice for Buffy, he might be able to use the vampire, but arranging the meeting would take time. And besides, he rather did want to celebrate.

“Rupert!”

He opened the door to find her with one hand raised, ready to pound again and almost regretted forgetting their date. Jenny looked stunning in a cheongsam, red with flowers embroidered in gold, with a skirt so short he could almost see heaven. “I see you dressed for the evening.”

Her smile had a knife edge to it. “And I see you forgot our date.”

“Ah, well.” He brushed a hand through his hair in a way he'd been told was adorable. He'd need all weapons to hand to survive this angry goddess. “I did get caught up in a book.”

“Good thing I came early. You've got twenty minutes.”

Giles let his gaze linger on her curves and wondered if she'd be willing to stay in. “We'll be doing what exactly?”

“Dinner. Movie.”
Right, she wanted to see *The Saint*. “Ah yes, eye candy. How could I have forgotten?”

“Hey, *Eight Heads in a Duffel Bag* is still playing if you'd rather.”

“I think not.”

“*Michelle and Remy’s High-School Reunion*?”

Giles suppressed a shudder. “Please, I'm at high-school all day. Besides, I have no objections to the eye candy.”

He'd just started running the water for his shower when he heard her shout. “Hey, the eye candy's supposed to be for me.”

Wrapped only in a towel, he stepped into the living room. He grinned as her eyes bulged a bit in surprise. “If you'd rather *Eight Heads in a Duffel Bag*, I can assure you I have absolutely no interest in Joe Pesci.”

“Uh, no, I think I'll go with the eye candy, thanks.”

“You're drooling.”

“Perhaps what I'm seeing is worth a little drool.” She raised a hand to her mouth as if to wipe it away.

“Only a little? I must be losing my touch.”

Giles held the door for Jenny, waiting until she'd left the restaurant before offering his arm. She didn't take it. “I'm not sure I can afford to be seen arm-in-arm with such a lunatic.”

Dramatically pressing hand to heart, Giles replied. “You wound me. I'll have you know that I'm nothing more than a traveller searching for purity.”

They burst into laughter and Jenny wrapped her arm through his. “It really was an awful movie.”

“But it did provide a plethora of eye candy, as promised.”

“So England, what next?”

It was her smirk that decided him. He'd been debating all evening: should he invite her home or not? Her smirk suggested she expected him to. “If it's not too forward, there is a delightful Sauvignon Blanc chilling at my place.”

She leaned in so closely he expected her to kiss him. “Rupert, there's one thing you should know about me.”

“Ah, yes?”

“I'm a beer kind of a gal.” She stepped back, laughing, but took hold of his hand. “Your place though, that sounds good.”

Gods, it was a good fifteen minute walk back. He knew he should have driven although a madcap tear through Main Street at a breakneck speed would hardly impress her with his savoir-faire.

“Teachers' out and holding hands.” The voice was appallingly familiar. “I feel they're not setting a good moral example.”

“Hey, kids.”
Buffy, ignoring Jenny, addressed that Owen lad whom she apparently was out with. “Do you feel they're setting a good moral example?”

The boy seemed to be staring down an alley. “Huh? Oh, I think their example's fine, but don't you think we should be getting to that other thing?”

Gods, she was foregoing her duty to be with that idiot? At least the lad seemed to have gotten her mind off of Angelus. Speaking of which … “Buffy, could I speak with you a moment.”

“Giles, sort of on a date here. Just like you're on a date here. Oooh, we're double dating, except not together.”

“England.” Damn, Jenny did not sound pleased. “Are you dry gulching me to run off with a student?”

“Ah, just for a moment.” He motioned Buffy down the street. “This way if you please.”

“So,” she asked after they'd moved a ways down the street. “Piccola Firenze, any good?”

Jenny had picked the restaurant. He doubted it was worth even two Micheline stars, not that he needed to be distracted into discussing it with his Slayer. “Buffy.”

“If you're gonna yell at me for not patrolling …”

“No, it's not that. I need to see Angel.”

Her foot started tapping as she folded her arms.

“There's as spell that will allow me to determine, unequivocally, whether or not he has a human soul.”

“So, we're not trusting him now?”
No, we're bloody well not. “Buffy, he is a vampire. They are, traditionally, not known for their honesty.” When she didn't reply, he added, “I'd prefer to perform it sooner rather than later.”

Buffy glanced over at Jenny. “So, I should bring him over tonight?”

“What? No!” He took in Buffy's smirk. He drew in as much dignity as he could. “Tomorrow will do nicely. Bring him around to the library after dark.”

“Fine.” Buffy's eyebrows' raised as she caught site of Owen wandering into an alley. “Gotta go!”

He returned to Jenny and offered his arm. She didn't take it but did stroll next to him. “What was that?”

“Ah, you are aware that I've been acting as a mentor to Buffy, yes? It's a special project to reduce recidivism in unruly youth.”

“I did hear some horrific stories about her acting out in her old school.”

“Quite, I gave her some, er, fatherly advice.”

She took his arm. “Is it bad that I find responsibility sexy?”

“Not at all. In fact, I find that most encouraging.”

His hopes for the evening rose with her laughter.

* * *
at the zoo. That night he'd been working his way across the lobby of the zoo's main building when he'd seen something odd in the gift shop. That had been Tim, big as a whale and trying to fit himself into a hammock. The boy worked at the concession stand, selling burgers all day. After a roommate had dumped him to the curb, he'd swiped a key to let himself in through the side gate at night.

Tim had been practically giddy when Bob hadn't fired him. “You can't sleep here,” Bob had told him. “Insurance won't cover it, but you give me that key and I'll let you keep your job.” The insurance had been an excuse. Bob couldn't risk the kid stumbling across his work with the hyenas. “You can come in an hour early to catch a shower and make yourself something to eat in the break room.” The kid was a nobody, but you never knew when even a nobody might turn useful.

After Giles had told him about Eyghon, Bob, thinking Tim could finally be of use, had started sitting with the lad first thing in the morning, bringing coffee and sometimes donuts for the two of them. Bob had been a day or two away from drugging the kid when that little girl, lost, had run up to him when nobody was looking. The power hadn't lasted though and Tim's time was up. Bob was reaching for the donuts when something in Tim's daily babble-fest reached through. “There are no real Sumo schools here in Sunnydale but I might get Sensei Brian to teach me the basics.”

How the hell did some homeless lard-bucket have someone keeping an eye out for him? “Sensei Brian?”

“He's got a dojo over on Main Street. I was thinking I'd ask him if he could teach me. I mean, none of his students are training for Sumo, but all I need are the basics. My cousin Janet's going off to college next year and I'm hoping aunt Nancy'll let me have her room. They're in L.A. There's a real Sumo school there. Being big as I am, it's gotta be good for something, right?”

“You haven't spoken to him yet?”

“Well, no. I keep passing the dojo, watching classes through the window, and I keep meaning to go in, really I do, but I find myself at Doublemeat Palace instead.”

The kid was a real winner. He hadn't gone to that sensei for lessons just like he hadn't gone to his aunt for a place to stay. Bob could see why. Once he'd asked and had been turned down, that'd be it, no more hope, the end of his dreams.

“You're a smart kid. You can get the basics down in less than a year.” Reaching back around for the donuts, he added, “I almost forgot. I picked us up a treat.” After picking up the donuts, he'd ground a couple of tablets and sprinkled them under carefully scraped back icing. The kid wouldn't taste it. He went for sugar bombs. “Boston Cream, your favorite.”
“Thanks Dr. Weirick but I don't know. I did have those three breakfast sandwiches and home fries. I'm sort of full.”

Shit. “Nonsense,” Bob replied amiably. “If you want to be a Sumo wrestler, you have to pack in the carbs.”

The kid looked longingly at the donut but didn't take it. “Actually they eat this stuff called Chankonabe. It's a stew – veggies, tofu, fish, meat – but they do also eat a lot of rice.”

“Not big on the sugar, eh? Maybe that means you should stock up on your sweets now.”

Tim wolfed down the donut in three bites, not even taking time to taste it. The drug took its sweet time taking effect. Bob glanced around, waiting for someone to stumble across them and wished he'd made up an excuse to get the kid into the basement before drugging him. After about fifteen minutes, Tim wasn't completely out but he wasn't moving much either. Bob pulled over a flat cart, rolled the kid onto it, and hauled him away. He'd have to move quickly. There wasn't much time to secure the kid before the rest of the staff showed up to start the workday.

* * *

Buffy, for once, was in the library only a few minutes after the final day's bell had rung. “So, this spell to check for Angel's soul, you're all ready to go with that, right? No last minute problems or anything? I mean, not that there should be because Angel totally has his soul but …”

“Calm, Buffy. I'm certain everything will be fine. If you could move that table and those chairs off to one side. No, I meant out of the way. We'll need this space for the ritual.”

The design on the library floor displayed an octagon in darker tiles against a pale background. For sorcerous purposes a hexagon's association of distance and clear vision would have provided a more felicitous geometric figure, but one worked with what one had.

“I don't suppose Angel's awake yet,” Buffy said as she glanced out a window. “I mean daylight and all, he's probably still asleep, not in a slugabed kind of a way 'cause, you know, vampire, and do vampires sleep during the day? I mean, I guess they'd have to what with being creatures of the night and all.”
Gods, if he had her underfoot all afternoon, he'd never finish laying out the ritual space. “Ah, Buffy, I have an address for you, a nest. Why don't you take care of them and then swing around to retrieve Angel?”

“I don't have to pick up Angel. He said he'd meet me here. Nest? What nest? I thought we were gonna spar.”

“Buffy, if you'd given it any thought, you'd have realized sparring would be impossible given that I'm preparing for a major ritual.”

She deflated at his words. Gods, was the Slayer honestly no more resilient than that? “Oh, uh, where is it?”

“203 Richardson. There may be humans there as well so take care. Vampires that feed on willing victims tend to be more cowardly than the demons you'd normally Slay. They might even hide so search the house thoroughly.”

“Willing victims? What, they go there to be killed?”

“Vampires don't necessarily have to kill to feed. We can discuss it later.”

“Right. Later.” She didn't turn to leave but stood there, staring at him.

“The ritual will be fine, Buffy. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Sure, of course, not worrying. I'll, uh, see you later then.”

Within his office, where it couldn't be seen from the library, Giles laid out an octagon in salt and sat a scrying bowl in its center. Withing that bowl he set one of a pair of magically attuned ametrine crystals. Combining amethyst, which would allow him to exsect and isolate a portion of Angelus' essence, and citrine, which would allow him to transmit that essence between the charged crystals, ametrine's association with the astrological sign of Gemini would allow Giles to twin Angelus' essence, to clone it in a sense. Part of the vampire's essence would be captured in the ametrine in the library and part in the ametrine in Giles' office. If all went well, Angelus would never suspect that
Giles had trapped a piece of his essence within the second crystal.

Buffy returned with Angelus so close upon the heels of nightfall that Giles knew she hadn't spent much time searching for stray vampires in the suck-house. No matter. That had been nothing more than a distraction, a means of keeping her out of the way while he set his trap for the larger prey.

“Giles, Angel. Angel, Giles.”

Angelus' demeanor lived up to every description that Giles had read. None of the vampire's menace came through. His almost sincere facade confirmed what those few who'd survived the creature had documented, that Angelus had the patience to play a long game.

There was no need to waste time with pleasantries. “I'll need you in the center of the octagon.”

“In the octagon?” The vampire looked surprised. “You're not performing the Revelation of Anubis?”

Damn. Giles hadn't realized Angelus knew that much about magic. “You can't expect me to trust a spell that is clearly little more than a folk-charm, not with something as serious as whether one of the most vicious vampires in history has a soul. Obviously I'll need to resort to the higher magics.”

The vampire played at guilt quite convincingly. His performance as a souled penitent was certainly outstanding. After a hurt glance toward Buffy, Angelus stepped into the ritual space.

“Where do you want me?” Buffy asked.

“Outside of the sacred circle or, in this case, sacred octagon. Never cross into or out of the circle during a magical ritual or you risk unleashing dangerous forces.”

“Okay.” Buffy didn't sound convinced but Giles wasn't concerned. In this case, the sacred circle was more supplementary than essential. It would help focus Angelus' essence but wasn't necessary to contain it.

Knowing Angelus had an understanding of the occult arts, Giles added in three spells meant mainly to distract the vampire from the true purpose of his ritual. Because Angelus had expressed an
awareness of the Revelation of Anubis, Giles used an older and more obscure spell, not Egyptian but Sumerian, a spell only a scholar would recognize.

“Peta mudutu shi.” The ametrine glowed, a spark shining against the darker wood of the floor. Interesting. The vampire hadn't been lying about the soul.

With a part of Angelus' soul trapped in the one crystal, Giles chanted the spell to double it and to transfer a portion into the crystal in his office. “Maharu abanyaruahhu abnu melammu libbu qamu ina etuti absu zeru babu.” Giles could only trust that the final spell had worked. He made a show of dispersing energies, hoping the distraction would keep Angelus from focusing on the pertinent part of the ritual.

Buffy, surprisingly, waited until he'd finished before speaking. “Did it work? The stone's glowing. Does that mean he has a soul?”

“It does.” Angelus' glare suggested the crystal, or more likely the soul, bothered him. “That glow, that's part of my soul. If I didn't have one …”

Giles finished the thought. “If he had no soul, the crystal wouldn't be glowing.”

“Told ya.” The girl, bouncing on her feet, appeared unexpectedly relieved. She obviously felt far more for the vampire than he'd imagined. Ah, well, the vampire's death would resolve that little problem.

Angelus grabbed the crystal. The vampire brought the crystal close to his face, stared for a moment, and smashed it down to the floor. Yellow-gold shards, darker without the spark, scattered out from the dent where the crystal had struck.

“Angel? What the hell?”

Giles spoke before the vampire could. “The crystal held part of his soul. If it hadn't been destroyed, it could have been used against him.”

“Sorry about the floor.” The vampire did appear contrite. Whom did the beast think we was fooling?
“Once Buffy's returned the table to its original position, the damage won't be visible.”

“So, you trust him now, right?”

Over my dead body. “Yes, the evidence of the soul is convincing.”

For a moment he thought Buffy might hug the vampire, but then she stepped away and Angelus stared at the ground. Why the awkwardness? Did Buffy feel uncomfortable because he was watching them? She'd never seemed to be concerned with his disapproval before. Ah, no, there was that Owen lad that Buffy was dating. Good, at least that should keep her out of the vampire's arms long enough for him to kill Angelus.

“Perhaps you could leave me to clean up the remnants of the ritual? Uh, Buffy, since you didn't get a chance to patrol earlier …”

“Yeah, yeah, go kill monsters. On it.”

Giles kept watch until Buffy and Angelus had left the school grounds behind. Anxious, concerned his spell hadn't worked he ducked into his office and breathed a sigh of relief. The second crystal was glowing with Angelus' soul.

Giles spoke the words of the final spell. “Ati me peta babka. Talamu gug sibum ina ahisa masku manzazu abanyarahhu zeru sa akhkharu.” The scrying bowl darkened. Chanted directions drew his viewpoint upward, as if through the air, until he was looking down at the California coastline. He changed the chant, moving down and focusing in until he faced a wall. He saw a tree, a depiction of a tree to be precise, laid out in tiles against pale green marble. Giles had started chanting again to move away from the tree and gain a clearer idea of where this mosaic might be, when he felt Eyghon's interest. The demon's power rose within him. “No! Don't!” The crystal cracked into three chunks, losing its spark. Giles swore as he fell against his office door. With the crystal shattered, Eyghon had lost interest but the demon's power had destroyed the spell, had lost him Angelus' essence. Giles knew the Amulet of Dominion was hidden somewhere in California but other than that he had only an image of a tree laid out in tile against marble to lead him to the amulet that would allow him to destroy Angelus.

* * *

Tucker kicked a rock along the empty street. Fucking suburbs, never anything to do. It'd been weeks
since he'd had anything close to fun and even then Giles had taken that demon and shoved it into that old guy. Like a demon'd want a body that wrinkled. Tucker had begged, fucking begged, but Giles wouldn't put the demon into him because he hadn't, Giles had said, proved his worth. “Prove my worth? Fuck your ass.” He'd gotten beaten up by a bunch of demons. What more did the guy want?

“Hey, there you are.”

Tucker didn't think. He punched, a quick one-two straight to the gut. As the little creep fell over, he wondered if he shouldn't get in a kick or two.

“You shouldn't punch me, Mom'll …” Tucker grabbed Andrew by the hair and yanked him off the street. “Ow.”

“Mom'll do nothing. Say one word and you'll never say anything again. You got me?”

“Back, demon!”

Tucker shoved Andrew to the ground and turned. Fuck. Owen was holding a cross at arm's length as if that was gonna save him. “What'cha gonna do, pretty boy. Pray over me?” Tucker ripped the cross from Owen's hand.

“But … but she said crosses would …”

“Yeah, if I was a fucking vampire.” Tucker pitched the cross. He made a fist and punched one hand into the other. “Could bloody you up though, see if any vamps smell ya and come running for dinner.”

“I'm not afraid of you.”

“Yeah? That's 'cause you're stupid.”

Idiot Andrew didn't know when to stay down. “Tucker, this might not be such a good idea. You know Mom works for Mr. Thurman.”
Tucker turned on Andrew but held back his kick. At least the little shit shrank back, but he was right. If Owen's Dad embarrassed Mom at work, Tucker'd never hear the end of it. Tucker was wondering if he could bluff his way out of this when he heard the screams. “You're just lucky I've got better things to do.” He ran off, chasing the screams.

There, in front of Amy Madison's house, the sidewalk, it wasn't usually that dark. He stopped at the edge of the street. Blood, the sidewalk was covered in blood. And guts. Further back, by the edge of the house, he saw a body. Tucker stepped closer, careful to avoid the guts. It wasn't just a body, it was pieces of a body, six or seven chunks. Cool.

Tucker wondered if he could find a bag in the house. His first dead body. He wanted a trophy. He heard another scream, higher pitched this time, maybe a girl. The corpse wasn't going anywhere. Tucker followed the screams.

Around the side of the house, he found Amy. Light glowed between her hands like she was trying to do a spell. Shit, if he'd known she could do magic, he might have hung with her. Giles wouldn't let him near magic.

Something growled and the light between Amy's hands vanished in a flash, like a strike of lightning, there and then gone. Claws reached out of a shadow and raked across her throat. The spray went fucking everywhere. Awesome! This was so much better than just finding a body.

He didn't think to be afraid, not even when the demon turned its green, glowing eyes on him. It was that Eyghon demon, the one Giles had put into that old fucker. The skin was greener and the claws seemed sharper, but it was the same demon.

The claws reached for him and a hand wrapped around his throat. Shit. Shit shit shit. He couldn't move, not with those eyes staring into him. The demon tilted its head. Oh God, it was gonna eat him. “Mine,” it growled.

“Yes, sir.”

The Eyghon demon drew its hand back and screamed, a growling howl of rage, into the night. Tucker screamed with him. When they stopped, his throat was sore. The demon sniffed the air. “Power. Magic. The traitor's pretty toy.”
Eyghon ran off and Tucker chased after. The traitor, that had to be Giles. Eyhgon wanted to be in Tucker but Giles kept them apart. That meant the toy had to be, uh, Buffy or maybe Willow. They were always hanging in the library. Didn't matter. Either way, he was gonna see someone die.

When he caught up, Eyghon was standing at the edge of an alley. Tucker glanced around. “What the fuck, man?” There weren't any girls, but something stepped out of the shadows. Wicked, even better. His face was ridged and distorted. Had to be a vampire.

The vamp was big, dressed in black, which made sense. Black made it easier to hide in the shadows. When the vamp stepped forward, it felt like he was drawing a line in the sand. “They aren't for you.”

Eyghon didn't say a word. He leaped for the vampire. Tucker, peering from behind a dumpster, couldn't make out much. The demon and vamp were moving too fast. That sucked. What was the use of watching a demon pound a vampire if you couldn't see the kill?

Eyghon went flying and crashed against a wall. The vamp walked over slowly but didn't go for a kill. Squatting, he stared at the demon. Then the vamp raised his head as if he'd heard something and ran off.

Tucker waited to see if whatever the vamp had heard was coming for the demon, but the street remained empty. He looked both ways, up and down the street, before approaching Eyghon. Tucker thought the demon would be dead, but he was still breathing. Fuck. Why hadn't the vamp killed it? Tucker stared at the demon but it didn't look like he was gonna die. With a shrug, he grabbed under its arms to drag it away.

* * *

Appearances could be deceiving, take Masa Luna for example. Sure, up front it practically cloned a 7-11, if you ignored the offerings of Adobadas potato chips and Jarritos, a surprisingly refreshing soda, especially the lime. The back of the store, however, that's where the real action was: a late night grill offering up the best Mexican and Salvadorean fare this side of L.A. That fyarl messing the place up? So not necessary.

Buffy ducked under the flying chair. It crashed heavily, taking down two tables and dumping three meals onto the floor. Damn, why hadn't she redirected the chair so it'd do less damage? “Sorry,” she called out to the patrons who, making a beeline for the front of the store, were too busy to answer. That was good though, the beeline that is, because it left the backdoor free for Dumbo the fyarl's exit.
A punch and two kicks shoved the fyarl to the backdoor and had only turned over one table, happily empty of food and so could be easily set right again once she'd gotten the demon out of the shop. But, and that was a big but, the door was closed. How was she supposed to hold the door open and kick the demon out to the alley where she could kill it without making more of a mess?

The door opened and Angel popped in, blocking the exit, sure, but this she could at least work with. “Buffy,” he said, “I've got something … oh, you're busy.”

“Just a bit.” A kick sent the fyarl careening into Angel who shoved it back into the restaurant. Its fall shattered a table to splinters. Stupid big mysterious vampire guy, didn't he know she was trying to get the fyarl outside?

“Angel, I'm trying to move the demon into the alley before it trashes the place.” The fyarl threw itself at Angel. Good, at least it was moving toward the door. “Do you know how few take-out places are open this late?”

Angel tugged at the fyarl's hands, pulling them away from his throat. The hands reached back, grasping even tighter. “A little help here?”

“Oh, like you need to breath.” A couple of punches turned the fyarl's attention to where she was standing … inside the restaurant. Bad, bad, bad. “Door.”

“What?”

“Open the door.” Angel opened the door. Two kicks sent the fyarl stumbling into the alley. Buffy chased after to find Angel wailing on the demon with a crowbar. “Thanks,” she said. “You have no idea how many mummified hotdogs I'd put up with post-patrol before I found this place.”

The fyarl fell and didn't get up. The crowbar clattered against the cement. “You're welcome.”

They stared at the corpse. “I guess he doesn't disintegrate. Help me move him to the dumpster?”

“I got it.” Angel picked up the fyarl.
“Oh, good. I'll just see if they're all okay inside.”

Maria, who took the orders and ran the register, was already turning tables right-side-up. “Oh,” Buffy said. “You're all good in here?”

“Si, si,” Maria said, gesturing Buffy to the counter. During the spate of chatter, Buffy wished she'd taken Spanish instead of French. At least she'd get in some practice while waiting for her food and maybe she'd even understand a bit of what Maria was saying.

Maria handed over a take-out box. “Um, I was gonna eat here?” There was more Spanish and gesturing toward the mess, which, okay, was going to take some cleaning up. “Uh, right, I'll see you next time.”

Angel was in the alley, obviously waiting for her, which was nice but she sort of hoped he didn't want any of her tacos. She got kind of hungry at night. But maybe vampires didn't eat tacos. Did vampires eat at all or were they all Bela Lugosi with the not even drinking wine? Wait, and why was Angel here? “You aren't waiting for me just to wait for me.”

“Huh?” Gosh, he made even confusion look good.

“You had a reason for showing up,” she said.

“Yeah, something to show you.”

“You mean like etchings? 'Cause, you know, I honestly don't know you that well.”

He didn't get it. Right, Mr. mysterious let's get to work guy, well vampire not guy but it seemed to be the same diff. “No,” he said, “a demon.”

“A demon. You really do know how to show a girl a good time. Did you kill it at least?” Probably not. Why show it if he'd kill it? She could just tell that this was gonna mean cold tacos.

“Uh, no, I knocked it out. He's human. I don't kill humans.”
“I thought you'd said demon.”

“Something of both,” Angel replied. “A man who invoked a demon into himself.”

“A demon who's really a human.” As Buffy's hand clenched into a fist, the plastic of the take-out bag stretched tightly around her skin. She remembered what Giles had said, well sort of remembered. She'd gotten the gist anyway. Some stupid guy didn't know enough to not want to be a demon and the ritual he'd used to get the demon under his skin had required the death of that little girl from the zoo. “Where?”

“Back that way a couple of blocks.”

She made him run. “It's okay,” Angel said. “I knocked him out. He'll be down for a couple of hours.”

Angel stopped on an empty street. There were closed stores, all dark on the inside, a few scattered cars, and an alley, darker even than the stores. “I don't understand,” Angel said. He was here. He was right here.”

“You lost him? He killed a little girl, Angel. Murdered her.” The take-out fell to the ground.

Angel turned his head oddly, as if sniffing the wind or something. “This way.”

She followed him across the street. “You said it was back there.”

“I can smell him. He went this way.”

“You said you'd knocked him out. A couple of hours you said.”

“Someone must have moved him.”
“Ugh.” Buffy wondered who’d be stupid enough to move an unconscious demon. “Only in Sunnydale.”

Angel stopped at a curb. “The scent stops here. They must have driven off. I'm sorry.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “You are.” Nothing more to do. Trail's gone cold. She started walking.

He called after her. “Buffy.”

She took a deep breath before turning. “I'm sorry I was mean, okay? It's just, he killed a girl, a little girl, and I keep thinking I could have saved her.”

“We'll get him,” Angel said. Buffy didn't see how. “A picture,” he added. “You can show it around at Willy's. Maybe someone will recognize him.”

“You took a photo? What, while you were beating him up?”

Angel shook his head. “A drawing. I can sketch him out. There's paper and charcoal back at my place.”

“I'm too tired for etchings.”

Buffy started walking again. A drawing. Like that wasn't too thin a thread to hang anyone's hopes on.

“Uh, your bag,” he called after. “You left your food.”

“I'm not hungry.”

* * *
Damn but Eyghon was heavy. Tucker had dragged the demon as far as the first car, picked the lock, and dumped the creature inside. He'd driven around awhile, taking a bunch of turns, before parking by offices in some dead-end. He'd thought about leaving the demon in the car but wasn't sure if the vampire could track them or not. One of the offices had a ramp. The lock at the top was easy to pick. Mom might have thought uncle Charlie was a reprobate, but at least he shared useful skills. Tucker dragged the demon out of the car and into the building. When he let the shoulders drop, the head hit concrete. Tucker peered closely at the face. In the dim light he couldn't be sure, but he thought the ears looked less monstery. That seemed to be a problem with putting a demon into yourself. It didn't last long.

Tucker kicked the body a couple of times, but it didn't move. Boring. He wandered into the building to see where he'd holed up. Office supplies, ugh. Who the hell sold that crap? The fridge held a whole case of sodas. Popping one open, he dropped into one of the chairs at a desk and started opening drawers. Nothing worth taking. He tried turning on a computer, but it wanted a password.

This was dull. Maybe the demon would wake, but it wasn't a demon, not anymore. It was that guy from the zoo, the one Giles had put Eyghon into in the first place. He thought about kicking the guy again but he wanted the demon himself. This zoo guy seemed to know to call the demon. Tucker couldn't piss him off until he knew what the guy knew. Zoo guy wasn't waking though. Wasn't there some flick where a guy'd been knocked out and woken with water? Had to be worth a try. Tucker dribbled soda onto the guy's face.

Zoo guy's eyes blinked open. His hand darted out, fast as a snake, and grabbed Tucker's shirt. He dragged Tucker in and dropped him onto the concrete floor. Sitting atop of Tucker, he wrapped one hand around Tucker's throat. “Who are you?”

Tucker tried to choke out his name.

“You're that kid who works for Giles.”

Tucker nodded as best he could.

“He send you after me?”

Tucker could feel his eyes bulging. He tried to say no but whatever choking sound he came out with didn't seem to convince zoo guy. Tucker shook his head from side-to-side as best he could with a hand around his throat.
The fingers loosened. “What are you doing here?”

“I saved you.”

“You what?”

Tucker took a deep breath. “After the vampire'd knocked you out, I dragged you here where you'd be safe.”

“Out of the goodness of your own heart?”

“I want him.”

“Him? Who? That vampire?”

“The demon. Eyghon. I want you to put him into me.”

Zoo guy released his throat. “What about Giles? Why not ask him.”

“He won't let me.” Fuck, he sounded as whiny as Andrew.

Zoo guy leaned in, staring so closely that Tucker wished he could lean away. “Why? Are you looking for the high, the euphoria of being filled with darkness? Do you think it'll make you invincible? It won't. Or maybe you're looking for the seventh sense, the almost spiritual connection to a demonic realm. Or do you want the power?”

“Fuck that shit. I wanna bust heads.”

Zoo guy rose to his feet. Tucker felt small, lying there below him, but was too afraid to move. Zoo guy reached into his pocket and dropped a key. “That'll let you into the zoo at the side entrance, the one off the parking lot. Tomorrow night. You bring the sacrifice.”
In Sunnydale, the Slayer went home early. Oh, not by human standards, but demons expected a Slayer to stay the course, party all night, not kick off before 2 AM. The smarter demons didn't come out until the Slayer had retired for the evening. Angel didn't mind picking up her slack. He knew Buffy wanted a normal life.

He'd shown the sketch around but if anyone did recognize the demon, they weren't admitting it. Angel had returned to his patrol, hoping he might find the demon again and capture it so he could redeem himself in Buffy's eyes. He'd been searching for hours but there'd been no trace.

He turned his steps to the seedier side of town, where humans played their dirty games, thinking that the pheromones might draw the demon, but there were no scenes of carnage, no bloody corpses littering street or club or playspace or dungeon or whatever they called their little dives. He paused outside Tribulation, which was inconspicuous from the outside, pale brick and a door you'd never pass through if you didn't know the password. It wasn't worth going in. If the demon had attacked, Angel would smell it even from the street. He could go home, warm up pig's blood and … No, he couldn't let Buffy down more than he had already. He'd stay the course, but where else could he look?

A man flew out of Tribulation, backwards, his feet scrambling for traction as if he'd been shoved out the door. He hit the ground rolling, back on his feet in a moment, but the door had closed. He ran one hand through his hair before pulling out a cigarette. Angel was puzzling over the man's appearance – there was something familiar about him under those jeans and white t-shirt – when the man's scent struck him. It was the Watcher. Giles.

Angel brushed his fingers over the sketch of the demon. He'd wanted to hand it to Buffy himself but he couldn't bring it to her during the day. He could leave it in her room while she slept but didn't want to frighten her, not that Buffy scared easily but a man in her room while she slept, that wasn't how humans did things.

Angel hadn't stopped looking at the Watcher but, lost in his musings, hadn't noticed when the man had started staring back. The Watcher hadn't moved. That would have drawn Angel's attention immediately, but it unnerved him that he'd let the Watcher catch him off his guard.

As the Watcher approached, Angel stood his ground, waiting for the man to come to him. “Angelus, innit?”

“Mr. Giles, I, uh, wasn't stalking you. Honest.”
“Course not. Vampires never stalk their prey, oh no, you sweet talk ’em, seduce ’em into walking right into your traps.” The Watcher took a drag and dropped his smoke. As the cigarette fell, he brushed at his hair with one hand while the other reached into his back pocket to pull out a cross. He let his hand drop to his side with the cross hidden behind his arm. It was smoothly done. If Angel hadn't been looking for it, he wouldn't have noticed the man had armed himself. “I don't know why she doesn't just toss you out with the trash.”

“Huh?”

“Blow you to hell. Run a stake through your heart. Off with your head. Set you on fire. Drag you into the sunlight and watch you squirm like the bug you are until you're nothing more than dust in the wind.”

“Mr. Giles, I understand why you don't trust me, but …”

“Don't trust the evil undead? Got that bloody right.”

The Watcher's words stung. Didn't trust him? The man had been there when he'd saved Buffy. He'd killed his own Sire for the Slayer. The man knew he had a soul. Didn't any of that earn him a modicum of trust? Angel forced himself to continue. “I found something earlier, a man who'd invoked a demon into himself. He escaped but I drew up a sketch.” Angel held out the image.

“And what, exactly, do you expect me to do with that?” The Watcher had changed somehow. His aggression hadn't lessened but he seemed more refined than he had a moment earlier, less like a thug.

While Angel processed the change, a boy too young to be in this neighborhood, came around a corner. “Hey, Mr. Giles, you haven't seen Tucker, have you? I've checked all his usual haunts – the library, that creepy bar which I'm not allowed into so I just peek through the windows, the mansion …”

“Andrew.” The boy jumped.

The Watcher tore the sketch from Andrew's hand and ripped the paper to pieces. “Go home, Andrew.”

“But Tucker's not home yet and I'm not supposed to be unsupervised.”

“I'll take him home.”

The Watcher nodded as if agreeing to leave a defenseless boy alone with a vampire.

“Can we stop by the mansion? That's the one place I didn't check since I can't get in …”

The boy let out a yelp as the Watcher yanked his arm to drag him off. “Come along, Andrew. Mustn't get chummy with the nasty vampire.”

Angel stared, not sure what had just happened. The boy, Andrew, bounced beside the man, still rambling on a mile a minute. “So, how come you're dressed like James Dean? Did you ever see that movie? *Easy Rider* I mean. Oh, wait, that's not James Dean. I really didn't like the ending. Who would have expected those rednecks to kill the two guys, the motorcycle guys I mean. Except it was sort of, uh, predicted? No, foreshadowed. It was foreshadowed when that other character, the one played by Jack Nicholson, died from grievous wounds also inflicted by rednecks.”

Angel picked up the shreds of his sketch. He didn't know why the Watcher had rejected it, but he couldn't let that stand. He'd have to draw another. It was too important to Buffy that the man who'd invoked the demon be caught. He didn't care what the Watcher thought. Angel wasn't about to drop it.

* * *

The spot under the oak, on the south side of the high-school, was cool but shady. “Come on, Willow, it's dark as night out here. Look how pale I am. What if I was out patrolling and got mistaken for a vamp?” At Willow's raised eyebrow, she added, “It'd be embarrassing. I'm the Slayer. I can't be mistaken for a vampire.”

The eight fuzz balls continued to dance around Willow's head, weaving around her like planets circling a sun. “Maybe that'd be a good thing, being mistaken for a vampire I mean. You could catch them unawares. And no,” she added with a frown. “We're not moving out of the shade. Tree being
used to hide magic practice. Remember?"

As a group of geeks wandered by, rambling on about Jedi and lights sabers, one of them nodded at Willow and got a little wave in return. “I think it's more the Hellmouthy lack of awareness,” Buffy said, “that's making them not notice the levitating fuzzballs.”

“We're staying in the shade.”

Buffy flopped onto the grass and stared up at the tree, all full of freshly budded leaves keeping the sun from shining onto them. “With all this wanting to hide out in the shade, maybe you're the vampire.”

The fuzzballs wobbled and fell to the ground. “Would that even work? Vampires hiding in the shade to avoid the sun?”

At the sound of light clapping, Buffy turned her head to see Xander – and how come he got to be out in the sun? – applauding as he approached. “Very good, 'cause levitating lint, that's gonna scare off the demons.”

The fuzzballs levitated off the ground and lined themselves up, one after the other, as if in attack formation, and flew off the mark, bopping Xander's face, rat-a-tat-tat and flew around to strike again. Xander waved his arms, batting at them, just like King Kong in that old movie, well, you know, if Kong had been human and on the grass in the sun instead of on the Empire State at night. “Hey, stop!”

The fuzzballs flew back to Willow and dropped into her hand. “That was mean. Just for that, Alexander Lavelle Harris, you're buying my sodas tonight.”

“Hey, ixnay on the iddlemay amenay.”

“Are we Bronzing it tonight?” Buffy asked. “Who's playing?”

“Some group called Budapest,” Willow replied. “They're from England. Oooh, do you think Giles would want to see them?”
Xander flopped down next to them. “I think Giles' head would explode if he even entered a building where things weren't categorized by the Dewey Decimal system.” When he spoke again, his voice sounded too bright, as if he was trying to sound casual. “So, what are you two talking about? Angel, right? You were talking about Angel.”

Couldn't Xander get off of that I hate Angel kick? “Actually I was trying to talk this vampire goth chick into venturing out into the sunlight.”

“But Angel, he's got to have been up to some wacky hijinks, right? Wait, vampire goth?” Xander nodded toward Willow and then tilted his head as he stared at Buffy. “You see what she's wearing, right?”

Willow's sweater did have black and maroon, typical vamp colors, but it was striped with light green and tan as well, and that yellow hairband was nowhere near a goth look. One of Willow's fuzzballs flew into the air and floated at eye level. “It's not my fault if I freckle rather than tan.”

“Well,” Buffy said, “she does seem to have that using her power for darkness bit down, forcing me to stay here in the shade and all.”

“Oh, well, uh, milady,” Xander said, “If you'd care for a stroll in the sun, I'd be happy to offer my arm.”

“Thanks, but no. I think I'll lie here and save my energy. I want to be extra fighty for sparring.”

Three more fuzzballs flew into the air to join the first. They started looping in a figure eight. “Oh, there might be a problem with that, with the sparring I mean or with sparring in the library at least. I heard this guy talking to Miss Calendar about some sort of scanning project. It looks like all our library books are gonna be digitized.”

Buffy sat up. “All the books? Aren't they going to wonder why a high-school library has so many occult books?”

“I don't think so. The principal's office knows all about the books. In fact, Giles was supposed to teach a class, some sort of mix of anthropology, sociology, and psychology addressing the worldview that admits to magic and demons. I was pretty upset when it was cancelled. It sounded fascinating.”
Xander laughed. “Giles teaching a class? Fascinating? Try dull.”

One of Willow’s fuzzballs flew off and bopped Xander’s nose. “Hey!”

***

The books had been shelved, the card catalogue updated, and the library been dusted within an inch of its life. Rupert picked up his teacup, paused to pull out a handkerchief, and wiped the water off the bottom of the cup and the ring off the table. He put the cup down and glanced at the clock. Willow was late. Well, no, not late exactly. She’d told him that Jenny would be keeping her in class for a short quiz. So why was he feeling unsettled?

It couldn’t, in honesty, have anything to do with Willow. He’d been feeling this way all day. But he didn’t think Buffy was the problem. Yes, the Slayer was dating, which was unprecedented to be certain, but she did fulfill her duties. So why did he feel as if he were waiting for the other shoe to drop?

When Willow did finally arrive, she seemed distracted. “Problem with your test?”

“Huh? Oh, no. It’s just, well, you know how Buffy’s been all upset about that girl who went missing from the zoo.”

Rupert had read about the child in the newspapers. Given that she’d vanished in Sunnydale, she was almost certainly dead. He hadn’t realized Buffy had been feeling any particular guilt. “Yes.”

“Someone else is gone now too, some guy who works at the zoo. He’s homeless so the police wouldn’t usually be concerned – and do you know how many homeless people disappear in Sunnydale each month? I mean I thought the high-school attrition rate was bad.”

“Willow, could you get back to this young man?”

“Well, with the girl missing from the zoo and this guy working in the zoo, they’re wondering if there isn’t some sort of connection.”
Giles, carefully keeping his voice level, said, “I hadn't seen anything in the papers about a missing zoo attendant.”

“Well, no, they're keeping it out of the papers ’cause they think it's some human, you know. They don't want to let some serial killer know they're onto him. I just, well, I finished the quiz early and I sort of got onto the police department's computer system, uh, just by accident. It's not like I have it bookmarked or anything.”

That's it. He was going to kill Weirick. Grabbing his tweed jacket in passing, Giles strode two steps toward the door, stopped, and turned to stare at the book cage. If he truly meant to kill the man, he'd need a weapon, something small but sharp.

“Um, Mr. Giles. My lesson?”

Giles stared at the girl and, for a moment, couldn't think who she was. Willow. Powerful magic. Magic that belonged to him, but her lack of training left her magic difficult to use. He needed to continue her lessons, but, no, not that afternoon. Weirick was dangerous. Giles needed to deal with him first. “Practice your meditation. I have an appointment.”

Before he could decide if he should add more details for veracity's sake, Kris barged through the library door with a man in tow, and not just any man but Lucas Miller. Seeing Miller felt like a punch to the gut. The man hired out as a contractor, specializing in information gathering, or, more accurately, spying. Giles had no doubt he'd been sent by the Council.

“Mr. Giles, good, I'm so glad you're here,” Kris said as if she'd expected to find him elsewhere. “This is Mr. Miller. He's here to scan the library.”

Giles gave them a bland grin. “Here to what?”

The blue polo shirt and khakis suggested Miller had been born and bred in California, but Giles had heard, back in London where a colleague’d had an unfortunate run-in with the man, that Miller hailed from Australia. “Scan your books,” the man replied in an accent so perfect that Giles would have sworn he'd been born and bred in Sunnydale itself. “Digitize them that is. It's part of the Californian State Initiative for the Advancement of Knowledge.”

Flickering his gaze away from Miller, as if the man were beneath his notice, Giles turned on Kris. “Miss Mansfield, I don't know what this nonsense is supposed to be, but it can't be a legitimate
"I'm sorry Mr. Giles, but I've spent the last two hours verifying Mr. Miller and his Initiative. It's legitimate."

Of course it was. Miller had a reputation, the best of the best. He wouldn't be so easily gotten rid of. Willow would have to go. Giles couldn't afford to have someone as clever as Miller sniffing around the girl, wondering what Giles' interest was. "Ah, Miss Rosenberg, I'm afraid we'll need the room."

Willow's eyes were as wide as an owl's. "But, but, where should I go?"

"Why don't you return to the computer lab?"

"But I'm supposed to be here! What if I get in trouble for not being here when I'm supposed to be?"

Gods, could the child not just leave? "If anyone complains, send them to me."

Willow glared at him woefully as she gathered up her books. Giles waited until she'd left the library. "And why hadn't I heard of this Initiative before?"

"We had no warning," Kris replied. "Apparently the paperwork was lost."

"Warning?" Miller asked. "As if I'm an invasion?"

"Of course not," Kris said.

"But it is legitimate?" Giles asked.

"I'm afraid so," Miller drawled. "You'll have to put up with me and my team until each and every book in this library has been digitized."

Giles wished he could sick Snyder on the man but, unfortunately, he could predict which way the principal would jump. Snyder wasn't one to buck authority. “I'm afraid it's quite impossible. I'm far too busy. I was about to start upon a project to reorganize the entire library. The current filing system is … non-standard. I can't imaging what my predecessor had been thinking.”

“Which means you'll be pulling all the books already. Perfect. I'll just keep an eye on you and scan the books after you've pulled them.”

“Keep an eye on me?”

“Watch you.”

Watch me? Damn the man, he was taunting Giles, throwing the fact that the Council had sent him in Giles' face. Ripper's head tilted left as he clenched his hand into a fist. The punch to Miller's chin sent him sprawling. Ripper leaped after, grabbed him by the collar and shoved his fist into Miller's gut. Before he could get a third punch in, Kris had grabbed him. He could have fought her off, but Giles took advantaged of his distraction. “Forgive me,” Giles said. “I'm not fond of surprises.”

Miller wiped blood from his nose as he rose to his feet. His eyes glittered in triumph, and Giles had to admire his professionalism. Giles knew that Miller could have taken Ripper down in a heartbeat, but instead he took a beating to protect his cover. “I do have to admit, while few are glad to see me, that's the first time I've been punched.”

You officious little prick, Ripper growled.

Settle down, Giles insisted. Let me handle him.

No, why should I let you have all the fun? Not that you know what fun is.

Giles pressed against Ripper, holding him down. What the hell do you think you're doing?

Ripper pressed back. Been too long since I've had a night out, mate. I'm getting' outta here.

Oh no you don't.
Rupert blinked. An incoherent thought about how lush Kris looked in that short skirt gave way to panic. He felt as if the floor were giving way beneath him. What the hell was Lucas Miller doing in his library?

* * *

A Hellmouth filtered perceptions, changing what people noticed. Miller had heard of the phenomena but had never seen it in action before. The two boys, Dave and Fritz, had blithely scanned dozens of occult texts without once asking why the books were in a high-school library, even after the one girl, Willow, had drawn attention to the books by babbling on about some class Giles had been meant to teach. She'd only stopped when the Slayer had pulled her to one side for a quiet chat. The other boy, Xander, who didn't seem to care about the books one way or the other, spent his time blathering at Willow and casting longing glances at the Slayer. Miss Calendar, who'd not only known of the texts but had been thrilled for the chance to get her hands on them, had turned out to be a better ally than Miller had expected. Her mere presence mitigated Giles' anger or at least its expression. There was obviously an attachment between them for all that they were trying to play it down.

The Slayer displayed a lack of interest in the books that almost anyone in the Council would have found shocking. Potentials were trained to respect their Watchers' scholarship, but Buffy had been identified by the Council only after she'd been Chosen. Given her lack of interest, Miller was surprised to see her in the library much less helping. She removed a book from a casket and blew dust off the cover. Even though Giles said he'd have to review the book before it could be scanned, it ended up in what the Slayer referred to as the Willow pile. Giles noticed immediately. He was nothing if not competent. “Ah, no, over here please. I'll need to take a look at it first.”

The Watcher's disinterested glance at the cover gave way to pure terror. With a distinct lack of subtlety, he headed straight for his office with the book. “Hey,” Buffy called after. “That one hasn't been scanned.”

Miller could almost hear Giles sigh although the man kept his face remarkably calm. “And it won't be. There's a reason it had been kept under lock and key.”

“But why not, Mr. Giles?” Fritz obviously cared more about needling Giles than the book.

“Yeah, England,” Miss Calendar added. “Share with the class.”

“I'm afraid it's too risque for a high-school library.”
“Risque? Like etchings?” Xander turned to Miller. “You're in charge of this whole scanning deal. Make him share.”

“I'll take Mr. Giles' word on what books are inappropriate. These are for high-school consumption after all.” Miller didn't know what the book was. Anything that terrified a Watcher was better out-of-sight and out-of-mind.

Giles vanished into the office and returned without the book. Miller wondered where he'd hidden it. Obviously not in the cabinets above his desk. Miller had emptied them, adding the books to the pile to be scanned. While most of the books had been schlock, there were a few valuable tantric texts in the mix. He suspected Giles would be furious that Miller had removed the books from his office. In fact, he was looking forward to Giles' rage as well as to his attempts to justify keeping books proscribed by the Council in a high-school library.

* * *

Bruce Lee could grab a bad guy's fist and freeze the attack mid-strike. Andrew figured it was some kind of Jedi technique only not really Jedi but some kind of mystical teaching because George Lucas had based the Jedi on Shaolin monks. It wasn't like there was a secret order of Japanese monks that wielded light sabers. That would be so cool but they probably didn't exist and even if they did, one wasn't about to leap out of the bushes and help Andrew, not that he was sure he needed help.

Andrew had tried digging in his feet, but Tucker had just yanked him along faster. Andrew had tried prying the fingers off his arm, but Tucker had just dug them in harder. “Ow! Do you have to grab so tight?”

“Com on, you baby. I don't have all night.”

“Not until you tell me where we're going.” Not that he'd been able to stop Tucker from dragging him along.

“You'll see when we get there or don't you trust me?”

Andrew didn't trust Tucker, or not completely anyway, not since O'Neill had vanished – and O'Neill was too a good name even if the dog had been more of a mutt than a Jack Russel Terrier. Tucker shouldn't have blamed the dog for chewing up his science project. O'Neill had been a puppy. He
hadn't known any better. Mom said O'Neill had run away, but she hadn't seen how Tucker had been
eying the dog. Not that Andrew was going to bring the dog up. Tucker didn't like being reminded
of O'Neill. “It's just that you never like hanging out with me and suddenly tonight we're all buddy-
buddy? I mean, wasn't it just yesterday that you called me a parasitical vine that sucked all the cool
out of the room?”

“Oh, come on, that was just a joke. You're my brother, of course I want to … who the hell am I
trying to kid? Come on, runt.”

“Hey, look, Sun Cinema's showing *Starship Troopers*. You know, I didn't really get to watch it
closely enough the last two times. There seemed to be this subtle …” He yelped as Tucker yanked
him into an alley. “You know, I really don't like dark places. There could be anything lurking, uh,
anywhere, and we wouldn't see these lurking things because, you know, it's dark and things that lurk
in the dark are really good at hiding.” Tucker didn't say a word. “Couldn't we go some other way?”

“Main Street's too crowded.” Too crowded? For what?

The alley came out near a graveyard and Andrew tried not to say anything because Tucker seemed
to be in a really bad mood but they were crossing the street and getting closer to the graves. Andrew
tried to step back. Tucker's fingers dug in harder as he yanked Andrew forward. “Ow! You don't
have to grab me that hard.” And, okay, maybe he was shouting, but Tucker's fingers were hurting.
“You know, Mom said we weren't to go into graveyards, not at night anyway, and also not even
during the day.”

“We're not going in, you idiot.”

“Well, where are we going? You still haven't said.”

Tucker still didn't say but he did stop but that was only because Buffy was standing in his way –
“Oh, hi Buffy!” – sort of like an avenging angel except there wasn't anyone to avenge so maybe like
a saving angel even though Andrew wasn't sure if he really needed saving, and how did she move
that quietly anyway? One minute they were alone and suddenly she was just there.

She nodded in response and the nod was friendly enough but her arms were crossed and she was
staring at Tucker. “What's going on?”

Andrew laughed. “Fancy meeting you here.”
“Piss off, bitch.”

Ooh, Tucker shouldn't have said that, not to Buffy, or really not to anyone because Mom didn't hold with that kind of language, but especially not to Buffy because she was really tough and, wow, she'd grabbed Tucker and slammed him into that fence so fast that Andrew had barely felt it when Tucker had lost his grip on his arm. When Tucker tried to take a swing at her, Buffy tightened the grip on his throat. “I'm going to see that Andrew gets home safely. You should leave.” When she let go, Tucker fell.

You know, if he'd been slammed into a fence that hard, he wouldn't have gotten up so soon. It was sort of like Tucker had hooked into the dark side of the Force to make himself more powerful or …

“The little brat's my brother. I'm taking him home.”

Hey, who was he calling brat?

Buffy glanced between them. Andrew’s smile felt sort of wobbly. “Was he taking you home?” she asked.

Andrew didn't want to get Tucker in trouble but he really didn't know where Tucker'd been taking him and he pretty much figured that was a bad thing. “Um, not as such. Our house is sort of back that way?”

“Right.” She smiled toward Tucker and, wow, her smile could be sort of scary. “You? Go. I'll take care of Andrew.”

“Fine, it's not like I wanna hang with babies … or girls.”

She watched until Tucker was out of sight. “Let's get you home.”

Andrew wasn't sure he wanted to go back to the house. What if Tucker got there first? It wasn't like Buffy'd wait around all night to make sure he was okay. “Do you like Starship Troopers? Because it's showing at Sun Cinema and they have really good popcorn. Have you had their popcorn? It's got just enough salt, not too much and not too little, although I'd prefer a bit less butter …”
St. Jude Thaddeus Convalescent Care Center had been described as a rest home, but Kris could read between the lines. Any institution named for the patron saint of hospitals and hopeless cases would be more hospice or sanitarium. Without really thinking about it, she'd been expecting an almost Gothic nightmare, not quite gray stones guarded by gargoyles under a clouded sky, but certainly something dour and grim. She found stucco walls, almost blindingly white in the afternoon sun, and roofs of red tile made cheerful by the brightness of the day.

She couldn't see the sea, not this far from the shore, but beyond the facility the ever-present mountains loomed. The grounds were well maintained, hinting at funding she wouldn't have expected for a public institution. She'd heard that the Mayor supported the facility but hadn't expected this level of generosity. Kris had been told that Sister Hyacinth Gilman would meet her. As she walked from the parking lot, Kris contemplated vocations. Hers had been forced on her and unwelcome although, in the end, she hadn't been deserving enough to be Called. She should be glad. The life of a Slayer wasn't her own but devoted to protecting others. A nun's life must be similar. Kris had been told that their vocation was chosen but still, it couldn't be easy to always put the needs of the world above their own. It must set them apart, leave them feeling isolated.

Sister Hyacinth – “Please, call me Cindy.” – didn't look as if she felt isolated. Kris had expected a dour old woman, trapped in a stifling and dark habit. Cindy was middle aged and wore khakis below a cute, if conservative, blouse. “Mrs. Madison's room is this way. I'll take you up.”

As they turned a corner, a man lunged at Kris, grabbing her arm. Before she'd even thought it through, she had him pinned against the wall, one of his arms locked behind his back. Below the balding head, Kris took in a well-cut blue pinstripe suit. Despite Sister Cindy's gasp, the man didn't seem upset by her attack if his torrent of words was anything to go by. “Don't go out after dark. Stay home. Don't answer the doors. They come at night, the jaws that bite, the claws that catch.”

She released him with an apology. “Sorry, I was attacked, mugged, not that long ago. I guess I'm still on edge.”

Sister Cindy nodded but seemed warier than she had before the incident. “I do apologize for Dr. Sharp. In his enthusiasm, he forgets how his actions might be perceived.”

Although Kris hadn't seen Sister Cindy page anyone, a young man, dressed in scrubs, came around the corner. “That's enough, Dr. Sharp. No need to bother the lady.”
As he was led away, Dr. Sharp called back. “Churches, churches are safe. Don't go out at night.”

That was odd. If he was on staff, why was he being led away? “Is he a doctor here?”

“No, a patient. Dr. Sharp was a neurosurgeon – one of the best in Sunnydale I've been told – until his wife passed away. I'm don't know what happened, not exactly, but I heard rumors of an accident with a barbecue fork. Dr. Sharp became paranoid. He was convinced that monsters had killed his wife and that they still lurked in the dark, looking for victims. He was actually trying to protect you. We believe it's projected guilt. Having been unable to save his wife in real-life, in his fantasy he thinks he can save others.”

“How long ago did this happen?”

“Four, or no, five years back.”

As Sister Cindy continued to lead her through the facility, Kris breathed a sigh of relief. The attack – it must have been a vampire – had happened before she'd moved to Sunnydale. It wasn't her fault. This one, not her fault.

Catherine Madison's room held no personal effects, not even a photo of her daughter. Kris recalled the time she'd visited the woman in the hospital, after Mrs. Madison had been found unconscious in one of the high-school labs. Kris had brought flowers as a cover for her visit. She wished she'd thought to bring flowers again. The sparseness of the room was too painful, too strong a reminder of her own life when she'd been training as a Potential. She'd had little of her own. Her clothes had been chosen for her. Her food, studies, and training had been dictated by tradition. Only a small pin, a butterfly set out in shimmering stones, which she'd later learned were fake, had been her own, and she'd found that, had picked it up off the ground and kept it hidden.

The last time she'd seen Catherine Madison, the woman had seemed almost dead. Then she hadn't moved, hadn't made a sound. Now the woman's tongue reached out from her mouth, moving outward as far as it could reach and stretching out from side-to-side. “She's always like this around meal times,” Sister Cindy said. “At first we thought it might be a sign of cognitive function, but it hasn't gone beyond these motions.”

“Will she understand me?”

Sister Cindy shook her head. “There's no sign she will, but, well, if I were her, I'd want to be told.”
Her smile was full of compassion although it wasn't clear whom that empathy was directed to: Kris or Mrs. Madison. “I'll be nearby if you need me.”

Kris reached out to take one of Catherine Madison's hands. At her touch, the woman jerked her hand back. Mrs. Madison's limbs started thrashing as if an unskilled puppet master were pulling her strings. Kris stood and stepped back, raising one hand to her mouth, and was about to call for help when she realized the thrashings, as uncoordinated as they looked, were purposeful. The woman was moving away from her.

After Mrs. Madison had stilled, the tongue stretched out again and her movements made Kris think that she was searching, reaching out, trying to communicate in the only way she could. Kris sat again, moving slowly to avoid upsetting the woman. She didn't try to touch the woman again. “Mrs. Madison,” she said softly. “I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news. It's about your daughter and your husband, ex-husband. I'm afraid they've passed on.”

The woman's tongue pulled back, quick as a whip, and stretched out again. “I'm sorry,” Kris said. “Whatever happened to you, it's my fault. I told myself I was gathering information and learning the layout of the land, but I knew you see. I knew about the demons and you didn't and now you're ...” Kris put her hands over her own face and sat there, breathing into them. With a shudder, Kris pulled her hands away. “Your daughter and your husband, their deaths are my fault. I was afraid and now they're dead. If I'd acted, if I'd gone patrolling ...”

* * *

Then what? a voice in Kris' head asked. You think you're the Slayer now? If she couldn't save them, what makes you think you can? “I'm better than her,” Kris muttered to herself. “She's not serious. She distracts herself with school and friends.”

Kris had never had friends. She'd had duty, as dry as dust, and in the end that duty had failed her. She hadn't been Called. Kris didn't understand it. She'd been rejected but this girl who'd been Chosen, who'd been given the privilege of protecting the world, abandoned her duty in favor of unworthy friends, schooling she could never use, and nights pursuing dubious pleasures. “She doesn't deserve it. She doesn't have the discipline.” Kris watched Mrs. Madison, a woman lost in a nightmare. “I failed you. I failed your daughter. I won't fail again. I'll protect Sunnydale. I promise.”

* * *

While most high-school librarians couldn't afford a sporty two-door Volante, Miller hadn't been surprised by Giles' car. He had thoroughly researched the man before accepting this assignment after all. Miller, in this persona, drove a black Toyota Corolla, a slightly dumpy car that wouldn't attract attention.
After they'd finished the day's scanning, Miller had followed Giles to his apartment. It had been where he'd expected the man to head. Miller knew he'd been recognized. Giles, knowing he was being watched, would play the good boy and say in. Except he hadn't.

An hour after dusk, a man left Giles' apartment. Tweed had given way to bluejeans and a wife-beater. The hair had been slicked back. Still, the man couldn't be mistaken for anyone else. Giles stopped, peering keenly into a store window and brushing a few stray strands of hair down before sauntering, so slowly Miller had to believe Giles wanted to be followed, past factories, abandoned or not, and into a neighborhood where prudent businessmen pulled gates over doors and windows at night.

Giles' cigarette, tossed aside, glowed like a comet against a polluted sky. As Giles vanished into a dive, Miller noted that he hadn't glanced over to see if Miller had followed. He didn't have to. He had to know Miller would be following.

Miller remained outside in his car. Logic said Giles would duck out the back to lose his tracker, but instinct told Miller that Giles wasn't going anywhere. The man had wanted to be followed here. Men vanished into the alleyway, reappearing quickly enough that they could be enjoying quick fucks, but Miller didn't need to see drugs to know that someone was selling. They didn't matter. Lowlife scum weren't his assignment.

Stakeouts could drag out all night but Giles didn't make him wait. Less than a half-hour after he'd entered, Giles left the bar with not one but two women, one on each arm. The taller, a brunette dressed in a black tank and a paisley miniskirt, looked like an extra from an Austin Powers' flick. After a moment's thought, Miller wasn't surprised Giles had picked her up. He seemed to be determined to relive his own glory days after all. The blonde, the front of her hair curled back into Farrah Fawcett wings, wore a jacket with shoulder pads, a look that was both more dowdyish and yet less dated than her companion's outfit.

The blonde caught both Giles' hands in hers, and stepped backwards, towards the alley. Laughing, Giles allowed himself to be led into the darkness. A few minutes later, Giles half-flew, backwards, out of the alley, moving so fast his feet barely seemed to keep him upright. The brunette, following him into the street, had revealed her true face, the unmistakable ridges of a vampire.

“Et tu, Brute?” Giles' voice carried. “I'd thought at least one of you was human.”

“You killed my Childe. You'll pay for that, you cur.”

Miller, not even bothering to glance towards the cache of weapons hidden under his passenger-side
seat, reached for the lever to open his trunk. A flamethrower was his best bet. Anything else might not kill the vampire before she'd fed on Giles. Antonia Ashworth would not be pleased if he allowed the man to die. She wanted Giles punished, humiliated and broken, not merely dead.

While time seemed to speed up, Miller felt as if he were slogging through molasses. He couldn't reach the weapon in time and Giles, the idiot, just stood there as if waiting for death. "Move, you git." Was this Giles' response to his presence? Suicide over public disgrace?

As the vampire approached, Giles thrust his hands forward, reaching toward her. A point between his hands began to glow, increasing in intensity until it was so bright that Miller had to cover his eyes. With a burst of even brighter light, the magic burned itself out. After Miller had blinked his sight back, he saw Giles, unharmed and staring straight at him. The vampire was gone, presumably crumbled to dust. Miller wasn't sure what he'd seen. Nothing in Giles' records suggested he could control that much power.

Although bareheaded, Giles touched his fingers as if to the brim of a hat. "Be seeing you." Miller stared as Giles strolled out of sight. Had the man put himself into extreme danger merely to force Miller to reveal himself?

* * *

Angel hated approaching Buffy in the Bronze. Seeing her there, in her element, surrounded by the warmth of her friends as she flashed that bright smile with the lights sparkling on her hair, glowing like a halo above her, only accentuated the gap between them. She was a daughter of the light; he, a son of the dark. He might watch from the shadows but could never join her, not even under artificial lights.

He left the Bronze to wait in the alley. Knowing she wouldn't leave her friends soon, he wondered if he should patrol in her place. The smarter demons would be out in force while she distracted herself. No, that wasn't fair. She wasn't distracting herself. Buffy deserved a normal life. Besides, it wasn't his place to comment. If anything, it should be her Watcher setting her a less predictable patrol schedule.

Her Watcher didn't trust him. That could be deadly, not for Angel but for Buffy. The Watcher, in rejecting his sketch, had rejected his help. Angel had come to Sunnydale to help Buffy. How was he supposed to do that if the Watcher rejected his assistance? If he gave the sketch to Buffy, would the Watcher reject it, knowing the source? No, Buffy wouldn't allow it.

But then what? Buffy couldn't act against a human. The Council could. In fact, Angel knew of three
mages who'd been locked up by the Council, never to be seen again.

Maybe he should have just gone up to her in the Bronze. Waiting in a dark alley, second guessing her Watcher's motives wasn't getting him anywhere, but Angel couldn't see himself, drink in hand, making small talk and pretending he blended in with the crowd. So he waited for more than two hours until she finally left the Bronze. She wasn't alone. He followed as she escorted Willow home, waiting until she was alone to step out of the shadows. “Buffy.”

“Angel.” She crossed her arms. What was wrong with her? Was it that guy she'd been seeing? She couldn't still be dating him. He was too ordinary. She must be upset Angel lost the possessed man the night before. With this tension between them, he couldn't tell her how strangely her Watcher had acted. He handed her the sketch. She stared at it so hard and so long that he felt as if he should explain himself, but she knew what it was.

“So, this is the possessed man?”

“Maybe.”

Buffy looked up from the sketch, her eyes blazing fury. “This might not be the guy? I mean, yeah, he doesn't even look human so what good's it supposed to be?”

“No, no, this is the man. I just mean it might not be possession.” Angel could only hope he didn't look as gobsmacked as he felt. Why was he bringing up domination? Buffy would never run across a man dominated by a demon. In all his two hundred and fifty years, Angel had never met a dominated human. Even the Master had known only one. What had he said? In all my years, I've never faced so vicious an enemy. He'd claimed the man's soul, corrupted by the demon, had driven the man to heights of atrocities that not even a vampire could match. “The Council calls it domination. A demon can create a connection to a human mind, something like a chain that links them.”

“Chain? So the person would be bound?”

“No, it's not a physical connection. That would be possession. Domination is more like a web connecting the demon to the person. The demon can't physically control the person but it can influence.”

“Sounds pretty tenuous.”
Damn, he shouldn't have used the spider web metaphor. Why did humans think of webs as fragile? “The demon isn't in the body; it's connected to the person's mind.”

“So? Why not just stand up to it?”

Buffy didn't understand. He should be glad. A demon had never wormed it's way into her thoughts. She had no idea how difficult it was to face that pressure day after day. “What's important to understand is that it isn't the person's fault. Demons are trickier than you know. They can get a hold on the most innocent of victims.” Oh, that's why he'd brought up domination. He didn't want Buffy to think of him as a monster. He wanted her to see him as a hero, trapped but resisting, holding out against evil.

“But this guy killed a little girl. He's evil now. So what's the diff?”

Of course, Buffy was the Slayer. She looked at a demon and could only see evil. “Do you think the sketch will help?”

Buffy shrugged. “He doesn't look even close to human. How am I supposed to recognize him? Or am I supposed to wait until he sacrifices another child and then hunt him down?”

“There are rules for invoking demons: only under the light of a full moon, things like that. It's not true for every demon but your Watch … if you know what kind of demon it is, you might predict where and when it can be called again. Stop him ahead of time.”

She glanced at the sketch but was still glaring when she looked back up. “You've had this since last night and are only giving it to me now?”

Damn, if he said he hadn't wanted to spoil her evening, it'd sound as if he thought she was a lightweight, more concerned with partying than with Slaying. If he told her the Watcher had rejected his first sketch, it'd sound as if he was complaining. “You're welcome.” He turned on his heel and walked off, hoping she'd call him back.

* * *

When he'd had Buffy assigned to the library for homeroom, Rupert had assumed she'd be a willing participant in her early morning training. Instead she'd never once been on-time much less early. On
the contrary, Rupert had consistently waited for her. Buffy waiting impatiently as he arrived was a blood-curdling sight. “Gods, Buffy, what happened?”

Her eyes widened as if she hadn't expected his concern. She stood and held out a piece of paper. “Angel gave it to me.”

Giles stared at the paper as he gathered his thoughts. Apparently the vampire hadn't told her that he – Ripper actually but the vampire wouldn't know the difference – had torn up the first sketch. He should have guessed the vampire wouldn't drop the issue, that he would bring it to Buffy's attention. Giles couldn't have her interested in Eyghon. He'd have to nip this in the bud. “It's a drawing of a demon.”

“It's the demon, or man I guess, that killed that girl at the zoo.”

Ah, that confirmed that the vampire hadn't told her that Giles had destroyed the first sketch. Buffy wouldn't have led with that sentence if she thought he'd torn up another sketch. “Are you certain?”

“Certain? Giles, you told me that she might have been killed in a ritual to call a demon into a person. That's a demon in a person.”

“Buffy, it's difficult to distinguish a pure demon from one that has been invoked into a human body. The differences are subtle. How can you be sure?”

“Well, Angel said it was both, a, uh, demon invoked into a person.”

If anyone could tell the difference, it would be a vampire. Buffy wouldn't know that, of course, but now wasn't the time to drive a wedge between them. “If that's the case, I suppose we can take it as a given that this is a drawing of a demon-possessed man, but we can't be sure he is one who killed that child from the zoo.”

“There can't be that many demon-possessed guys running around Sunnydale.”

No, there weren't but he wasn't about to set Buffy after Eyghon. “It may, in fact, be a cult. Let's ignore what you might do if you did catch this person. Even Slayers aren't sanctioned to kill humans after all. If it is more than one person, moving too fast may destroy any chance we might have to stop them.”
“But Giles, he's killing little kids!”

“And if it were merely one man, we could catch and stop him, but if it's a group and we stop only one, the rest will scatter and take their rituals elsewhere. We'd be hard-pressed to even find them much less stop them.”

“I can't sit here and do nothing!”

Damn. “I'm not asking you to. I'll research this demon, see what I can learn. All I'm asking is that you wait. Or do you want other girls, in other cities, to fall victim to this cult as well?”

“You don't even know it's a cult.” Her words contradicted him but her tone said she'd allow him time to investigate the demon. Good, that should give him time to deal with Weirick.

* * *

The books stacked on the library's table bore a striking resemblance to tiny Towers of Babel. Giles was certain they were about to crash to the floor. Unfortunately he wasn't allowed to correct this obvious and egregious error. The day before, after he'd shifted the highest stack to a cart, Jenny had carried on as if he'd murdered her grandmother. Discretion being the better part of valor, Giles merely eyed the books and hoped to avoid a landslide.

One by one Jenny and her students – Willow first, before Jenny even, and then the two boys – trailed in after the final bell. Miller had arrived a half-hour earlier. Giles didn't know exactly how the man had spent his day, but nothing the man had done or turned up would be to Giles' advantage. Unfortunately, with the scanning sessions limited to after school hours, Giles had no excuse to keep the man in the library where he could keep an eye on him.

Jenny glanced over the students who'd already busied themselves scanning the books. “You all know what you're doing, right?” The two boys seemed to ignore her but Willow popped her focus up out of the screen and nodded. Apparently that was enough to satisfy Jenny. With nothing better to do, she started browsing through an already scanned book. It hardly seemed fair. They were his books. He should be allowed to put them away now that they'd been scanned.

“Hmm, L’Étoile et la Jarretière,” she said in quite passable French. “I'll have to check this out. A bit racy for a high-school library.”
Giles could only hope that no one else had noticed Willow's blush. As he took the book calmly, not ripping it from Jenny's hands as he wanted to, he said, “That one's not meant for public perusal.” He turned on Miller. “In fact, I had it under lock and key in my office.”

“I am here to scan your entire collection.” Only years of tight self-control kept Giles' fist at his side. The man might not be Council, but he knew better than to leave out a book on sex magic.

“Don't worry, England. I won't damage your precious book. I'll read the digital copy.”

“You'll read the what?”

“That was the agreement Jenny and I came to,” Miller said. When had she become Jenny to him? “She keeps a digital copy of the collection.”

“We are scanning them to preserve and disperse information after all,” she added.

“Disperse? Mr. Miller, could I have a word in private?” Miller withdrew not to Giles' office but behind the circulation desk. Very well, they'd just have to speak quietly. From the corner of his eye, Giles could see Jenny speaking with Willow. He shook the distraction off to focus on Miller. “Are you insane?”

“J Jenny understands which books should be available to the general public.”

“Jenny understands? And how, exactly, did she come to this understanding? Access to those books has been restricted …” No, he couldn't mention the Council, not while he and Miller were pretending that organization didn't exist.

Miller's smirk suggested he'd released the books to raise trouble. “Sex magic books aren't verboten, merely private.”

Before he could formulate a response, Jenny's voice rang out. “Rupert!” She dragged Willow over and dropped a book onto the circulation desk. “How has Willow read this?”
Giles hid a wince. One of the tantric books he'd left hidden for Willow to find. "I wasn't aware that she had. It was, after all, under lock and key in my office. I'd had it mailed here, rather than to my home, because I'd be available to sign for it when it was delivered." That sounded almost plausible.

Miller's face had gone perfectly blank. Wonderful. Just what Giles needed, for the Council to get word of this. Leaving the books in his office had been a mistake. Hindsight, as ever, was 20/20. The best Giles could do now was minimize the damage. "Willow, this is quite serious. The books in my office aren't for general consumption."

"At least she's only read the one," Miller drawled.

Damn the man for sticking his nose in. Jenny glanced at Miller before asking Willow, "What other books have you read?"

"Well, it's a library. I mean, I've read lots of books."

"Willow." Gods, he hadn't know Jenny could sound that severe. "You know which books I mean."

Willow stared down at the ground as if wishing it would swallow her whole. "Well, there was The Rose and the Thorn and then this one?"

"The Rose and the Thorn," Jenny repeated. "I saw that in one of the piles. That's it?"

"Well, that is, I've got …" Willow's voice dropped to a whisper. "The Rising Serpent."

"The Rising …" Jenny stopped half-way through the title. "Willow, is there someone you've been practicing this with?"

Giles reviewed his interactions with the girl to see if there was anything that could implicate him. He'd mentioned tantra but in a seemingly absentminded manner, and he'd then immediately turned around and told her she was too young. He'd allowed her to see the books but had made it seem more of an accident that she'd found him putting them away. Still, it'd been careless of him. He should have found an intermediary to introduce Willow to the tantric texts.
“Practiced with?” Willow practically squeaked. “No. No! I tried the energy org …” She blushed and quickly moved on. “But that was all by myself and anyway that was only once. Taboos. I was breaking taboos.”

Ah, that explained why Willow’s energy flow hadn’t smoothed out. She’d resisted the allure of sex magics. Noting how Miller had almost vanished into the woodwork, observing but not influencing Willow’s confession, Giles decided to lead her off the topic of sex magic. “What kind of taboos, Willow. What have you been doing?”

“It was kind of hard to decide. I mean, I could have tried smoking but that’s really unhealthy and I like my lungs all cancer-free, and I thought about drinking but Mom and Dad allow me to have wine at the table, a half-glass and only for special occasions, but alcohol just doesn’t feel all that taboo-like.”

“Willow.” At the sound of her name, Willow jerked, cringing and staring up at Jenny like a rabbit before a hungry fox. “We’re not angry, but we need to know what you’ve done.”

“I didn’t study for a whole day, twenty-four hours I mean, from midnight to midnight. It was easy at first, you know, when I was sleeping, but it got harder later.”

Not studying? That was the girl’s idea of violating a taboo?

“Anything else?”

“Just one other?” She looked up hopefully.

“And that is?”

Willow stared at the ground again. “I, uh, sort of wore gang colors to school.”

“Gang colors?” Giles asked. What on earth was the girl going on about?

“Yeah, Principal Snyder said weren’t allowed so I thought it’d make a really good taboo to break. I’m not going to get in trouble, am I? If I’m suspended it’ll ruin my perfect attendance. Well,
not perfect because I did miss class that one day in third grade, but perfect in high-school where I've never missed a day.”

“I don't recall seeing you in gang colors,” Jenny said.

“It was my Hello Kitty t-shirt, you know, black shirt with the red bow? Nobody seemed to notice.” She petered off.

“It's okay, Willow. We'll keep the gang colors to ourselves but you'll have to return Giles' book.” Willow looked up as Jenny dropped a hand on her shoulder. “I'm going to drive you home and you're going to hand me the book.”

“But the scanning project. We've still got a few more hours this afternoon.”

“Now.”

“Um, okay. I'll get my bag.”

“Miss Calendar,” Giles said. “The book is mine. I should take Willow home to retrieve it.”

Jenny glared from behind crossed arms. “Not on your life. It's your fault she had the book in the first place. You're just lucky there's no damage done.”

If she chose to report him, things could go badly. “Of course. I will be more careful in the future, but do keep in mind the books were under lock and key.”

She nodded but didn't look back when she left with Willow. Giles turned to find Miller wearing a bland smile. Not knowing how the man would handle this, Giles chose to retrieve the offending books. They'd have to be removed from the high-school that evening even though that rather felt as if he were locking the barn door after the horses had escaped.

* * *
Willow wanted to drag her feet as they crossed the parking lot but didn't think it'd help. Miss Calendar was going to yell at her, Willow just knew it, and that wasn't fair. Okay, she shouldn't have taken the books, but it's not like she'd committed any kind of a crime. Sure, the books weren't hers, but they were in the library and she had returned them, just like you do with books that are in the library. Anyway, all she'd done was break a few taboos. It wasn't like anyone had gotten hurt.

Miss Calendar was waiting by her car, tapping her foot impatiently. She must have been racing to the car to have gotten there so fast which meant she definitely was going to yell. Willow got into the passenger side of the sedan which was so red it was sort of a midlife crisis kind of a color, but Miss Calendar was too young for a midlife crisis just like Giles was too cool for one no matter what Xander said about his car.

As they drove away from the high-school, Willow tried to think of something to say, but “Gee, it sure is bright out today” just sounded inane.

“Willow, do you understand why we're upset that you took the tantric books?”

Not really. Anyway, even though Giles'd said he was upset, he wasn't, not really. She could tell. That probably wasn't something she should tell Miss Calendar though. “Just because they've got sex in them … I mean, I am old enough to read about sex.”

“It's not the sex. Well, it is, but not in the way you mean. Tantra, well, it's adult. I know you're at an age where you think you can handle anything but this is way over your head.”

“You're saying I'm not mature enough? I'm totally mature. I'm the most mature kid … person, I mean person, in school. You don't make me stay for computer science classes. Why? Because I'm so mature I know it already.” Willow pointed toward the corner. “You should turn right up here.”

“What?”

“To get to my house,” Willow added. “That's the quickest way.”

Miss Calendar waited until they were through the turn to respond. “There's a difference between book-smarts and emotional maturity. You're young. If you take up tantra now, you'll miss your chance for your first kiss, your first love. You get only one chance to be young. Don't throw it away.”
“But I wasn't doing any of that sex stuff.” Okay, maybe she'd tried those energy orgasms once, but Miss Calendar didn't need to know that. “I was just breaking taboos.”

“But don't you see? You're a teenager. You should be learning to set boundaries. You define boundaries by learning what you consider out-of-bounds. You need a baseline. You can't have that if you don't slow down. Willow, you need to walk before you can run.”

Walk? Walking was boring. “My house is just up on the right, the third past this intersection.”

Miss Calendar didn't say anything more about tantra and boundaries. She pulled over and got out of the car and said, “I'll wait for you here.”

The house felt empty. Even though her parents' cars weren't in the driveway, Willow called out as she walked through the door. “Mom? Dad? You home?” Nothing. She had the house to herself, not that it was going to do her much good since she had to return the book.

When Willow had brought the first tantric text home, she knew she'd have to hide it. She'd hit upon the purloined letter method, hiding it on the shelf with her school books. She'd covered all her books in paper bag book covers. Granted, she hadn't covered her books for three years but her parents hadn't noticed. When Xander had commented on it, she'd complained about that time he'd rested a soda can on her book and ruined the cover.

From the shelf she pulled out the book with *Operating System Concepts* written on the side of the cover. Removing the cover revealed the true title: *The Rising Serpent*. Willow wished she had more time to go through it but at least she'd taken notes. They'd have to do.

When Willow joined her outside, Miss Calendar was half-leaning on the car. She stood up, held out her hand for the book, and skimmed through as if she were checking to make sure Willow hadn't pulled out any pages. “Willow, I want your promise. No more breaking taboos.”

Willow noticed that Miss Calendar hadn't said no more tantric texts. Of course with Mr. Giles removing those books from the library, it'd be hard for her to get any. It wasn't fair. She'd just gotten into taboo breaking. She'd hardly had a chance to give it a real try. On the other hand, it had been hard coming up with taboos to break. Really, after not studying for a whole day and wearing gang colors, what else could she try? It sort of seemed like the next step would be killing somebody which, no, she wasn't about to go there. So, yeah, it wasn't that difficult a promise to make. “Okay, I mean, I promise.”
Luckily Miss Calendar was satisfied. She drove off and Willow returned to her room. She fed her fish and buzzed about, feeling vaguely unsettled. Where did Miss Calendar get off saying she wasn't mature? She'd fought demons. Well, she'd helped more than fought them herself, but it was sort of like going to war, killing vampires and all, and nobody let you go to war until you were old enough which meant mature enough. And she always came in second in the science fair which, okay, wasn't first place but second was still pretty good, and her homework was always done on-time, and she'd never missed a day of school unlike some people who just took off whenever they wanted to have a day at the beach and didn't invite … Anyway, she was too mature.

Mature enough to break taboos if she wanted except she had sort of promised she wouldn't, but that had been promise made under duress. You didn't have to keep that kind of a promise except that kind of thinking did sound sort of immature, like crossing your fingers when making a promise so you wouldn't have to keep it.

Okay, she wasn't about to break any taboos, not soon anyway, but Miss Calendar hadn't made her promise to avoid sex. Not that she was going to get involved in real sex kind of stuff because she didn't even have a boyfriend yet and even if she had, well, pregnancy would definitely put the kibosh on college. But she could practice those energy orgasms. They were sort of like solo-exercises so they wouldn't interfere with that first kiss stuff Miss Calendar had been going on about.

Willow had just sat on the edge of her bed when she jumped to her feet. Should she get naked for this? It was only energy work, no touching herself or anything, and she had worn her pjs the last time. She could probably leave her clothes on.

She lay on the bed and arched her lower back as she drew energy through her root chakra. Releasing her breath, she tilted her pelvis as she squeezed her pubo-coccygeus muscles. It didn't feel like much. She tried it again and then again and, ooh! Tingly. Not a lot of tingly but some. She kept at it and it got a bit more tingling but not much until she remembered to cycle energy between her two lowest chakras and to add colors, red for the root and orange for the sacral. She lost focus a couple of times. It was a lot to keep track of, but she was too mature enough. She could handle it.

As the energy built up, she started shifting her pelvis faster, up and down, up and down, up down up …. It was sort of like a feedback loop. The more energy there was, the faster she moved and the faster she moved the more energy …. Oh, she'd lost it. Guess she shouldn't be thinking about feedback loops. Right, no thinking, only feeling.

She built the energy up again, sharp and tingly, focused on her clitoris, and she wondered if now was a good time to shift up from the bottom two chakras, to move from the root and sacral to the sacral and solar plexus. Just how much energy was enough? The books were kind of vague. She waited until she felt really excited and made the shift. The energy waned, feeling less tingly, a lot less tingly than it had, but that was correct, right? It was supposed to wane so she could build it up at a higher level or at least she thought so, but the energy wasn't building up again. Was she doing it wrong?
Ooh, moaning. She was supposed to add moaning because that was, um, relaxing and it made the tingly stuff easier or something. Willow tried a moan. It sounded sort of fake, but maybe it might help. It did. After a bit the moans sounded more real and she was feeling all tingly again.

She wasn't at all ready for the knock on her door. Willow about leaped off her bed, wanting to grab a blanket to cover herself even though she was fully dressed. The door popped open.

“Mom?”

“Oh, Willow honey. I couldn't help but hear and I wanted to make sure, you do have your own dildo, don't you? Oh, I can see that you don't. Honey, masturbation is so much easier with the right equipment. How about you and I go shopping this weekend? There's this lovely little shop …”

“Mom!”

“Yes honey?”

“Dad's not home, is he?”

“Oh, honey, this is nothing to be embarrassed about. I'm sure your father will be thrilled when I tell him how you're maturing. Oh, I just had such an idea.”

Willow winced. That look of excitement in her mother's eyes never boded well.

“We should have a ritual, a rite of passage, just like when you had your first period. Hmm, there must be some references in … Oh, and maybe we should hold off on that shopping trip. Just think how much more meaningful it'll be when I present you with your first dildo as part of the ritual. I'm sure your aunts will want to be there and maybe some of your cousins are old enough. You don't want that Bunny girl there, do you?”

“No, Mom, I don't want Buffy there.”
As Jenny sailed off with Willow in tow, Giles cursed himself for allowing the woman to get so close. Granted, it was Miller's fault that Jenny knew Willow had been reading tantric texts, but Giles hadn't known that Jenny had any awareness of the occult. That had been sloppy of him. He should never have gotten close without investigating her. She wasn't the novice, in terms of magic at least, that he'd assumed. Her presence couldn't be a coincidence. Was she another spy and, if so, whose? If he kept her close, who knew what she'd learn, but if he drove her off, she'd know he suspected her. Killing her was out of the question. It'd rouse Miller's suspicions for one and if he had his druthers, Miller was the one he'd kill although he didn't know if he could kill the man. Miller was an assassin, among other things, quite a competent killer in fact. Even if Giles could kill him, it'd only rouse the Council's interest. Travers might even use it as an excuse to remove Giles from Sunnydale, and Giles couldn't have that. Using Buffy's access to the Slayer line was his only hope of ever getting Eyghon out of his head.

Giles glanced over to see Miller smirking at him. *Bloody berk wouldn't look so happy with a knife in his throat.*

*Ripper no! Killing him would cause more problems than it would solve.* Giles shoved and felt Ripper give way. Damn, Giles couldn't imagine a worse moment for Ripper to get lose.

As the doors flew open, the air blasted in like a squall. Jenny, furious, flew in like an avenging angel on that wind. She slammed a book on the table. *The Rising Serpent.* “Out. Now.” She didn't shout but the boys jumped. Dave looked like he might say something but Fritz grabbed him and pulled him toward the door. Jenny turned on Miller. “You too. Out.” Miller's smirk dropped. He followed the boys out.

She waited until the others had left before tearing into him. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Ah, apparently she had perused the book. “I assure you, if I'd thought one of the students would get her hands on the book, it would never have been delivered to the library. It was, however, hidden away under lock and key.” Hopefully Willow hadn't told her the cabinet hadn't been locked.

“Do you understand what kind of damage you could have done?”

There was no need for the *bitch* to yell.

“You were lucky … lucky … that Willow chose to limit herself to breaking taboos.”
“Give it a rest.”

Before Ripper could add that the bird was fine, Giles shoved him down. Ripper shoved back. *Damn you, not now!* Giles shoved again, holding Ripper back, but it took all his focus. He fell against the wall. Damn, he couldn't deal with both Ripper and Jenny. “I know it was wrong of me to keep the books here, but any exposure was unintentional. Please, this has upset me more deeply than I can say. I'd prefer to be alone.”

“Are you okay?”

Giles struggled against Ripper. “Honestly? No, but I'm better off alone.”

“If you say so, but this isn't over.” She nodded toward the book. “Don't forget to take that when you go.”

Giles held Ripper back until she'd left. As Ripper broke through, he shoved a stack of books, grinning as they crashed across the floor. He shrugged off the tweed jacket but yanked so hard on the tie that it tightened into a knot. He grabbed a knife from the weapons cage and cut through the tie, letting it fall to the ground. Buttons popped as he tore off Giles' shirt. He slicked his hair back and cursed Giles for being out of cigs.

Gods, he wanted to stab someone. Teacher was out. Besides, if he was gonna stab her, it'd be with something more intimate than a knife. If he iced Miller, Giles'd throw a fit, expecting a hassle from the coppers, but Weirick, nobody could tie him to the high-school. Ripper gripped his hand tightly around the handle of the knife and took a couple of sample slashes. Yeah, that'd do.

* * *

Kris skulked from shadow to shadow, pausing only long enough to glance over her shoulder, jumping as an owl hooted overhead. It was a relief to see the cemetery's gate even though she wouldn't be safe on the other side. She knew what she'd been thinking: patrol past the fresh graves, kill the Fledges, protect Sunnydale. Her courage had failed her. She hadn't gotten near the graves. Hearing – imagining? – one snap of a twig, she'd turned tail and fled.

She knew she should go back. Someone had to kill the Fledges. Why else had she come to Sunnydale? But her steps took her through the gates and toward the distant lights of Main Street. She
didn't think she was a coward. Her Watcher wouldn't have wasted fifteen years of his life training a coward, but he had filled her head with lectures on strategic retreats. She hadn't realized he'd been talking about running away. Perhaps he'd recognized her cowardice even then. No wonder she'd never been Chosen.

Kris eyed the dark streets, afraid to hide in the shadows where something might be waiting but afraid to walk in the street where something might see her. When she heard two voices coming from around a corner, she ducked into a dark doorway.

“How much farther?” Was that Owen? Of course it was. Who else would be stupid enough to gallivant near a cemetery after dark?

“It's down this way. Come on.” Owen was being led by a boy she wouldn't feel safe with even if he were bound and gagged and she held a sword to his throat. Tucker Wells had been at the scene of every gruesome and occult event in the high-school. There'd been no evidence proving his involvement, but he'd certainly seemed overly excited by the gore.

“Oh, uh, okay.” Watching Owen trail after Tucker felt like watching a lamb being led to the slaughterhouse. Kris didn't know where Tucker was taking Owen, but it couldn't be anyplace good. As they turned another corner, she stepped out of the shadows and followed.

She wasn't sure if she or Owen was more surprised by where Tucker led them. “The zoo?” Owen asked. “What could be hiding here? I thought a graveyard or a crypt.”

“What kind of monster'd be stupid enough to hide in a graveyard? That's the first place anybody'd go looking.”

“But the zoo?”

“Sure,” Tucker added. “They hide among the animals.”

“But that doesn't make sense. People would notice something strange living in the cages.” Owen seemed to be wavering. Perhaps he wouldn't follow Tucker into the zoo.

“That little girl, the one in the news.” There was a desperate edge to Tucker's voice. “She got taken by a demon.”
Tucker did have a point. A zoo attendant had also gone missing. It wasn't public knowledge but Detective Young had bored Kris with the details, laying out dribbles of information as if she'd follow to his bed. Kris had never heard of demons infesting a zoo, but that didn't mean they wouldn't. She decided to follow the boys in.

She waited until they were out of sight before trying the gate. It had locked behind them. Kris yanked it three times to be sure. It wouldn't budge. She cursed her Watcher for refusing to teach her how to pick locks. When she'd suggested the idea, he'd granted her a frosty glare, staring at her as if she were a changeling left by the fairies in place of his obedient student, and had given her a tediously long lecture on respect for the law. She'd never raised the idea again. She stared up at the stone wall surrounding the gate. Well, she'd always been a good climber.

From the top of the wall, she could see a large field, fenced in, and silhouettes, huge shapes darker than the night, possibly sleeping. Beyond, along a path, vanishing over a hill, she spotted Tucker and Owen. Hitting the ground jarred up through her frame but didn't break a bone. She kept her eyes open as she ran, as much to learn the layout of the zoo as to search for attackers. A sign identified the dark silhouettes she'd seen as American Bison. She flew past another open space, not only fenced in but also separated from the path by a small moat. At the top of the hill, she passed the Panda Overlook Cafe but didn't see any pandas from the path. The boys weren't visible either.

As she heard a shout cut off abruptly, Kris dodged into the bushes. Tropical and green, they were lush enough to hide her. She moved forward, stepping carefully and more slowly than she'd like, but she couldn't afford to be heard. At the edge of the bushes, she paused. Owen lay on the ground, his lip bloody. Tucker, off to one side, glared at a man in the uniform of a zookeeper. “You promised.”

Kris recognized the haughty condescension on the man's face. Her Watcher had looked at her with the same expression. “And you believed me. Why would I give up a chance to invoke the demon into myself?”

Demon? But invoking a demon into a human required a sacrifice. She felt sick. So that was why Tucker had led Owen to the zoo. She couldn't let them kill the boy. Maybe she didn't have enough power to fight demons, but she could stop a couple of penny-ante villains.

As the zookeeper leaned over to drag Owen to his feet, Kris stepped out of hiding. “Keep your hands off him.”

“The zoo's closed. I'm afraid you'll have to leave.” After the darkness he'd show, the mild-mannered grin he wore like a mask chilled Kris to the bone.
“I'll be taking the boy with me.” She didn't give him time to reply but addressed Owen. “Can you stand?”

“Uh, I think so.”

Kris kept her gaze on the zookeeper, expecting an attack. She didn't expect that attack to come from behind. She hit the ground hard and felt groggy and ill as she opened her eyes. Tucker stood over her, a rock in his hand.

Owen had gotten to his feet but the zookeeper had grabbed him and held him close, twisting the boy's arm behind his back. “No, please,” Owen cried. “Please don't kill me.”

She had to stop this. There was no one else. Kris tried to push herself up, but fell back to the ground, too dizzy to move. When she heard the voice, she thought she was imagining it. “I wouldn't do that if I were you.” There was a pause and then one more word. “Berk.”

The zookeeper replied, which meant he'd also heard the voice. She hadn't imagined it. “If it isn't the school librarian.”

Kris couldn't lift herself up but she could turn her head to look. It was Rupert but with a face so feral he almost seemed demon-possessed himself.

"Ripper, actually. You've been a naughty boy and lucky me, I get to do something about that.” Light glinted at his side. He had a knife.

The zookeeper must have seen the knife too. He held Owen tightly to himself. “You can't touch me, not without going through the boy.”

“What makes you think I give a rat's arse about the boy?” As Giles lunged, the zookeeper shoved the boy forward, straight onto the knife. The boy screamed and hit the ground. Kris shoved herself up, ignoring the dizziness, almost sitting up before the world spun into darkness.

* * *
Two lines of trees arched over the long driveway leading to Giles' mansion. Even on moonless nights, he could turn off the headlights. Animals flowed with heat, with life, and even vegetation gave off a warm glow. It was Eyghon's gift, this new night vision. It also shouldn't be. The Council taught that demonic domination, unlike possession, did not physically taint the human host. Of course the Council's information came from experiments done in the eighteenth century. In fact, that had been one of Alan Wyndham-Pryce's arguments in favor of creating his Department of Physical Research: outdated techniques and equipment couldn't match what a trained scientist could learn today. Some of the stuffier antiquarians had thought him an upstart, but Alan had carried the day and had been experimenting on – torturing if the truth be told – demons ever since. Giles shuddered as he thought on what Alan would do to a victim of domination. Death would come as a mercy to anyone, demon or otherwise, dragged into the antiseptic operating rooms under Alan's domain. Giles had sworn he'd kill himself before falling into their hands. No one, no matter how powerful in the Council, would be able to save him once Alan's team noted these physical changes.

Still the changes weren't unwelcome. Giles lifted Weirick's unconscious body from the trunk with an ease he couldn't have matched even twenty years earlier. Back at the zoo, knowing he wouldn't need Tucker's help moving the man, Giles had put the fear of God into the boy, explaining in gory detail exactly what he'd do if Tucker didn't follow Giles' every direction to the letter. Tucker was unreliable but valued his own skin. He'd do as Giles had directed. He'd find and clear up Weirick's ritual space. No one would ever discover, in some dark corner no doubt, much less raise questions about how the Mark of Eyghon came to be in the zoo.

As Giles hit the switch at the top of the stairs, the basement flooded with an almost clinical florescent light, removing any mystery from the dark corners. Kyle blinked from inside the cage but didn't turn his head against the onslaught of light on retinas made hypersensitive by possession. The boy was further gone than Giles had thought, little more than skin, bones, and inflamed joints. He wouldn't last the night.

Kyle gasped, his scream as weak as a thin wail, as Giles lifted him from the concrete. Damn, when had the lad lost so much weight? He couldn't be more than eighty pounds. Gently, he carried Kyle out of the cage and settled him on the floor. Giles needed him alive for the ritual. He was less careful with Weirick as he moved the man into the cage.

With the cage locked, Giles should have started the ritual to invoke the hyena into Weirick. He didn't. Instead Giles stood and stared, not even cursing the man for alerting Buffy to Eyghon's presence. Go on then, Ripper taunted from the back of Giles' mind. He wants the demon, give it to him. Giles shut his eyes. Damn Ripper for stirring. He didn't have time for this. He had to save the hyena spirit. What the bloody hell for? Got what you wanted.

What did he need the hyena for? He'd already learned how to preserve a demon-possessed body by leeching energy from another person. He could still put the hyena into Weirick, not as an experiment but to watch him waste away and suffer as Kyle had. The demon, murmured Ripper, use the demon.
It's no more than he deserves and he'll suffer more. All the power he ever wanted and nothing he can do but watch it destroy him.

Eyghon would kill Weirick more quickly, tearing through his power faster than an animal spirit could, which meant Weirick would suffer longer under the influence of the hyena spirit. Giles drew in a sharp breath. Eyghon. The hyena. Why not use both? He'd never read of two demons dwelling within the same breast. Weirick had wanted the hyena. Weirick had wanted the demon. He'd be getting no more than he'd asked for. Giles grinned with a sense of new found purpose. Besides, it'd be fun. Two demons in one man. It was bound to be a horror-show.

Giles squatted and tested Kyle's pulse. It was erratic. He'd have to work fast. The knife rested against the boy’s throat at an awkward angle but Giles couldn't risk even raising the boy's head. He was that close to death. Giles chanted the words of the ritual. “Yu ba ya sa na!” The knife flashed, drinking deep from the throat. Green flashed in Kyle's eyes before they faded forever. A moment later, Weirick's eyes opened and flashed that same shade of green. The man stirred but apparently the strength of the hyena couldn't counter the blow that had knocked Wierick out.

Weirick already wore Eyghon's Mark. The Latin to invoke the demon rolled off of Giles' tongue. Power surged as Eyghon incarnated into Weirick's body. It had worked! Giles hadn't been sure two demons could be invoked into the same frame. With any luck, Weirick would suffer fiercely before he died.

Weirick's skin warped, shifting and bulging as it turned from green to tan and back again. The man's features continued to morph, never settling on one form. His eyes popped open as he screamed. Ah, good, it was painful, excruciating actually based on the sounds.

The screams stopped abruptly but Weirick wasn't dead. Neither human nor fully demonic, he seemed a strange blend of the two. He looked straight at Giles. “Release me.”

Giles fell as pain stabbed through his eye. It faded almost immediately. “Release me.” Damn, that had been stupid. Even incarnate in human form, Eyghon could reach through the bond to hurt him. Giles couldn't hold out, not against a monster living in his own mind.

Before Giles could act, the demon laughed. It wasn't a human laugh and it wasn't, quite, demonic. It sounded more like … Giles' thoughts turned to Xander, caged, as his hyena-possessed friends gathered outside. Gods, it wasn't just Eyghon inside Weirick. The demon and the hyena had joined forces.

The demon-hyena reached out with one claw, grabbing the door to the cage, and yanked, pulling the
cage apart. Oh shit oh shit oh shit. Joining hadn't just combined their power, it had multiplied it. The hyena grinned at him. Shit. Eyghon wasn't going to stop it. The hyena would tear him to shreds.

Giles reached, pulling on the bond that connected him to Willow, drawing power off the girl and thrusting it into a shield. He could feel her jerk, trying to hold onto her magic, but he'd broken the boundaries between them. The creature, more hyena than demon now, stepped forward, still laughing, and bounced off the shield. The laughing stopped. It took a swipe. Giles could feel the shield weaken but it didn't give way. He grabbed more power. The shield shone, glowing so brightly it was visible even under the florescent lights. The demon stood, laughing, and ran off.

As the demon-hyena tore up the stairs, Giles fell against the wall, spent. He couldn't feel Willow through the link. Perhaps he'd killed her. He couldn't worry about that now. If that creature came back, he was dead. He couldn't even move much less defend himself.

After a few minutes, he heard a scream, a man's but high-pitched with terror. It cut off abruptly. Bugger. The creature had found a victim. Giles could only hope the combination of demonic and hyena possessions would burn through the body, killing Weirick quickly.

* * *

Through five of the cameras that pervaded the facility, Lucas Miller watched the woman, Kris Mansfield, wake in a room that was meant to suggest, but not convince her, that she was in a hospital. He saw her sit up, take in the nearly empty room, the hospital bed, and the IV in her arm. Before she could remove it herself, a nurse, male and old enough to give him an air of authority, entered the room to remove the IV.

“When can I leave?” Miller had known that Kris wouldn't be able to stop herself from questioning the nurse. The man been instructed to ignore her questions. If Miller had wanted her to know, he wouldn't be playing these games.

When the nurse left the room, Kris followed but not quickly enough. The drug from the IV slowed her reactions, not enough for her to notice but enough to delay her long enough for the nurse to disappear before Kris could make it to the hallway. As Miller had predicted, Kris tried all eight closed – and locked naturally – doors before approaching the open door at the far end of the hallway.

She stopped at the edge of the doorway to stare at a replica, sans windows, of her Watcher's study. Every detail had been carefully duplicated: the Anatolian kilim, spread across the floor, whose abrash, subtle graduations of shade indicating the yarn was hand dyed, declared its antiquity; the shelves crammed with occult books; the cabinet used to store ancient scrolls; and even the scent, a
mix of myrrh, frankincense, amber, and patchouli. When her eyes lit on the room's sole occupant, Kris visibly flinched. The man, not a Watcher, was a distant cousin of the man who'd trained her as a Potential. Their facial features were remarkably similar but the cousin was shorter and more inclined to chubbiness. The differences underneath the similarities were important. They'd leave Kris feeling unsettled, as if she were standing on unstable ground, making her all the more vulnerable to manipulation.

“Defunct Kristin Shae Mansfield.”

She winced when he referred to her as a Defunct. Miller had expected her to. Most ex-Potentials felt as if they'd failed when it became clear they'd never be Called. The pseudo-Watcher gestured toward a chair, the one Kris had sat on when in the study with her Watcher. More of a tall, wooden stool than a chair, it stood in stark contrast to the leather wingback her Watcher had favored for himself.

“What do you want?”

Miller grinned. She hadn't asked the obvious question: who are you. What do you want went to the heart of the matter.

“I understand you've met Mr. Rupert Giles.” The pseudo-Watcher went straight to the point. He would attack her vulnerability, her lack of faith in her abilities, later when she needed convincing.

Like a rabbit under the eye of a fox, she froze.

“We'd like you to tell us what you know of him.”

“I don't understand. I thought he was one of your Watchers.” Interesting. She'd moved to a Hellmouth but didn't think of herself as part of the Council.

“What he is to us is hardly your concern, Defunct.”

“I'm afraid I'm not comfortable discussing Mr. Giles with you.” She was twisting on the hook, trying to evade the questions, but that was of no matter. She didn't have the skills to evade an expert interrogator.
At the knock on his door, Miller muted the sound on his monitor, knowing he wouldn't be interrupted here unless it was urgent. “Enter.”

Edmund Wyndham, descended from a line that had left the Council in a scandal so extreme that the loyal cousins who'd remained had hyphenated their name to Wyndham-Pryce, was certainly more experienced than the current heir to the Wyndham-Pryce name. Oh, not Alan, that lad was as cunning as a fox and twice as devious. He'd go far in the Council. But Wesley was wet behind the ears, not so much inexperienced as gullible, so much so that Miller'd be surprised if the lad survived his first field assignment.

“Sir, Fitzsimmons is dead, killed by a demon.”

Miller turned off the camera feeds. He could count on his man to both interrogate Kris and ensure that she never darken Giles' door. Miller couldn't risk Giles learning that she'd been interrogated. He'd know the Council was getting close and he'd bolt. Miller would track him down, of course, but letting prey escape, that was a rookie mistake, one that he wasn't about to have on his record.

“Has the demon been captured?”

Edmund surprised him. “The demon is dead, killed by the Slayer. The remains vanished before the demon could be identified.”

“No indication that it was Eyghon?” Giles, in his youth, had been associated with Eyghon. That was old news, forgiven by the Council, but if the man had taken up with the demon again, that was something Miller could take to Antonia Ashworth.

“We can't tell. The young man, Tucker Wells, left the scene and immediately cleared away any evidence. He spilled paint across the floor of a storeroom. If there had been a demon Mark painted on the floor, it's lost to us.”

Tucker had removed the evidence. That was surprising. Miller had pegged the lad as a weak reed, someone Giles couldn't rely on.

“We believe Mr. Giles must have threatened the boy, terrified him in fact. Mr. Wells wouldn't have been so thorough otherwise.”
They couldn't interrogate Tucker, not directly. If the lad vanished, Giles would grow suspicious and bolt. If they interrogated the lad and let him go, he'd tell Giles he'd been questioned and, again, Giles would bolt.

“We could bring in Miss Kim,” Edmund suggested. “See if she could get the information out of Mr. Wells.”

Miller nodded his assent. Despite her youth, Amanda Kim was a competent agent. She'd get the information from Tucker without arousing Giles' suspicions.

* * *

Owen didn't remember the knife in his gut. Or he did remember, but not really. He remembered seeing the knife, sharp and deadly in Mr. Giles' hand. He remembered the zookeeper shoving him forward. He remembered a sharp burst of pain and hitting the ground. He remembered opening his eyes to the night sky, stars twinkling above him. Those stars could be dead, he'd thought, burned out centuries ago. The light took that long to travel. He'd raised his bloody hand and the stars had been obliterated. Death had not kindly stopped for him. Death had come hunting.

Here, in this hospital room, with machines beeping, the scent of antiseptic, and no windows, no outside view to distract him, Owen could think clearly again. His hand's weren't bloody. He didn't hurt. He felt a localized numbness in his gut. He didn't explore the wound.

A nurse came in, or at least Owen thought he might be a nurse. The man wore scrubs. Nurses wore colored scrubs and doctors wore white medical jackets, right? The man had no name tag. Shouldn't there be a name tag? The man, nurse, picked up a chart from the foot of the bed and wrote something.

“Is my Mom here? My Dad?”

The nurse, man, didn't look up. He put the chart back and left the room without speaking.

“Hey,” Owen called after. “Who are you? What's going on? Can I see my parents?” He felt as if he should be asking for a lawyer, but you didn't need lawyers in hospitals.

He lay there, staring at the ceiling. No stars here, just medical machines and the one hospital bed.
There was no tv. Didn't hospitals have tvs? There was no noise. He should be hearing something, shouldn't he? Announcements or other patients? “Hello?”

He heard no answer but silence.

“Can anyone hear me?” After a pause, he called out again. “Hello?”

No one answered. No one came. He sat up, thinking about getting out of the bed. Could he pull the IV rack with him? He heard a voice at the door, a rumbling bass. “Hello, Mr. Thurman.”

“Um, hello.”

The man wore tweed, a starched shirt, and a tie just like Mr. Giles usually did. Owen's chest tightened as he remembered the knife. His throat closed, choking him. “Please, I'm gonna be …” He leaned over the side of the bed. Something slimy, more like saliva than vomit, spewed to the floor. When he sat up, he had nothing to wipe his mouth with. “Please, could you call a nurse or maybe a doctor?”

“I'm afraid not.”

“Please, I'm sick. Why won't anyone come?”

“Someone has come. I'm here to speak with you.”

The man couldn't, not without his parents present. There was a law or at least Owen thought there was a law. “If you want to talk to me, my parents should be here.”

“Oh, your parents can't help you with this.” Something about the way the man smiled made Owen feel like a lamb before a slavering wolf.

“What do you want to talk about?” Something legal, it had to be. The man wanted him to sign papers or something. Well, he wouldn't, not without his parents.
When the man spoke again, it wasn't anything Owen had expected. He spoke two words, one name: “Buffy Summers.”

“Buffy?”
The Puppet Show

Chapter Notes

What went before:

- **Eyghon in Giles’ mind**: Eyghon is connected to Giles by a process called domination. Unlike possession, in which a demon takes over a human host, domination entails the creation of a psychic bond between the demon and its host. The demon does not inhabit the host but is, instead, connected to the host’s mind. The demon is, in effect, always in the back of the host’s mind, whispering directly into the host’s thoughts.

- **Giles’ split personalities**: Under the stress of Eyghon's influence, Rupert's personality has split into three. Rupert is closest to canon Giles and has the least contact with Eyghon. Giles is the personality in charge of protecting Rupert. Ripper takes care of any dirty work Giles needs done. To keep Eyghon from tormenting Rupert, Giles has agreed to give Eyghon access to the Slayer line.

- **Willow’s breaking taboos**: Giles, in order to control Willow’s power and make it his own, has put magical hooks into her that allow him to call on her magic at will. Because she’s an unskilled magic user, her power does not flow as easily as Giles would like. Meditative practices would improve the flow of her magic. In order to get her to meditate more often, Giles has introduced the girl to Tantra (in a “please don’t look at this forbidden book” kind of a way.) He expected she would take up solo sex meditative practices such as energy orgasms. Willow, intrigued by the sex magic but a little put off by them as well, has instead chosen to follow the book’s idea on breaking taboos. Jenny Calendar, after discovering Willow reading a book on Tantra, called Giles out for being so careless as to allow the book to fall into the girl's hands. She doesn't realize he'd done it deliberately.

- **Giles studying students possessed by the hyena spirit**: When removing the hyenas from the students, Giles and Weirick came to an agreement: Weirick would help Giles study the effects of hyena possession by putting the hyena spirit back into one of the students and Giles would help Weirick gain the power he craved by possessing him with a demon. Because Giles used a modified ritual, Weirick’s possession did not last. Weirick, not satisfied with the deal, is invoking Eyghon into himself. In the last chapter, Ripper killed Weirick.

- **Antonia Ashworth**: When Merrick was Buffy’s Watcher, the Council decided that the next two Watchers to be assigned to a Slayer would be Roderick Travers Ashworth and Rupert Giles, in that order. Giles, to gain access to the Slayer more quickly, invoked Eyghon to kill Roderick Ashworth. Antonia Ashworth, to prevent her son Cecil’s death by quest for vengeance, has taken over that quest for vengeance herself.

- **Lucas Miller**: Working for Antonia Ashworth, basically spying on Giles. He headed up the project to scan all the books in Sunnydale's library.

- **Kris Mansfield**: A Potential who'd never been Called. In the last chapter, Miller's men interrogated her to learn what she knew about Giles.

- **Buffy’s homeroom in the library**: Giles set this up without giving Buffy a head’s up. Buffy is taking homeroom in the library. Giles expects her in an hour early so she can meditate. That's going about as well as you'd expect.

- **The Amulet of Dominion**: Giles has learned of an artifact, the Amulet of
Dominion Over the Line of Aurelius, that will allow him to weaken any or all vampires of the Aurelian line. He plans to use this artifact to kill both the Master and Angelus. He already has the spell that activates the amulet but does not know the amulet's location.

- **Tucker:** Because the lad is so bloodthirsty, Eyghon has an interest. Miller, noticing Tucker is working with Giles, has assigned Amanda Kim to spy on Tucker.

If he had claws, Tucker could tear out that damned librarian's throat. He swung the sword, which he'd grabbed for the weapon's cage, ahead of him, imagining the shock on the fucker's face as his guts spilled to the floor. It'd serve him right, being taken out by his own weapon. Why the hell he'd have to kill that zoo guy for? Tucker swiped with the sword again. He should stick it into Giles, quick as a whip. He stopped and the sword dropped to his side. Fucker'd been fast with that knife though, faster than he'd expected. Fuck that. Old man like that, he'd go down easy. Still, maybe he could get some practice in first.

Fucking librarian thought he was a big shot, thought he knew everything but he didn't know Tucker'd broken into his weapon cage and grabbed this sword and he didn't know Tucker'd been reading his books. There were these demons, Yarbnies, fucking pansies they were, hiding out below underpasses, the cowards. He'd find one and …

“Shit. No!” The words crumbled into a scream. Fuckin' A. It sounded like a babe. Maybe he could see a demon disembowel the bitch. Tucker darted toward the screams, picking up speed as they cut off. He saw the demon first, in the playground, denting the metal as it climbed a slide. Big and hairy, it stunk about as bad as it looked.

The babe totally made up for the ugly. Standing on the top steps of the slide all wicked hot and Asian with a shirt so short he could see her belly ring glinting in the streetlight, she looked like something out of a porn mag, and, okay, the pageboy hair was shorter than he liked but she was gonna get it and he was gonna get to watch. Only she didn't. The demon climbed another foot, the metal crunching in his claws as he moved up, and hit, well Tucker wasn't sure what it hit. But there was a flash of light and the demon flew back, crashing to the ground. “Fuck!”

The demon heard. It turned, saw him, and leaped. Cringing back, Tucker's eyes shut as he swung the sword. Nothing crashed into him. When Tucker tentatively opened one eye, the demon lay sprawled on the ground at his feet.

The girl, climbing down the back of the slide, jumped the last few feet. “Good work. You hit its weak spot. You know your demons, yeah?”

Damn but the chick was hot. As she came closer, he could see her navel ring was a skull, silvery with black eye sockets. He wondered where else she might be pierced. “I've studied a bit.”

She looked him up and down slowly, reminding him of every bitch cheerleader who'd walked away, jeering and cackling. “Name's Mandy. Mandy Kim.”

“Tucker. I'm, uh, Tucker.”

“So, Tucker, I'm heading to the cemetery for graveyard dust. Wanna come?”

Fuck yeah! “Sure.”
She sauntered on ahead. He raced to catch up. “What else have you killed?”

Shit. He couldn't say he was out hunting Yarnies. They were, like, the kittens of the demon world. A fucking girl could take 'em out. “Got in a fight with a couple of Fyarls once.”

She licked her lips. “Cool.”

“And there was, uh, this teacher. Or, I mean, not a teacher, a demon posing as a teacher. She, I mean, it, uh, he … he's dead now.”

“Fast and sexy. Dangerous combo.”

Sexy?

She stopped and pointed at … was that Buffy? “Deadly for a pretty little girl like that out on her own at night.”

Fuck. Buffy could totally tell Mandy he hadn't killed that teacher. “She's nothing. Total loser.” He nodded toward the house. Uncle Charlie'd said it'd been used in that Addams Family film but Tucker was pretty sure he'd been joking. “Was dating Owen, pretty boy poetry freak who lives in that creeptastic frame. The whole family up and vanished over the weekend, moved out of town or something without any warning.”

“So she's just standing there, staring at his house, hoping he'll move back to be with her again? Pathetic.”

“Yeah,” Tucker agreed. “Come on, let's get to that cemetery.”

But she didn't. Mandy walked up to Buffy. “Oooh, pretty little cheerleader lost her boyfriend? I hear he got eaten, crunched down by something big with teeth.”

“What?” Buffy's eyes were as wide as those of a little kitten facing a big bad wolf. “No, there was no eating. He, uh, I mean his family moved. There's no furniture. Not that I'm the kind of a stalky freak who'd check if there were furniture or not. And, see? A For Sale sign. They just left town, moved away, suddenly, without telling anyone beforehand.”

“Ha!” Mandy danced around Buffy, looking over her shoulder as she walked past her. “I see a pathetic freak who can't get over the boy who dumped her.” He grabbed Tucker's hand in passing. “Come on, Romeo. We've got more interesting fish to fry.”

Romeo? She'd called him Romeo? That was good, right? That meant, uh, kissing and shit, right?

* * *

Buffy dragged herself in just before the end of homeroom, looking as if she hadn't slept in days. She hadn't been playing around in that Bronze club again, had she? Gods but the girl had no sense of duty. “Buffy, could I speak with you a moment?”

As she took a large sip of coffee, Giles wondered if it'd be worth bespelling her so she couldn't enter the Espresso Pump. Unfortunately, Sunnydale was rife with coffee shops. She'd most likely waste time going even further away for her morning dose of caffeine. “What's up?”
"I believe the question should be what's not up. That would be you. Buffy, you've been dragging yourself in here, far later than has been your wont, for the better part of the week. I want you to skip that partying or whatever nonsense you've been up to, patrol of course, but then return home and get to sleep. If you're here bright and early tomorrow …"

She slammed her coffee on the table, crumpling the cup. Giles dove behind the checkout counter for napkins. “Partying? You think I've been partying?”

“I, well, if I'm mistaken … Buffy, is something bothering you?” He swabbed at the coffee with a wad of napkins. “You know I'm here if you need me, don't you?”

With a sniff, she replied, “I guess.”

Giles patted her hand. “Please, Buffy, tell me what's going on.”

“Well, Owen …”

“Mr. Giles.” He didn't know the man, but Giles had seen him about. One of the teachers presumably.

“What do you want?” Giles snapped.

“Me? Nothing. Principal Snyder wants you in his office.”

“At my earliest convenience one presumes.”

“Do you think he'd have dragged me out of homeroom if it could have waited? Principal Snyder wants you now.” He vanished into the hallway, leaving the doors swinging shut behind him. Giles had the impression the man would have slammed them if he could.

“He's a charmer.” Buffy picked up the napkins and dumped them in the trashcan. “As long as you get to homeroom before the cards are collected, most teachers will count you as on-time. Not Benioff. Once the bell's rung, you're late. No excuses.”

“Ah, Buffy, what is it you wanted to tell me?”

“Huh?” She shrugged. “Nothing. Not important.” She wiped at the table, obviously keeping herself busy to avoid catching his eye. “Don't you think you'd better check out what Mein Führer wants?”

So much for building trust with the girl. Damn Snyder and his interruptions.

“Yes, quite. You have a few more minutes. Do try to meditate before the bell rings.”

She continued wiping at the perfectly dry table. “Sure.”

Right. Whatever Snyder wanted, it had better be important. The bell ending homeroom rang, filling the halls with students. Giles swam against the stream and dodged into the outer office, the room that had once been Kris'. The damned bint had vanished over the weekend, presumably eaten by something. One would think her years of Slayer training would have taught her to survive on a Hellmouth.

“I don't care who. Just send someone. It's a mess here,” Snyder shouted into the phone. Giles stepped into the man's office just as he slammed the phone down. “Took you long enough.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You're taking over the Talent Show. I don't have time to discuss. Just do it.”
“The what?”

“The high-school's Talent Show. Surely you have them in London or Scotland or wherever you're from. The students perform. Parents applaud. It's all very touchy-feely. Mr. Rodgers, the previous director, had an unfortunate accident with a barbecue fork. That's where you come in. You'll be taking his place.”

“No.”

“What did you say?”

“You want me to organize the Talent Show and at the last minute. I won't.”

“I am up to my eyeballs in chaos here. Miss Mansfield quit, not giving any notice, and I don't have time for your uppity attitude. You're doing it.”

“No.”

Snyder pulled out a folder and laid it on his desk. The label, reading Giles, Rupert was clearly visible. “Ex-Principal Flutie notes that you have an attitude problem. You don't interact with the students. He was quite concerned. Now I generally don't care what a weak-hearted liberal who got eaten by wild dogs thinks, but I need someone to take over the Talent Show and you're it. You will accept this position or I will take my, and ex-principal Flutie's, concerns to the school board and ask them why we don't have a red-blooded American tending our high-school's library.”

He didn't have time for this. “Mr. Snyder.”

“Principal Snyder,” the man interrupted.

“Are you aware how Principal Flutie died?”

Snyder stared as if uncertain where this was going. “I was told that ex-Principal Flutie'd been eaten by wild dogs.”

“Quite,” Giles agreed. “And, you have, one presumes, noticed the death-rate of teachers and students. It is, if no one has bothered to inform you, abnormally high.”

Snyder leaned forward. Standing there, resting his hands on his desk, he reminded Giles of a little dog, a schnauzer perhaps, barking and trying to bluff a rottweiler. “And where exactly are you going with this?”

“I was merely noting that one more death, among so many, could easily go unnoticed. I do believe it'd barely be commented upon, particularly if the victim were new to the area and not well-known in the community.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Over the Talent Show? Please, it would take considerably more than that to make me act.” Giles graced the man with a Ripperish grin. “Now, if you were to object to my lack of interest in extracurricular activities and if you were to take said objections to the school board and thereby threaten my position, well, such actions on your part would have consequences.”

Giles watched as Snyder parsed his words. The man fell back into his chair. “I don't have time for your petty concerns. Get out of my office.”
As he passed through the outer office, Giles stared at the empty room. Kris was gone. Damn, the little Defunct had been his backup plan to access the Slayer line if Buffy got herself killed. He'd have to let it go. He didn't have time for distractions, not if he was going to both kill Angelus and find the Scythe with Miller breathing down his neck.

* * *

The dojo, although large enough to hold dozens of fighters, held only two. Kris Mansfield, whom the Council would label a Defunct, a Potential grown so old she'd never be called, dressed in the white on white gi of a novice with her red hair trailing in a braid down her back, moved through a basic kata. Sensei Curtis Jones, evaluating her form, knew the woman expected him to train her to fight demons. He was actually charged with convincing her to take a desk job. The woman had spent fifteen years studying the Council's texts on demons. Organizations that found such knowledge useful would pay well for such a skill.

At the end of the form, Kris bowed and waited for him to acknowledge her before rising. Her Watcher had, presumably, merely nodded his head in response. Curtis bowed in return. Most Watchers were experts in the forms but paid lip service to the deeper aspect of the craft. Curtis, who thankfully had never trained with the Council, respected the art, and so he respected its practitioners, no matter how unskilled.

Kris wasn't unskilled. Her form, although damned near perfect, told him she hadn't been trained to fight. That wasn't her fault, but until she acknowledged that fact, she'd insist on going up against demons. That would get her killed.

"Your form is excellent." She nodded at the compliment but her gaze remained solemn. Most of the young women taken by the Council and trained to duty from a young age, had a diminished sense of joy but Curtis saw something deeper in Kris' serious mien.

"I would like to see your sparring techniques." Kris looked even more uncomfortable. So, she'd already realized that the Council hadn't trained her to fight well. Good. That'd make his job easier.

He joined her on the mat and they both bowed. She stepped into a fighting stance. Curtis waited for her to make the first move. She struck with a basic combo: a feint to the face and a sucker-punch to the gut. Either she was smart enough to avoid a flashy attack or she did feel unsure of herself. He twisted to avoid the punch, opened his fist, and blew confetti from his palm into her face as the forward momentum of her punch took her past him. "Stop."

As she turned toward him, he held out his hand, palm up. "If that had been black pepper, you would be incapacitated now, effectively blind, and unable to defend yourself."

She nodded her understanding but didn't speak.

"You can say it. That's cheating, right?"

"It isn't one of the seventy-six prescribed attacks, but … whatever wins the fight, yes?"

"For demons it isn't about winning. It's the thrill of the hunt, the joy of the fight. They delight in tearing their enemies from limb to limb: pure violence for its own sake. You don't fight. You think. That's your biggest mistake."
Kris kept her face blank but he could see the tension in her frame. “That's hardly my fault.”

“No, it's not.”

Her eyes widened. “But…”

“Your Watcher did not train you to fight. That's not your fault but it is your legacy.”

Her lips quivered. With a deep breath, she got herself under control. “That’s not fair.”

“They taught you to spar but not to fight. Have you ever wondered why?”

“Yes.” Ah, good, she was further along than he'd thought. “But I can't make sense of it.”

“That's because you think of yourself as a Slayer. You expect, even now, to be chosen. Think of it from the Council's point of view. They train thousands of girls. Only a few are chosen. The Watchers don't want the Defuncts to fight well.”

“But they, the Defuncts, we, uh, with the right training the Defuncts could help. They, I mean we could kill demons. Maybe not as well as the Slayer, but they could make a difference.”

“Think. Potentials are released from duty at their physical prime. Those that want to fight demons would, if lucky, have a good five to ten years of action before being killed but the smart ones, ah, they could group together and recruit other Defuncts. They'd be an army, one whose knowledge and skill could rival the Council.”

She stared into space, taking his words in. Good, the worse she thought of the Council, the more use she'd be. “That's why I haven't been taught to fight demons?”

He nodded.

“How long before I could be retrained?”

“To unlearn all they've taught you and work proper skills back up, about eight years.”

“And by then I'll be too old.”

“Yes.”

“Then why did Wyndham recruit me? Just to show me how incompetent I am?”

“You're hardly that. You've studied with a Watcher, memorized their texts. You know more about demon lore than anyone outside the Council. If you're willing to join us, we'll put those skills to good use.”

And it would be someone else's job to tell her that book learning was only the tip of the iceberg when understanding demons. Much like performing a kata didn't make you a fighter, memorizing texts didn't make you an experienced demon hunter but if she could be convinced to take on a more scholarly role, she could with training, become useful.

* * *
Giles decided to sit with a cup of tea before shelving the last of the books left out from Miller's scanning project. He spent a few minutes contemplating blends and finally chose Harrod's Afternoon Ceylon over Ahmad's English No. 1. He had just sat down with his tea when Jenny stormed through the doors so forcefully that they swung behind her like branches in a strong wind. Gods but she was gorgeous when enraged, all passion and fire. He put his guard up, not against whatever little squall she was about to raise, but against her larger mission. Her knowledge, not only of the occult but of Watchers and Slayers as well, could not be a coincidence. He couldn't be certain she'd been sent to spy on him, but a bit of prudence wouldn't be out of place. In fact, he rather hoped she was a spy. It added a touch of spice to their relationship. Just how far could he push her before she dropped him and pursued other paths in search of whatever she'd been sent after?

“How'd you do it?”

Perhaps he could turn that passion down a darker path. He leaned back in his chair, imagining her in leather, pants so tight they might as well have been painted on, and a bodice. Surely handcuffs or a whip wouldn't be enough to drive her off. Her little spy game required her to return to his bed to learn whatever she was after. “Do what?”

She played her part perfectly, becoming even more agitated at his amused tone. Oh, this was fun. “Guess who's in charge of the Talent Show.”

“I take it that you have that honor.”

“Only because you somehow got out of it. What did you do, threaten to kill him?”

Giles hid his discomfort behind a sip of tea as he wondered how thorough a dossier she'd been given. He wasn't above murder, not when it was necessary. Did she know or was she merely guessing? “Not at all. I merely suggested that cleaning up the detritus of the scanning project was keeping me too occupied to allow me to pursue other interests.”

“Don't try to jive me. I tried a similar argument. He told me to make time.”

“Perhaps I'm more persuasive than you?”

Jenny took the chair across from him and leaned over the table. “What is it? Come on. You can tell me.”

Giles placed his teacup and saucer on the table before spreading his empty hands between them. “I'd ask what I might expect to receive in recompense but in fact I have nothing, as you'd say, on him.”

“You know something or you did something, and I'm not leaving until you tell me.”

“You know how much I enjoy your company, but unless you intend to miss your next class, you will, in fact, need to leave in, oh, about a half-hour or so.”

She stood and glared down at him. “You haven't heard the last of this.” Oh, yes, he would definitely bring out the whip next time.

“I look forward to your next little chat on the subject.”

* * *
Giles shelved the last of the books and stared down at his library, reveling in the quiet order of the room. Clunky machines no longer sat as useless as rocks, marring his table. Books no longer towered in stacks that threatened to crash to the floor. Students no longer knocked about the room. Miller was no longer staring over his shoulder. No, that last, unfortunately, couldn't be true. After plundering the books in the library, Miller no longer had the excuse of the scanning project to explain his presence, but Giles was certain the man had not left Sunnydale. Miller wouldn't leave until he'd completed his assignment, but at least he was no longer pestering Giles at work.

Now that his time was his own again, Giles could finally locate of the Amulet of Dominion, the charm that would allow him to destroy Angelus. It was unnerving how the vampire kept sniffing around the Slayer without trying to kill her. Giles would be glad when the damned beast was nothing more than dust.

Over the weekend, a scrying spell had sent Giles to a warehouse where the Sunnydale Historical Society had dumped the offscouring of generations. No one would miss one journal, especially one that had been hidden away for so long that the box that held it had been covered in dust.

Council men, delving deeply as they did into the occult, were forever questing after prophecies. Even the most scholarly could fall prey to a foolish belief that had more to do with wishing than scholarship. There had always been rumors of a journal documenting the fall of the House of Aurelius. Giles had never credited them but this journal, written by a man calling himself Josiah Hex, might actually prove authentic.

It was, unfortunately, devilishly difficult to translate. Nineteenth century German would, normally, prove no hindrance but Hex had written the journal in code. Giles couldn't blame Hex for that. In fact, the code did suggest the journal might be authentic. California had been under Spanish, that is Catholic, control. Writing about vampires could have gotten the author, whomever he'd actually been, killed.

“Adjacent to the Tree of Life lies the Wall of Eternal Life? No, of Resurrection.” Giles checked his excitement. He couldn't allow his hopes to influence his understanding of the text but the Tree of Life and Wall of Resurrection did fit the vision he'd seen when scrying for the amulet: an image of a tree laid out in tiles against a marble background.

Checking his notes, Giles wondered what Hex had meant by the Tomb of the Juniper. Certainly a good number of traditions used trees to symbolize life after death but that referred to resurrection which didn't apply to vampires. They were dead, not reborn. But if this wasn't a lead, why had the scrying spell led him to this journal?

Attacking the question head on wasn't helping. Giles leaned back in his chair and took a sip of tea. The Harp & Lyre blends were the devil to locate in southern California but he couldn't imagine his day without them. He breathed in the slightly coppery aroma of the Assam blend and felt himself relax in the library's orderly silence.

It was an unfortunate time for someone to scream.

Should he ignore it? The scream might be nothing – students tended to make mountains out of molehills after all – and this research was crucial. However, the hallways were filling with noise, the chatter of overly excited children. Given that the bell had rung less than ten minutes ago, they should all be in class. Perhaps he'd better investigate after all. Giles locked Hex's journal away before searching out the source of the commotion.

The children were all streaming in one direction. Giles stepped into that river and flowed with them to a hallway outside the gym. Students thronged in the hall, about as intelligently as lemmings, to no
purpose. Police tape barred the entrance to the girl's locker room but there were no officers were in
sight. Giles grabbed one of the students, one he vaguely associated with cheerleading. He didn't
know her name but her type always knew what was happening. “Geez, grabby much? Keep your
hands to yourself.”

He ignored her rudeness. “What's going on? Why are you all out of class?”

Tears almost welled in her eyes. “Oh, it's Emma. She was, like, my best friend and now she's dead.”

“Dead? How? What happened to her?”

The girl curled her lip. “Morbid much?” And walked off.

“It's not Emma,” another girl offered. This one was also near to tears but honest ones. “We had gym.
I mean we were getting ready for gym but there … there was … it was Emily. We found her. In
there.” She pointed to the locker room.

“Now we know why she didn't make it to the track meet yesterday,” a boy offered as if Giles cared
about a bloody track meet. “We might have won the long distance …” He turned to glare at a girl
who'd elbowed him.

“She's dead, Josh, and you're worrying about a race?”

“Oh, uh …”

“When was she last seen?” Giles asked.

That stirred up the chatter with answers ranging as far back as homeroom the previous day. Like
starlings readying for their flight to winter grounds, they each had to have their say. “She didn't show
up for eighth period.”

“Duh, because she had to warm up for rehearsal.” The Talent Show rehearsal, it turned out, was the
last time anyone had seen Emily.

Deciding he should investigate further before the police returned, Giles shoved through the students.
It rather felt as if he were swimming upstream although perhaps walking through mud would be a
more accurate analogy given that the students weren't going anywhere.

The locker room was colder than the hallway. The student's voices, muted by distance, sounded like
the buzzing of mosquitoes. The corpse wasn't hard to find. The police had left the body uncovered.
The girl's skin had taken on that pale, almost grayish, lifeless quality seen after death. It wasn't
difficult to see how she'd died. A gaping hole in her chest, the darkened red of dried blood, stood
stark contrast to the blandness of the girl. Whatever had killed her had made rather a mess of it. Giles
was a bit surprised the body hadn't been discovered before third period; presumably the children
weren't expected to exert themselves in gym earlier in the day.

“Sir.” Oops, the coppers had returned, two of them, blocking his exit, studying his appearance. And,
damn, he'd meant to maintain a low profile. “Sir, you can't be here.”

“Good Lord. I … is she dead? I mean, obviously … but when I'd heard there'd been a disturbance in
the locker room, I hadn't expected anything like this.” Giles dithered as his eyes followed a trail of
blood. It led not to a heart but to a knife, bloody and discarded on the floor. Ah, good, the killer was
human. He wouldn't have to delay his research to support Buffy in a demon hunt.

“Sir.” Damn, the copper was looking at him with suspicion. Giles made up an excuse.
Principal Snyder sent me. He needs the name of this unfortunate young lady so her parents can be informed of, well, you know.” He gestured toward the body.

One of the coppers rolled her eyes. “We will take care of informing the family.”

“Oh, yes, of course. I'll be on my way then.”

The hallway was just as chaotic as it'd been before he'd stepped into the locker room. One would think, with Snyder being such a disciplinarian, that the man could keep better control over the students. And, damn, Buffy had arrived. He was going to have to get past the gauntlet of Buffy and her friends before he could return to his research.

He explained, quite clearly, that the murderer had to be a human. Buffy, contrary girl, refused to believe him. “No, wait. I'm not buying you guys. Remember the Hellmouth? Mystical activity is totally rife. This to me says demon.”

Giles winced. He needed to get back to Hex's journal. Couldn't the girl take his word on anything? “I wouldn't waste your time. Humans do kill, even on Hellmouths.”

The children ignored him. “We could check it out,” Willow said. “Talk to other kids in the Talent Show. We don't know for sure it's not a demon.”

“You three do as you please,” Giles told them. “I must return to my library.”

As he walked off, dodging past the mass of students who refused to stay still, Giles could hear the three of them working out assignments, deciding who would speak with whom. “How come I get stuck with Cordelia?” Giles grinned at Xander's complaint. Their search, while a waste of time, would, with any luck, keep them out of his way while he located the Aurelian amulet.

* * *

In between classes, when the halls were full of kids, vibrant with life, Buffy could relax, hang out, have fun, but now, with everyone else in their classrooms, the empty halls felt sort of, well, empty. The only sound, her heels clicking against the floor, beat out a rhythmic pattern against a silence that seemed oppressive and just a bit creepy.

Her thoughts turned to that last guy she'd interviewed, Jeff whose hands never seemed to sit still. He'd been off by himself, sitting under a tree, and drumming on his textbooks as she walked over. “Um, hi, you don't know me, or I think you don't know me. That girl with the tuba, I think her name is Debby, she said you'd been at the Talent Show the other night. You're with that band, right? Vampire Hillboys?”

“Oh, yeah.” His hands hadn't stopped drumming. “Taylor came up with the name. He'd rushed in for rehearsal, late which totally wasn't like him, and said he'd been attacked or mugged or something. He said it was a vampire and that some angel had saved him and told him to run off home before he got himself killed.”

Buffy hid a wince. She really had to come up with something better to tell people.

“The next day, though, he said it'd been a dream or maybe a movie he'd been watching. Something, anyway. But we'd already named the band. Adam, our bassist, likes to tell it as a really spooky story.
Scares the chicks. Makes 'em sort of grabby."

Grabby? Nice guys here. Buffy wanted to slam her hand down on his to stop that tap-tap-tapping, but she needed the guy to answer her questions. Once again, into the breach, whatever that meant. The never-ending quest to find a way to ask if he knew who killed Emily without actually coming out and asking if he knew who killed Emily. "So, you were at the Talent Show last night?"

The tapping sped up into a more complex pattern. "Huh? Oh, yeah."

"And you saw Emily there."

His hands stopped. He stared off into space, looking like a lost little boy. Oh, she hadn't thought he'd get upset. "You knew her?"

He started beating on his books again in a sort of heartbeat rhythm. "We used to hang."

"Did anyone talk to her?"

Even though his hands hadn't stopped drumming out that heartbeat, he was still staring off with that lost puppy dog look. "Sure. She was popular, knew everybody."

"Was anyone acting weird?"

She knew what he was going to say. Everyone had come up with the same name. "Well, Morgan but he'd been acting odd in general lately."

"Clutching at his head, missing school, that kind of thing," Buffy muttered more to herself than him. "Well, yeah, but I was thinking more about his dummy."

He moved back to a more complex drumming pattern again. "What about the dummy?"

"Well, I think I saw him talking to it, not like for the show or anything, but like it was a real person or something."

"Huh, I haven't been able to find Morgan."

Jeff shrugged. "He's probably in the auditorium."

"Huh?"

"That's where he goes when his headaches get to be too much."

So, here she was, with her footsteps echoing down the long hallway … Oh, and that's why she'd been thinking of Jeff: heels clacking on the floor reminding her of his drumming. Jeff had said Morgan got headaches. What if they were more? If he had migraines, the auditorium wouldn't be a bad place to go. It'd be quiet and dark.

The auditorium wasn't dark. The stage was lit. Ugh, and there was that dummy sitting by itself. At least it was facing away. "Right." That was the dummy's voice. "Now you and me gotta be on the lookout. Figure out who's gonna be next."

Okay, and hearing that creepy dummy voice when Morgan was nowhere in sight, that wasn't at all disturbing.

"How are we supposed to …" Morgan stepped out from behind the curtain. "Oh, hi."
“Hello,” Buffy replied.

“I was just working on throwing my voice.”

Not something he needed to practice. She'd almost thought the dummy had been speaking for a minute there. As Morgan stared, Buffy realized she needed to say something. Asking if he'd killed Emily probably wasn't going to cut it. “Uh, Morgan, did you notice anything weird going on around here yesterday?”

“Well? What d'you mean?” Did he have to pick up that dummy? Now that its back wasn't to her, she'd swear it was looking at her.

“With Emily. Did she say anything to you, was she arguing with anyone?”

“No. She was dancing.” Oh, good. Opening the case meant he was putting the creepy dummy away, right? “Sid and I were talking.”

“Talking.”

“Rehearsing.”

“So, you didn't notice anything weird at …”

Morgan fell to a chair and grabbed his head. Oh, one of those headaches. It did look bad. He she been too loud? He could have said if he alone-time. She was about to ask if he needed help when the dummy – she'd swear it was glaring at her – shouted, “Look, sweetheart! He answered your questions. Now leave him alone!”

Okay, and so much for migraines. Were the headaches all a put on? “Okay, Morgan, how 'bout you drop the abacus-cadabracus act and talk to me yourself?”

“He's said all he's gonna say.” Way to completely ignore her talk for yourself request.

“It's okay, Sid. We're done.” Sid? He'd named his dummy Sid?

At least Morgan was putting the dummy away. Right, maybe if she backed off a bit, he'd be willing to talk. “I'm sorry. Look, I didn't mean to make you mad.”

“No! I'm … It's him. He's … We have to go.”

Morgan and the dummy, well dummy's case anyway, vanished through the door. “So much for that interview.”

“Buffy?”

Okay, and there was Miss Calendar, on the stage. How long had she been standing there? “Um, hi. I didn't think anyone was here or anyone else I mean. So, I guess being the leader of this whole shindig means hanging around backstage a lot?”

“Were you asking about Emily?”

Oops, busted. “Um, well, we were thinking about, uh, maybe having a memorial thingy, um, here in school that is. And so of course I've been talking to …”

“You were asking if she'd been arguing with anyone.”
“Um, right. Because anyone she'd been arguing with, well that meant they weren't getting along and that person shouldn't be invited to the memorial or maybe they should because they'd be feeling extra bad and so should be there, you know, to have the support of the school and all.”

Miss Calendar just stared and Buffy could feel that she wasn't buying the whole memorial thing. “You hang with Rupert … I mean, I've seen you in the library.”

“Um, sure, 'cause learning. I love learning and, uh, you know, studying.”

“Really? Because your teachers, well, lets say your grades don't reflect this supposed love of studying.”

“Have you been checking up on me?”

Miss Calendar glanced down and crossed her arms. When she looked back up, her gaze seemed distant. “You should get back to class. You're supposed to be in class now, yes?”

“Um, yeah, I'll get right back to that,” Buffy said as she backed toward the exit. Great, now they really were going to have to organize a memorial.

* * *

Tucker'd had friends once. They'd bought it in that mansion, attacked by who the hell knew what. Giles knew, that was for sure, but he wasn't saying. Ever since that night, Tucker'd sat alone. In Sunnydale, you learned to keep yourself safe or you vanished. And so he trudged to class alone. History was boring. Miss Jackson was boring. Who cared what a bunch of dead guys had gotten up to?

He was completely unprepared when the hot chick from the night before slid into the seat next to him. “'Sup?”

She wasn't as hot as he remembered. Or, well, maybe she was but he couldn't see her torso at all under that Dingos Ate My Baby tee, but her blue jeans were just as tight and as her hair flipped back he felt his stomach drop to his feet. “Uh, hi.” Shit, he was an idiot! “How come I haven't seen you around before?”

Her smirk said she remembered every detail of last night's make-out session in the graveyard. “You cut me to the quick. You've forgotten me already?”

Shit, no, he hadn't meant that. Meeting her, in the dark like that, how she'd shoved him against the walls of the crypt and thrust her tongue down his throat, it'd seemed like a dream. He didn't expect to see her in school. “No, no! Uh, you're Mandy, right? I just meant that school, it doesn't seem like your kind of thing.”

She grinned at that. “I knew you were smart. It isn't, and yet here we are. I'm gonna have to share your history text. Haven't bothered to pick one up.”

Tucker'd never sat with a hot chick before so of course Mitch and three of his buds had to barge in and ruin it. “Hey, pretty lady, don't encourage the loser. If you're that desperate for a seat, you can sit on my lap.” As his buds laughed, Mandy rose to her feet. Something in her grin sent Mitch stepping back. “Uh, so haven't seen you around. What's up with that?”
“I'm new here. Wanna know why? Got kicked out of my last school for slicing a guy from his guggle to his zatch.” At the word guggle she touched his Adam's apple and drew her hand down to his belly.

Mitch took two more steps back. “In your dreams. Like I'd soil myself with you. Bitch.”

“Shit,” Tucker breathed. “You are the coolest girl ever.”

She turned back to Tucker and Mitch faded into insignificance. She held out her hand. “Let's blow this dump.”

He'd hoped she'd lead him back to a graveyard and French him again. That was a theme he could live with, but they ended up in the Espresso Pump. She took her coffee strong and black and so Tucker ordered that as well even though he didn't care for coffee all that much.

She lifted the cup toward her face and the steam rose like a veil between them. “You were pretty handy, killing that demon last night. How'd you know where to strike?” The purr in her voice was melting something in his brain.

“Oh, you know, I picked stuff up here and there.”

“Here and there?” Something in her voice had changed and she looked disappointed.

“Well, I sort of, uh, have a teacher, um, more of a mentor really.”

“Mmm.” He relaxed at the sight of her grin. “I like a man who knows what he's doing.”

Knew what he was doing? Shit. Giles hadn't taught him squat. He was gonna have to get the old geezer to teach him something stat.

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Giles set Hex's journal on the table and pinched the bridge of his nose. Other than that one reference to the Tomb of the Juniper, he hadn't found anything of use. Perhaps it was time to move on. In his vision, he'd seen the Tree of Life laid out in mosaics. The style hadn't been ancient. In fact, the naturalistic rendering suggested the design had been created during the Classical revival of the eighteenth century. A wealthy eccentric, the kind of man who collected arcane talismans, could have commissioned the Resurrection Wall, but it was far more likely that the Aurelian Amulet had been hidden by the Church.

The Council had never been the only organization fighting against demons. Any sect that lasted long enough to become a dominant religion, as it organized itself into a religious hierarchy, had to choose to either fight or ignore the world's literal demons. The Catholic Church, in creating orders such as the Knight's Templar, had taken their fight against demons to the outskirts of Christendom. Those soldiers of God had returned with cursed demonic talismans, charms which the Mother Church had distributed widely, hiding them in obscure monasteries.

The journals of priests often contained clues to warn their brothers where such demonic talismans might be hidden. In fact, didn't the journal of one of the Padres, um, Sanchez, contain a reference to a Resurrection Wall? Giles, unfortunately, didn't have the journal with him. The text itself was kept under lock and key in the Council's main library. He'd have to try another angle. Giles searched
through the library’s shelves for books referring to the Spanish missions.

Most of the books weren’t promising, but he did find The Desert Dagger: A History of Conflict Between Demons and the Spanish Missions. It was fascinating, really, how a book blatantly discussing demons in an historical context could go unnoticed on a Hellmouth. The index led him to a half-dozen sections discussing the Resurrection Wall. The third told him what he needed to know:

*Dr. Molina’s theory, that the practice of cremating the dead and placing their ashes within the niches of a columbarium as a countermeasure to extreme vampiric activity has not been supported in scholarly circles as there is no evidence for his claim of high rates of vampiric activity in northern California. Boynes et al. traced the practice to the first successful missions in California – previous missions had failed, their occupants either missing or dead, presumably resulting from conflicts with native American tribes – where Padre Junipero Ferrer's remains were placed in what came to be known as the Resurrection Wall.*

Giles jumped up from his seat and started pacing. “Junipero. Of course, Juniper. The Tomb of the Juniper. The Aurelian Amulet, the talisman that will allow me to destroy Angelus, is hidden in the tomb of Junipero Ferrer.” The text said nothing of Padre Ferrer's final resting place. Giles scanned through other books: founded nine missions, travelled extensively between them, ah, and there it was, Padre Junipero Ferrer had been buried in … Sunnydale.

Jumping online, Giles looked up the address. Down below Rock Nook Park, which would take him, what, forty-five minutes? He'd have to wait. He couldn't steal the talisman in the middle of the afternoon. No matter, he'd need time to prepare, to gather tools and learn what he could of the mission's layout.

About a half-hour before the school-day ended, as Giles paced the room, wishing for night to fall, dreading the long hours he have to spend training the Slayer before he could make his move on the mission, Tucker strolled into the library. That was a surprise. Giles hadn't seen the lad since the night he'd put both the hyena and Eyghon into Weirick's body. Giles knew the boy had cleaned up Weirick's ritual space. He'd hacked into the police database and found a report of a room covered in wet paint. The lad had done a good job there, at least, but after the fright he'd given the boy, Giles was almost shocked to see him again. “What do you want?”

“I wanna learn about demons. You said you'd teach me but you haven't done squat except leave me to get beaten up in a dive and make me clean up your dirty work.”

The lad had shown absolutely no interest in studying and now he had the nerve to come complaining? Giles didn't have time for this. He needed to get rid of the little nuisance before Buffy showed up. “You want to learn about demons? That girl, Emily, was killed by a demon. Go volunteer at the Talent Show. See what you can learn on your own.” At the girl's name, Tucker looked unexpectedly dejected. “Missed out on seeing a corpse, did you?”

“Fucking cop dragged me out of the locker room,” the boy muttered.

“Well, here's your chance. You can be first on the scene.”

“But the show's tomorrow. All the acts are, you know, already set up. I'd look strange, trying to horn in at the last minute.”

Gods, did Giles have to grab the lad by the collar and toss him out the door? “Volunteer to help backstage with the lights or sweeping or something. I don't care. Just get your ass over there.”

“Backstage? Where the girls will be dressing and undressing?” The boy ran off like a shot.
The Spanish mission rose from tamed grounds, from a grassy landscape so adorned with cedars and rosebushes that it had more of a European than Californian desert feel. From the schematics, Giles knew he'd find the Resurrection Wall in a niche in an open garden at the center of the mission. Giles would have preferred an enclosed space, perhaps a nice crypt in the bowels of the earth. Anyone could, gazing at the garden, spot the serpent in their midst.

From within a copse at the southern edge of Rocky Nook Park, at the boundary between nature left wild and the well-manicured lawn of the mission, Giles waited for the monks to retire. At a quarter to ten, one of the brothers walked around the edge of the building, not scanning for lurking trespassers but singing as he strolled about, wandering here and there seemingly at whim. His mellow tenor drifted across the open grounds in a song of praise. “Man proclaims His grace and glory. Hallelujah unto God's almighty world, hallelujah unto God's almighty world.” As the monk paused to linger over a rose, Giles felt that the song had been more a serenade to the beauty of the world than a hymn to any type of divine power. The man stood again and vanished into the mission. About fifteen minutes later, most of the lights went out as if turned off from a central switch. The covered walkways that edged the mission remained lit. Giles waited another hour before making his move.

The most direct path in, the one that circumnavigated the monks' living quarters, would take him through a hallway alongside the church proper, but to get to that hallway Giles would have to move past the covered walkways. Crossing the grounds wasn't dangerous. Even if someone did glance out, it was unlikely they'd notice a black clad figure on a moonless night. Ducking under the arches that led him to the covered walkways brought Giles into the light, where he could be seen.

The first door he tried led Giles into a dark hallway. The cross hallway, the one leading toward the church, was well-lit. Giles slipped forward, silently moving past dark classrooms, until he heard the sound of footsteps from the lit hallway. Taking two steps back, he flattened himself against a doorway. A yawning monk looked neither right nor left as he wandered through the intersection. After a minute, even his footsteps had vanished. Giles waited to see if the light would be turned out. It wasn't. Braving the lit passage, he walked in the direction the monk had come from, parallel to the church, and turned left on the last hallway before the sacristy.

Beyond another covered walkway, this one unlit, the garden opened to the night sky. The pale walls encircling the garden seemed to glow with their own light, allowing him to head straight to the niche. It was darker here, so much so that he shouldn't be able to see the mosaic pattern against the green marble, but he could. Eyghon's little gift: night vision. His fingers traced the green forest marble surrounding the Tree of Life. Further along the wall, the Portofino marble niches shone against the red onyx background of the Resurrection Wall. It took only a few moments to locate the niche that held, if his research paid out, Padre Junipero's ashes and the Aurelian Amulet.

He drew a chalk circle around the nameplate. Pressing one hand against the stone, covering the padre's name, Giles called upon Willow's magic. It came to him unevenly, more in spurts than a flow, but it was enough. “Quod occultum est. Clauderent viam vicissim pulverulenta.” The marble crumbled under his hand and fell to his feet. Dust drifted in the air. Giles pushed aside the urn. The amulet wasn't there. No, it had to be here. Giles dropped the urn to the floor. The niche was empty. Perhaps one of the monks who'd hidden the amulet had charmed it, made it invisible? He reached into the niche, grasping for the amulet. It wasn't there, but it had to be. His research couldn't be that far off. Unless … Damn. The journal had been a mislead all along and he'd fallen for it.
There was nothing else to do but return home empty-handed. As he stepped out of the columbarium, Giles was conscious of how visible he must be, a dark more-than-shadow against the pale walls, but he wasn't spotted until he stepped into the lit walkway outside the mission. “Hey, you. Stop!” Giles bolted across the lawn, racing away from the lights, hoping the darkness would hide him, but the monk, faster than Giles, was close to his heels.

Giles risked a glance back. Three other brothers, raised by the alarm no doubt, weren't far behind. “Sod it!” Ripper stopped, twisted, and threw back a punch. The closest monk fell to the ground, his mouth bloody. “Damn you,” Giles shouted at Ripper as the other three drew closer. “Not now!” Racing off, darting between a pair of rose bushes, he tossed magic back, calling out “Croître et éclater.”

At the sound of screams, Giles glanced back. Two of the monks, caught in the rose bushes as they'd grown into a wall, were hanging about three feet above the ground, their limbs impaled by giant thorns. Damn. The spell would wear off, returning the rose bushes to a normal size, but he couldn't remove the men's wounds. He'd have to trust that Hellmouth induced blindness would lead the monks to a more mundane explanation of the injuries.

* * *

At the knock at his door, polite but insistent, Miller glanced at his clock. 2:17 A.M. He threw on a robe before opening the door. Edmund Wyndham, while fully dressed in a three-piece suit, hadn't taken the time to shave which meant the matter was important but not urgent. “There's been a break-in at Nuestra Señora de La Paz Perpetua, a local Mission, a bit less than an hour away. Two of the brothers were brought into the hospital, one raving about rose bushes growing into walls before his eyes. The injuries of both men are consistent with being pierced by unusually large thorns.”

“I take it Giles is still missing?” Their tail had lost Giles before dusk. That hadn't been unusual. The man was an expert at avoiding detection, but he usually turned up at his mansion. This night he hadn't.

“He returned to his apartment shortly after the ambulance carrying the monks arrived at the hospital.”

So Giles had been out-of-sight while something had gone down at the Mission.

“There's a large a police presence at the Mission and Hernandez, our man on the force, doesn't work the night shift. It's unclear whether anything was removed. Shall I ask Hernandez to investigate?”

“Let him see what he can learn but I'll check out the Mission myself.” If Giles were the perpetrator, the clues, if any, would be subtle, difficult to detect. “We do have a Galdurfinna Lens available, yes?”

“I believe there's only the one. They are rather scarce.”

“Have it ready for me by 10 AM.”

Wyndham's eyebrow rose. “Don't you want to get there earlier?”

“The magic won't dissipate that quickly and the persona I'll be using doesn't wake before the crack of noon.”
For his visit to the Mission, Miller picked the persona of Carl Novak, a reporter so down on his luck that he'd follow any story, no matter how minor. The pale suit Miller kept for Novak looked as if the man had slept in it two nights in a row. The Mustang, a pale yellow convertible, rattled as if Novak didn't have the funds to repair it. If Miller had a favorite persona, it might well be Novak. The man's crass American attitude lacked any sense of panache but made him truly fun to play.

The Mission's parking lot was close to full, almost certainly because of the break-in. Americans, particularly the righteous, did come out in droves for a good crime. The long walk from the far end of the lot gave him a chance to take a look at any magic at the scene of the crime. Pulling out the Galdurfinna Lens, Miller chanted the spell of revelation which would allow him to see magical energy for a few minutes before burning out the lens forever.

He found signs of magic at the scene, but that was hardly surprising. Bushes didn't grow into walls and then shrink again naturally. The magic roiled through the air like a wild thing, a stark contrast to the orderly and geometrical castings favored by the Council. That didn't rule out Giles. Anyone could learn alternative magical systems. The magic was messy though, not chaotic exactly. It felt undisciplined, as if the power came from someone with little training in magical castings. That did seem to rule Giles out, but it couldn't be a coincidence that the Mission had been plundered while he'd been out-of-sight.

The lens fizzled and crumbled to dust as the spell wore off. Miller wandered through the gardens, turned a corner, and found one of the monks, one so young he was probably a novice rather than a full fledged monk, watering the roses. The young man stood as far from the roses as the hose would allow. Obviously he had some clear memories from the previous night.

Striding over with a fast pace, Miller grabbed the novice's hand, assertively pumping it up and down a few times. “How ya doing? Carl Novak, Independent News.” He flashed an ID card. “You don't mind if I record? I hear there was a break-in last night.”

The lad glanced around as if searching for a higher authority to deal with Novak. “Uh, right. I'm Brother Francis. You should probably speak to Brother Matthews.”

“Of course. Of course. But perhaps you could just answer one little question first? I heard about a theft, some sort of ancient relic gone missing.”

Brother Francis glanced toward the Mission. Along that line, based on the schematics, there'd be classrooms, an interior garden, and the columbarium. “Relic? No, um, nothing was missing. I mean, we found an urn on the floor and there was dust but not ashes from the urn. Its seal was still intact.”

Ah, so it had been the columbarium. That fit with Giles as the perp. Arcane artifacts were often hidden with the deceased. “Really? I heard it was a cross, three feet tall, gold encrusted and covered with rare jewels.”

“Don't be ridiculous. The niches aren't more than a foot and a half …”

“Brother Francis!” The name, shouted from the Mission walls, disrupted Francis' flow of words. The monk, striding across the garden, emitted an air of self-importance, the aggrandizement of low-level authority who used his limited power to buck up his ego. “Who are you talking to? You know you're not supposed to give interviews.”

“Um, this is a reporter,” the lad answered. “Carl something?”

The new monk glared at the young man until he ran off. Miller flashed his card again. “Carl Novak. I'm doing an article on the growing escalation of crime outside the city centers, how even our
churches aren't safe. That sort of thing.”

“Then you should speak with Brother Matthews. I assume you have an appointment.”

“Not as such.”

“Then you'll have to make one at the administrative office. I'll escort you.”

The monk dumped Miller in an office, glaring back as he left. The reception area, with its hard woods and leather couches, had obviously had a lot of money put into it. The woman behind the desk – hair starting to gray, conservative suit – couldn't say when Brother Matthews might be available. “I'm afraid he's rather busy. You could wait, but it'd be a long one.”

“Sure, I can wait, but in the meantime do you have a restroom? Long trip up from LA and I went way to heavy on the coffee.”

She pointed down the hall and told him to take the third right. Miller took the fifth right, the one past the chapel, and stepped into the interior garden. Past the police tape, he saw a red onyx wall interspersed with marble niches. Ducking under the tape, he examined the hole where one of the niches had been. There were no marks, no signs that the marble had been broken with tools, and the remnants on the ground were uniform, a fine dust with no chunks. Miller had no doubt. Magic had opened that niche. He felt certain that magic had been Giles' but he had no proof, nothing concrete enough to bring to Antonia Ashworth.

As Miller ducked back under the tape, the little administrator of a monk showed up with two hulking young men in tow. “Just what do you think you're doing? Desecrating the mausoleum?”

Miller raised his hands in surrender. “I'm just leaving.”

As Miller had hoped, the monk took up his suggested idea. “Damned right you're leaving.” One of the young men looked shocked when the monk swore. “David, Peter, escort this man back to his car. Novak, wasn't it? The police will be hearing about your little visit.” The young men, obviously uncomfortable, trailed him to Novak's car.

As he drove off, Miller thought about what he'd seen. Magic had been used at the mission. He couldn't prove it had been Giles, but he was certain. Something had been removed from that niche. Just what had Giles gotten his hands on?

* * *

Rupert sat at the library table with his hands wrapped around a cup of tea. The caffeine wasn't helping. Eyes closed, his head dropped slowly, down, closer and closer to the cup. As the slightly bitter aroma wafting up from his teacup hit him, he jerked up and glanced at the clock. Ten minutes before homeroom; Buffy was late. Perhaps he should stop her morning sessions. Meditation wasn't part of the Council-approved Slayer curriculum. Rupert didn't know why he'd started the sessions in the first place, which made them part of some ongoing scheme of his other self. He really ought to nip them in the bud.

As he raised the teacup to his lips, Buffy slammed through the doors. She wasn't alone. She was practically holding Willow up. Rupert lurched to his feet. “Gods, what happened?”
“Nothing. Nothing.” Despite her protestations, Willow half-fell into a chair. “I'm just tired.”

“There's nothing just about this,” Buffy said.

Giles knelt before Willow and took her hands in his. He'd have to take care. There was no reason for Buffy to suspect that he'd drained Willow's magics the night before. Best if she didn't ask any questions. “Willow, are you sure you're alright?”

The girl tried but failed to stifle a yawn. “Why does everyone think something's wrong? I'm just a bit tired.”

“Everyone?” Buffy asked. “Who's everyone?”

“My Mom's dragging me to the doctor this weekend.”

“Aha!” Buffy exclaimed. “So something is wrong.”

“No, I'm just a little sleepy is all.”

“Willow, you can barely stand and this isn't the first time, is it? You were exhausted last week too.”

“Buffy, it's nothing.”

Buffy unexpectedly turned on him. “Giles, can you look into it?”

As if he didn't have enough to do. “What do you expect me to do? Take her temperature?”

“No, what if there's, like, some demonic cause?”

“Such as?”

“I don't know. You're the expert. Go and, uh, expert.”

“Buffy, without a specific target, I wouldn't know where to begin.”

“Emily's death! It could be related to Emily's death.”

“I thought we'd agreed that a human had killed the girl.”

“No, you went all let's ignore this latest demon attack.”

He held back a sigh. At least the concern with Emily had moved Buffy past Willow's exhaustion.

Willow laid her head on the table. Buffy ran around and wrapped her arms around the girl like a shawl. She stared up at Giles. “We have to help her.”

So much for getting Buffy's focus off Willow. “Fine I'll see what I can turn up.” He glanced at the clock. “I'll write Willow an excuse for homeroom and first period.” Let the girl sleep. It wouldn't, exactly, restore her drained energy but at least it'd look like he was doing something.

“No,” Willow murmured as she sat up. “I can't miss class. Missing class bad.”

“You can and you will,” Buffy ordered. “Willow, you're not going to learn anything if you can't stay awake.”

“But …”
“Willow.”

“Oh, okay.” Willow’s head dropped to the table again. He'd need to do something to make the girl more comfortable although, given how quickly she was dozing off, perhaps he should leave her sleeping.

Buffy looked concerned that Willow had given in so easily. Time to move her thoughts to something else. “Buffy, before you take Willow's excuse to the office, do you have anything to report from last night's patrol?”

“Not with my patrol.”

That was oddly expressed. “If not with your patrol, then what?” Gods, if she'd allowed Angelus in her rooms again …

“Well, I think Sid was in my room last night.”

“Sid?”

“Morgan's dummy.”

“Ah, Morgan?”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “If you were following this demon attack, you'd be in the loop, all loopy. Uh, forget that last bit. Not what I meant t say.”

“Of course. And who is this Morgan?”

“Um, guy. He has headaches, major ones, or, I don't know, possibly pretends to. He was acting all weird and was definitely there, at the Talent Show I mean, the night Emily vanished.”

“Ah, conclusive proof indeed.”

“Giles!”

“Is there any concrete evidence that he's a demon wielding puppeteer?”

Folding her arms, she glared up at him. “Giles.”

“Buffy.”

She threw her arms in the air and started pacing. “Okay, I don't know what's up with Morgan but there's something hinkey going on. And that dummy does walk. It was in my room. And I'm pretty sure it can talk on its own too.”

“Fine.” Giles allowed a touch of exasperation to creep into his voice. “I'll see what I can turn up.”

Willow started snoring. Buffy's glance down at the girl combined affection with concern. “But you'll still have time to help Willow?”

“Yes, Buffy, I'll have time to do both.” Especially since he wasn't planning on doing either.

* * *
Willow peered into the AV room. Oh, good, it was empty. She knew she should be in the cafeteria, but she didn't think she could keep her eyes open long enough to eat. She just needed a little nap and she'd be fine. She could probably have dozed off on those comfy couches in the student rec area but Snyder didn't like anyone hanging out there between classes even if they did have a free period. Besides, Buffy or Xander would find her there. Buffy would really freak if she caught Willow taking a second nap.

The AV room was nice and quiet and, because the couch faced away from the door, nobody, like Buffy or Principal Snyder, could see her from the hallway. She'd just get a bit of shuteye and then be refreshed before her next class. That'd prove to Buffy that she was fine.

The couch was comfy, more than she'd been told even. Willow just hoped she wouldn't sleep through her next class but of course she wouldn't. She wasn't that tired no matter what her Mom or Buffy thought.

A clatter jolted Willow awake, startling her into a sitting position. “What?”

Her gaze darted around the room, settling on a boy with sandy hair, blue jeans, a Star Wars t-shirt, the one with princess Leia holding a gun while Luke raised a light saber to the sky and Darth Vader's face loomed over the both of them and, oh, it was Alan. He always wore that shirt, well not always obviously. She had seen him in other clothes but he wore that t-shirt so often that he seemed like he always had it on. “What are you doing here?” And, okay, maybe that wasn't the brightest question she could have come up with but she had just woken up.

He squatted down to pick microphone up from the floor. At least he hadn't dropped the volt-meter in his other hand. “Shouldn't I be asking you that?” He rose to his feet and took a chair across from her. “I'm checking out the sound system for tonight's show.”

Oh, right, he was in the AV club so he did have a right to question why she was there. “Well, I was sort of tired today, not a whole lot tired, not exhausted or anything, but tired enough that I thought a nap would be a good idea, and Jesse had told me how this couch was perfect for napping because it's so comfortable and nobody can see who's sleeping here from …” Why'd he look so upset all of a sudden? Oh, right, Jesse had been in the AV club.

“Do you ever hear from him?” Alan asked. “I mean, maybe not you personally, but I thought Xander might have …”

“No.” She wished she could tell him that Jesse'd been vamped but now was dead, really dead, dusted but Jesse's parents still thought he might come back. It was hard, not saying anything. Willow knew she'd want to know if a friend had vanished like that. It'd be like having a wound that was scratched open every day. She felt bad, not telling Alan, but then she'd have to explain the whole vampires are real thing and, well, she was sort of supposed to be keeping quiet about that although maybe being all secretive really wasn't the greatest idea. How were people supposed to protect themselves if they didn't know what the danger was? When she'd asked Giles, he'd told her if everyone knew then demons would have no reason to hide. It'd be much worse. That didn't seem totally right, but she figured he knew what he was talking about. So, no mentioning vampires or demons. What had they been talking about. “So, um, are you doing the sound and lights for the Talent Show?”

She thought, for a moment, that Alan was going to push the Jesse question but then he shrugged. “I'm helping but there's a chess tournament here tonight. It should end around the time the Talent Show starts so I won't be there early enough to run the equipment myself. Todd found a glitch in the sound system but he's got a full schedule today so I'm looking into it.” His voice was softer when he
continued. “We've missed you at the chess club.”

“Oh, well, yeah, I've been busy.” Saving the world sure had cut into her extracurricular activities.

“I'd thought you might come back after you'd finished griev … I mean, I know you've been upset with Jesse vanishing and all.”

Right, and once again something she couldn't talk about.

“But I can see why you'd want to hang with that new girl. A pretty girl like you can't be one of the guys all the time.”

Wait. Had he just called her pretty? Willow felt as if her cheeks were flaming. “Uh, yeah, speaking of Buffy, could you not tell her I was, oh, and Xander too, don't tell Xander either, or anybody really.”

“Oh, but you'll have to tell me what I'm not supposed to tell them.” His grin probably meant she sounded like a babbling idiot but it was an amused kind of a grin so at least he didn't mind.

“Uh, that I was sleeping. I've been a bit tired lately, um today, I mean I was tired today, but Buffy's sort of blowing it up into something big, which it totally isn't, and I don't want to worry her. So, maybe if she asks you can say I was here talking to you?”

“Your secret's safe with me. If you want, I'll do you one better. Why don't you help me check out the sound system. Then it won't even be a lie.”

“Oh, um, yeah. I mean, that sounds good.”

“Todd said there's some sort of squeal.”

“Squeal? Like a pig?” Like the ghost of Herbert? Would a pig even come back as a ghost or was that limited to humans?

“No, more of a feedback loop gone wrong.”

“Oh.” Good. “Yeah, that makes more sense.”

* * *

The words wavered under his gaze. Giles shut his eyes as he pinched the bridge of his nose and downed the rest of his tea. He shut De Aurelian Lineam with a sigh. It was the definitive text on the Aurelian line but he'd read through it dozens of times already and found nothing to help him locate the Aurelian Amulet.

He stared into his empty cup and rose to his feet. He'd need fortification before returning to his research. He hadn't found anything yet, but that didn't mean there wasn't anything to find. Before he'd taken three steps towards his office, the library doors burst open, revealing Buffy and Willow mid-argument. “You were too. Admit it. I saw the yawn.”

“Buffy, one little yawn doesn't mean ...”

“Aha! You admit you yawned.”
“Once, and it was more of an I'm bored yawn than an I'm tired yawn.” Under Buffy's skeptical gaze, Willow added, “I'm fine.” as she dropped into a chair. She sat upright but seemed to refrain from slouching only by sheer force of will.

Before Giles could think up a distraction, Xander barged in carrying, of all things, a dummy and shouting “Heeeeeeer's Chucky” at the top of his lungs.

“Xander. Shhhhh.”

The boy paused halfway across the room. “Is this shhhh a library thing 'cause I've heard you ...”


“Willow? Pfft. She's fine.”

“I'm not sick.”

“See? Even Willow says she's not sick,” he added as he flopped into the chair at the far end of the table. Under Buffy's glare, he started twirling the dummy's head from side-to-side. “Redrum! Redrum!”

Thank the Gods he could count on Xander to provide a distraction although what Xander was doing with ... or wait, hadn't Buffy mentioned something about a dummy? “Is that, er, Sid you have there?”

“I took it out of Mrs. Jackson's cupboard,” the boy agreed. “Buffy said she wanted to speak with Morgan alone, and, uh ... well, Morgan's alone, and, uh ... Sid's with me.”

Well, that investigation, as fruitless as it must prove, would at least keep Buffy distracted.

Xander, speaking in a squeaky voice, one he presumably meant to represent the puppet's, added, “Xander and I figured you could go off all Texas Ranger style and scope out the sitch.”

“Texas Ranger?”

“Okay,” Xander added in his own voice. “Maybe more like the Lone Ranger or Tonto, all sneaky, well not sneaky but quiet like. Sneaking up on him or something.”

Buffy folded her arms and stared down at the boy. “Just what is it you think I do?”

“Um, not whatever I just suggested obviously.” The boy glanced around the room in a panic and spoke again in that squeaky puppet voice. “Hi, Buffy! Hi, Willow! Would you like to hear some off-color jokes?”

“I really don't think you should be doing that.”

“What?” Xander asked in his own voice before switching back to the puppet's. “C'mon ... I'm not real.”

“Xander, quit it!”

Buffy turned and started walking to the door but turned back at the banging sound, Xander pounding the dummy's head against the desk. “He's ... not ... real! I think out demonstration proves that, uh, Sid ...” He knocked the dummy's head against the table a few more times, “is wood. Now, why don't you go and find Morgan and prove he's ... whatever he is.”

“I'll go find Morgan.” Buffy paused to glare at Xander. “You watch the dummy.”
“Bye-bye now. I'm completely inanimate.”

Buffy gave Xander another glare before heading out the door. Willow rose to her feet, looking a bit wobbly now that Buffy wasn't there to be concerned. “We should research.”

“Redrum! Redrum!”

“Xander, I'm serious.”

With a sigh, the boy put the dummy down. “What are we looking for?”

The two turned to Giles. “I'm afraid I haven't been following your investigation. I do have work of my own you know.”

“Right,” Willow said. “How about, uh, reanimation theory and organ harvesting.”

“Organ harvesting? Oh, I am there.” They headed up the stairs but Xander paused to turn back. “You'll keep an eye on Sid, right?”

Giles blinked at the boy. “You want me to keep an eye on an inanimate block of wood?”

“Oh, uh, right. Forget I said anything.”

* * *

The auditorium felt, not empty but as if something bad was waiting, hidden in the shadows. “Morgan?” Buffy paused, half-hoping no one would reply, and felt like fidgeting, whistling Dixie or something, and why whistle Dixie anyway? Why not whistle Brooklyn or New Orleans, or ... wait, wasn't Dixie a song? As she stepped forward, Buffy sang, stretching out the words of the normally jaunty tune until they sounded almost dirge-like. “I wish I was in Dixie. Hooray! Hooray!”

Backstage felt even creepier than the stage had. She tried the door at the far end of the makeup room, but it wouldn't open. Buffy thought about smashing it open but heard another door slam shut. A gust of wind blew through a curtain. Buffy turned and walked back toward the stage and saw Miss Calendar. “Buffy. What are you doing here?”

Hadn't Xander said something about the best lies being hidden in the truth? It made the bitter pill easier to swallow which, now that she thought about it, made lying sound pretty awful. “Looking for Morgan Shay. Have you seen him?”

“It's late and Snyder's on a kick to get students off the school grounds, something about liability. You shouldn't be here.”

“I thought Morgan would be here. We found Sid, his dummy I mean, and I know Morgan's upset that he can't find him, so I thought I'd come and try to find Morgan myself to set his mind at ease.”

And did that even make any kind of sense? Miss Calendar nodded her head as if she'd actually followed it though. “Okay, I'll give you ten minutes but then I want you gone.”

“Sure. Thanks.”
Giles slammed the book shut. He'd like to blame the children, the little noises coming from the stacks, on his lack of progress, but he'd be kidding himself. If the De Aurelian Lineam had any useful information on the Aurelian Amulet, he'd have found it already. He pinched his nose and wondered if he should report on the magical attack, the expansion of the rose bushes into a wall at the Mission. He'd prefer to not draw the Council's attention to any of his activities, but Miller must have already learned of it. Could Giles feign ignorance? It hadn't been reported in the papers. Would it look suspicious if he pretended to have no knowledge of the incident?

“You know,” Xander said as he stepped out from the stacks, “You'd think books on organ harvesting wouldn't be, oh I don't know, boring. I need a break. Hey, Wills, you want a snack, a Ho Ho or something?”

Willow's voice, quieter than her wont, drifted from the stacks. “No, I'm good.”

Xander peered behind a shelf. “You know, this research thing would go a lot faster if you were actually researching.”

“Hey, I was researching,” Willow exclaimed with more of her usual energy. “I was just taking a break for a moment as I sometimes do.”

Xander vanished behind the stack. “Right, come on. You sit at the table. I'll grab us a couple of sodas.”

“But ... but research.”

As they emerged from the stacks, Xander's arm was wrapped around Willow to hold her up. “Willow, you're not doing anyone any good.” They took two steps down the stairs and stopped. “Uh, Giles, what did you do with the dummy? Please tell me you did something with the dummy.”

“Do with the?” Giles bolted to his feet. Scanning the room he stepped back far enough to see under the table. No, the dummy hadn't fallen.

“Okay,” Xander said from the top of the stairs. “This really, really isn't of the good.”

“But at least I'm awake now,” Willow added.

* * *

Miss Calendar turned and vanished onto the stage. Buffy sort of wished she'd leave the auditorium but at least the woman wasn't looking over her shoulder, trying to help her hunt down Morgan. Privacy, sort of necessary when hunting demons.

From the far end of the hallway, Buffy heard something creaking. Were the clothes hanging on that rack moving? She shoved the clothes aside. The space behind was empty, no demon lurking behind the costumes. Maybe it, whatever it was, had dodged out of sight. Morgan was tall. If he was here, she should see him above the clothes racks. As she looked up, scanning for movement, she stepped forward, stubbing her toe against something soft. Buffy touched her hand to the wall for balance,
glanced down, and saw the body. “Morgan?”

Wincing, Buffy stepped back, wishing she could bleach away the image of Morgan's scalp hanging off to one side of his head. “First the Tin Man and now a Scarecrow. If a Cowardly Lion shows up ...” Buffy felt more than saw the bead curtain as she backed through it. A snapping noise pulled her eyes to the ceiling. The chandelier, crashing down, hit her before she could dodge and pinned her to the floor.

Footsteps, running footsteps, pattered from a catwalk near the top of the stage. Shadows danced to the sound, small shadows, dummy-sized shadows. Buffy shoved against the chandelier, pushing with all her strength, and raised it about an inch. A little more, a little ... her arms gave out and the metal frame crashed down around her again. The pattering, on the ground floor now, sounded closer. Something moved, just out of her sight, in the shadows. “Whoever's there, I'm gonna hurt you! Badly! If you just gimme a minute ...”

She shoved. The chandelier didn't budge. The footsteps came closer. She glanced up. The dummy stood above her, knife raised in one hand. As he stabbed down, she turned her head, barely avoiding the knife. He raised the knife again. Buffy struck, whipping her arm out, knocking the dummy across the room. Oh, good, adrenaline must have kicked in. She shoved again, lifting the chandelier, not much but enough to drag herself out from underneath. She heard more than saw the next attack. Grabbing the dummy, she knocked him into a wall. The knife slid out of reach.

“You win,” Sid said in that gravelly voice Morgan had said was his father's. “Now you can take your heart and your brain and move on.”

“Huh?”

“At least I took out your brothers even if I couldn't kill you.”

“But I don't have any brothers, or sisters even. Totally sibling free.”

A voice called out from the far end of the room. “What the hell is going on here?” Oops, Miss Calendar was back. “And did that dummy just speak?”

“That was me.” Hey, better than letting her know the dummy could walk and talk on its own. “Morgan was teaching me ventriloquism because, you know, I've always wanted my own dummy.”

“Don't be an idiot.” Hey, she might be directing the Talent Show, but Miss Calendar couldn't judge Buffy like that. The act wasn't that bad. Sure, the content needed work, but with the dummy speaking for itself, she had to sound like the world's best ventriloquist. But Miss Calendar wasn't speaking to her. “She's not a demon. She's the Slayer.”

Sid's voice echoed hers as Buffy asked, “What?”

* * *
Jenny could hear her uncle’s familiar accent. “Do not reveal yourself to the Slayer.” Shit, how many times had he drilled that into her head? And here she stood, under the Slayer’s accusing glare but happily the girl glanced at the dummy and decided she had bigger fish to fry.

“Not a demon?” Buffy asked.

“Not even close.”

Buffy shifted about a foot back on the floor. While the girl may have decided she wasn’t an immediate threat, Jenny noted that Buffy was positioned so she could keep an eye on both herself and the dummy. “So, what’s your story?”

The dummy rose to its ... his feet. The care he took in brushing the dust off his clothes suggested he’d once worn swankier suits. “There was this demon, see ...”

“Wait,” Buffy interrupted. “A demon? We should tell Giles.” She glanced at Jenny. “I mean, um ...”

“It's okay, Buffy. I know Rupert is your Watcher.” Actually, she hadn't been sure. Rupert hadn't acted like a typical Watcher, but when had Rupert ever been typical? “He is the adult you spend the most time with.”

Her uncle's words – “Do not reveal yourself to the Slayer.” – echoed in her thoughts again as she stood under Buffy's calculating gaze. “And how exactly do you know ...”

“Ladies, ladies,” the puppet interrupted. “Could we save the pettifogging for later? This demon's still out there. I've got a time limit here.”

“Right, time crunch.” Buffy rose to her feet. “Which is why you should tell everyone at once and not waste time explaining your sitch twice.”

“Yeah, that'll work.”

Buffy strode two steps across the stage, stopped, and turned back to the dummy. “Uh, Sid? Do you mind if I carry you? It'll save time.”

Jenny wasn't sure how the puppet did it with painted eyes, but he leered at the girl. “Mmm, gently wafting perfume, soft mounds of flesh ...”

“On second thought, you can walk.”

As Buffy turned for the exit, Jenny fell in behind leaving the puppet – Sid? – to take up the rear. She'd rather not have it behind her, but Buffy was closer to her primary assignment. Before they could start moving, Buffy turned back again, facing her this time. “Where do you think you're going?”

“I'm coming with.”

“But ...”

“Let her tag along.” Tag along? “The demon's gotta be in that Talent Show and she's running it.”

Buffy shrugged but didn't object again. The hallways sped by in a blur. Jenny hadn't thought keeping up with a Slayer would be so tough although Sid, even with his short legs, seemed to have no trouble.
They swung through the library doors and stopped. Xander and Willow stood on the landing, between the railings and the stacks, staring down to the first floor. “But Buffy'd want to know.”

Rupert, standing about two feet from the table – and why was no one standing near anything? – pinched the bridge of his nose for a second before looking up. “I'm certain Buffy has more important ... um, hello.”

“Buffy, the dummy's gone.” Willow blinked for a moment as Xander's jaw dropped. “Okay, not so much missing as with you.”

“And walking,” Xander said. “He's definitely walking or at least standing on his own.”

Sid took a step forward. “Listen, kid ...”

“... And talking,” Xander added. “He's definitely talking, uh, that's one of you throwing your voice, right?”

“Afraid not,” Buffy said, “but it's okay. He's not the demon.”

“Right,” the boy continued, “because so many dummies can walk and talk on their own.”

“Well, I did have one of those dolls who could talk,” Willow said, “when I was a girl I mean, but you had to pull a string. Does he have a string?”

“Perhaps we should sit and discuss this. I'll just put the kettle on.” Rupert vanished into his office while everyone else gathered at the table. The kids left a space for her next to Rupert's chair, which was sort of nice actually. She leaned over to see what he'd been reading. Hmm, Latin, something about the Aurelian line. Angelus was an Aurelian. Damn, her uncle wouldn't be happy to hear about this. Before she could pick up the book to skim it, Rupert grabbed the book and took it into his office. When he returned, he puttered about with the burner and kettle that he'd left on the checkout counter instead of joining them at the table. “Please, continue.”

As Sid talked, recounting adventures as a demon hunter in 1930's New York, Jenny kept her eye on Rupert. The warm and gently playful man she'd dated had vanished, leaving a hollow shell, no, not a shell, a mask. She could feel him watching her, recategorizing her, possibly even deciding she was a threat. Rupert caught her gaze, hung his head and grinned sheepishly, looking like his old self. As he joined them at the table, Jenny turned her attention back to Sid.

“This is what I do. I hunt demons. Yeah, you wouldn't know it to look at me. Let's just say there was me, there was a really mean demon, there was a curse, and the next thing you know I'm not me anymore. I'm sitting on some guy's knee with his hand up my shirt.”

“And ever since you've been a living dummy?” Jenny asked.

“Morgan, God rest his soul, was right all along. I shoulda picked you to team up with, but I didn't because ...”

“Because you thought I was the demon.” Buffy sounded more amused than upset at the mistake.

“Who can blame me for thinking? Look at you! You're strong, athletic, limber ... nubile ...” Sid shook his head. “I'm back! In any case, now this demon's got his heart and brains, he gets to keep the human form he's in for another seven years.”

Rupert moved to tend to the whistling teakettle.
“There were seven of these guys,” Sid continued. “I've killed six. If I can get the last one, the curse'll be lifted and I'll be free. I'm sure it's someone in that stupid Talent Show.”

Buffy sat back as if frustrated. “Yeah, but now that the demon has what he wants, he'll be moving on.”

Sid leaned forward. “So, once we know who's missing from the show ...”

“We'll know who our demon is!”

“Oh, shit.” Jenny leaped to her feet. “The show!”

“What?”

“The show, it's about to start. I'm supposed to be there.”

As she bolted for the doors, Jenny heard Buffy tell Willow to pull the student's addresses, something about catching the demon at home, and Sid called out, “You, babe, get ’em all on stage, form the power circle. Then we can see who's a no-show.”

Jenny stopped and spun back to face the table. “You want me to perform magic in front of the students?”

How could a dummy's look suggest she was an idiot. “No, the power circle. You get everyone together, you get ’em, you know, revved up.”

Goddess, she was an idiot! “Right, of course. Um, be there in five?” She ran for the door before they could reply.

* * *

Sid pattered next to her as they raced through the halls, and how did short legs move so fast anyway? Buffy leaned into a turn, pulled herself up short, and grabbed Sid before he darted around the corner. At his look of outrage, she dropped him. “What the dickens?”

“Hall's full of geeks. Star Wars club must have just gotten out. Well, no, there's no Star Wars club, not that I know of anyway, so it's probably the chess club. Same diff. We can't have them seeing you running about on your own. I suppose I could go ahead.”

“Carry me.”

“Are you sure?” It did make sense. The guys would think she was just carrying a dummy. Problem was, well, Sid was alive. It didn't seem right.

“I'm used to it.”

Buffy squatted down, reached out, and pulled her hands back. “How do I do this? Make a little chair out of my arms?”

“Just tuck me under one arm.”

“I ... I can't. It's undignified.”
“Trust me, it'll look the most natural.”

“I ... okay.” Buffy gingerly tucked Sid under her arm. “Are you sure about this?”

He stared up from unmoving eyes. “Yeah, I'm good. Better get going or we'll miss the power circle.”

Buffy held her head still, looking straight forward, as she walked past the chess club guys. If she didn't look at them, they wouldn't notice her, right? Sort of like an ostrich. Oh, but that probably didn't work for ostriches. It didn't work for her either. “Isn't that Morgan's dummy?”

“Huh?”

“The dummy, it's Morgan's. What are you doing with it?”

Oh, great, he was giving her the stinkeye like he thought she was one of those bullies who'd steal a guy's dummy the night of the big show. “I, uh, well I ...”

Before she could think of something to say, Sid spoke up. “She's taking me backstage because the lackadaisical nitwit forgot he left me in Mrs. Jackson's classroom. Now, if you don't mind, we'd like to get there before the show ends.”

“Rude much?”

“Hey, it's okay, she's Willow's friend.” Oh, this guy was why she'd been thinking Star Wars' club seeing that he was wearing one of the t-shirts, Luke, that princess, those two, uh, robot guys, and the big bad looming over all of them from behind. “Good job with the ventriloquism. Are you in the show too?”

“Me?” Buffy squeaked. “No, no, definitely not. No. But I'm, uh, helping Miss Calendar so I really need to get Sid, uh, the dummy, backstage.

Star Wars t-shirt held out a hand. “I'm Alan. I'm heading there myself, helping with the sound. Walk with you?”

“Um, love to.” Oh God, she was grimacing, wasn't she? He must think she was awful. “But I'm late. Gotta run. Bye. Nice to meet you!”

They turned two more corners, leaving the chess club guys far behind, to find Miss Calendar running toward them. “Nobody's missing.”

“Huh?”

“Nobody's missing.” Miss Calendar repeated. “I checked the roster twice.”

Sid squirmed in her arm, hit the floor, and vanished down the hallway, heading toward the auditorium. “Sid.” Buffy chased after.

She heard more than saw feet pattering down the stairs. It was darker in the basement below the stage, darker and emptier. “Sid?”

Buffy peered into the darkness. “Sid?” Something hit her arm, something wet. Shaking it off with a grimace, she looked up. Something fell. Without thinking, she caught it. Brain, ugh! She was holding a brain! Her hands flew apart, dropping the brain to the floor where it jiggled for a moment before settling into stillness.
Buffy rubbed her hands together so forcefully that Giles half-expected her to declaim, “Out damn'd spot! Out, I say!” Instead she whined, “I'm never gonna stop washing my hands.”

Xander, carelessly ignoring Buffy's distress with the self-centered focus of youth, started denigrating the dummy. “So, the dummy tells us that he's a demon hunter, and we're like, fine, la la la la. He takes off, and now there's a brain. Does anybody else feel like they've been Keyser Soze'd?”

“Sid's on the level. I'm sure of it.” Well, at least Xander's words had moved Buffy's attention from her hands. “But why would the demon have rejected this brain?” She started rubbing her hands together again. “I-I mean, I thought Morgan was the smartest kid in school.”

Willow replied from the computer. “He is, gets straight As.”

Giles settled his teacup into its saucer. “If there were something wrong with the brain, some unknown, to us at least, physical injury perhaps, the demon would reject the brain in favor of another. Were there any disfiguring marks on the brain?”

“I didn't look that closely. So whoever's out there still needs a healthy, intelligent brain?” Well, the demon wouldn't be coming after Buffy.

“In other words, I'm safe!” Xander said with a grin.

“And it's gonna be looking for the smartest person around.” Buffy turned to stare at ... Gods, Willow! The girl belonged to him. The demon couldn't have her.

“What?” Willow glanced between the three of them as if she had no idea of her own worth.

“What's the square root of 841?” Xander asked.

“29.” Willow paused as if something had clicked. “Oh, yeah.”

“Right,” Giles said. “Obviously if Willow's in danger, she should be removed from the school.”

“Hey!” Willow sat up in her chair. “I'm not going anywhere.”

“He isn't wrong,” Buffy said. “I would feel better if you weren't here. I mean, not in an I don't want you here way but in a you'd be safer away from the demon way.”

“But Buffy.” Xander spoke slowly as if explaining to a child. “You're here. You can keep her safe.” He turned to Willow “No way that demon's gonna snatch your brain with the Slayer on guard.”

Buffy brushed her hands against her jeans. “Ugh, thanks for that image.”

No, he couldn't allow any harm to come to Willow. “Perhaps if we moved Willow to the bookcage?”

“Hey,” Willow piped up. “Right here. Stop talking about me as if I weren't right here.”

“Merely as a safety precaution. I'm certain Buffy can protect you.”

“But what about those other students, the ones actually in the Talent Show?” Willow asked. “I don't want anyone dying while you're watching me.”
Giles laid a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder. “Willow, you're far more valuable ...”

“Come on,” Xander interrupted. “How smart can any of them be if they got stuck in the Talent Show?”

Buffy froze. Even her hands stopped moving. “No, Willow's right. We don't know who the demon will go for ... The chess club!”

“Buffy.” There was a mocking tone to Xander's voice. “I get it: chess, strategy and all, but do you really think a game's gonna help you find the demon?”

“No, the guys from the chess club. They were in the hallway and one of them, um Alan? He was heading to the auditorium.”

“Alan?” Willow rose to her feet. “Buffy, you've got to save him. He's our friend.”

Right, and who would protect Willow while Buffy chased these phantasms? “I'll watch over Willow, Buffy. Take Xander. He should be safe with you.”

“No, I'm going with.”

“Willow, I can't allow you to walk into a situation where you're the most likely target.”

“How do you know?” Willow replied. “You're smart. He could be coming after you. We can't just leave our friends alone and unprotected.”

“Giles sort of has a point, Willow,” Xander said.

“Do you see my resolve face?”

“Right.” Xander turned to Buffy. “We're Three Musketeering it. Let's go.”

The three children darted for the door, Buffy already well in the lead. Giles chased after.

* * *

Alan's stomach dropped as the guillotine's blade sliced through the melon. Marc's grin was that of a bully with a victim in his sights. “Pretty cool, huh?”

The half-melon felt heavy in his hands. Alan could picture his head in its place. His brains would have spilled into the basket. “Couldn't you get anyone else?”

“My assistant got sick. You won't have to say anything. I'll ... I'll show you. Lie down.”

“How exactly does it work?”

As Marc pulled the blade up by a rope, Alan looked for the trick. He knew how. His uncle ran a magic show in Vegas and had taught Alan how to spot them. He didn't see any tricks.

“A good magician never tells his secrets.” Marc turned away to roll down his sleeve. There was something furtive in the movement. “C’mon, we haven't got much time.”
“Uh, no, I don't think so.” Marc's eyes narrowed at Alan's words. “I, uh, forgot. My Mom's picking me up. She's probably waiting outside. I mean, I'm sure she's waiting. She's just outside the building or, no, she'd come in looking for me. I have to go.”

“You really think your momma's gonna save you?”

Alan took one step back and then another. Marc, moving impossibly fast, grabbed his arm so hard that Alan thought he'd break it. “Hey, let go.”

Marc threw him on the floor, grabbed him up again, and dropped him on the guillotine's bench. “No,” Alan shouted. “Don't.” With his head strapped to the bench, Alan stared up at the blade. It hung sharp and heavy above him. He took a swing with his arm but Marc grabbed it and strapped it down. “Help! Help!”

Marc shoved a rag into his mouth. Alan, whimpering through the cloth, knew no one could hear him. This was it. He was gonna die.

“Gruesome, killing a guy on stage.” Was that Tucker? He'd help, right? He wouldn't just stand there and watch Alan die. “Can I watch?”

“What the hell is going on here?”

Alan couldn't roll his eyes far enough to see, but it sounded like Miss Calendar. He screamed through the rag. It came out as a weak whimper.

“Just a trial run for my act.”

Don't believe him. Don't believe him.

“Is he strapped down to that thing?”

“It's perfectly safe. Really. Why don't you run along? Take care of some show stuff or something.”

“Yeah,” Tucker said. “Stop cramping his style.”

“What I need to do is unstrap this boy. Alan, are you okay?”

Alan couldn't see what happened but he heard a loud thump as if a body had flown across the stage and hit the floor at the far end. He hoped it was Marc, but no, the boy looked down again at him with a sick grin. “Not long. Nobody'll bother us now.”

He picked up ... was that an axe? He chopped at the rope. No. No!

“Can I chop it?”

Was that Tucker wanting to help kill him? Alan heard another thump and nothing more from Tucker. Marc started chopping at the rope again. Someone, help me. Please!

Something tackled Marc. Alan saw a blur that threw Marc out of his sight.

“What the?” He heard another voice. Xander maybe? Alan tried to cry for help but then Xander was there, standing above him. “Keys, where are the keys?”

“Maybe the demon has them?” Willow's voice, definitely Willow's. “Uh, anyone have a big rock I can smash against the lock?” A thump, something heavy hitting the floor, set the blade vibrating above him.
“Allow me.” A new voice. He didn't know this one.

“G-Man, I forgot you could pick a lock. Those courses at the Watcher's Academy, much more thorough than you'd expect.”

And then the straps were gone and Alan felt himself being pulled from under the blade. He collapsed at the foot of the guillotine.

“Miss Calendar? Are you out here?” Alan didn't look up. He couldn't deal with Cordelia just now. “Oh my God, what is this freak show?”

He looked up to see Buffy holding, was that a stake? Whatever it was, it looked sharp, good and pointy.

Apparently the words “freak show” were more alluring than screams for help. Half the students in the show seemed to have followed Cordelia to the stage. “Oh my God, look at his skin. Is that some kind of condition?” Marc's cheek and hand had turned gray, almost scaly.

“You don't think it's contagious, do you? I'd better not be contagious. My father is so suing this school if that's contagious.”

Buffy kicked Marc, sending him flying back into the box for his disappearing act. The door swung shut behind him. “Is this part of the act? If I'd known we could ad-lib like this I would have ...”

The box shattered. Whatever came out didn't look human. “If that happened to my skin, I'd kill myself.”

Cordelia's voice replied. “That, my friends, requires a specialist.”

The ... thing ... hadn't Willow called it a demon? ... creature sent Buffy flying, crashing into the students. “You clumsy oaf!,” he heard Cordelia shout. “If you got blood on my new shoes, I am so killing you.”

“Get those students out of here,” Mr. Giles shouted.

“Come on, kids,” Miss Calendar called. “Off the stage. Everyone off the stage before the curtain rises.”

As the, uh, call it a demon, turned to face him, Alan scuttled back but it moved too fast. It loomed over him, a claw reaching for his head, when it fell to the floor with a knife in its back.

“Good shot,” Buffy said.

“Thanks.” Oh, it was Morgan's dummy, walking and talking. Sure, that made sense.

The dummy yanked the knife out of the demon's back. “It has to be both the heart and the head. Otherwise it'll come back.”

“There's no happy ending for you, is there? I mean, your body has to be dust.”

“Don't sing a sob story for me, sister. I'm wood. There's no vaccine that can cure this.” The dummy swung the knife and chopped the demon's head from its body. Then he fell to the floor.

Buffy picked the dummy up in both arms. The curtain opened. Alan, shading his eyes, could almost see the audience. Looked like a full house. He heard Principal Snyder. “What is it? Avant-garde?” Buffy stared at Mr. Giles as if waiting for a cue. Wait, had this been all an act?
Alan could hear Miss Calendar whispering, “Onto the stage. All of you. Now!” The students lined up at the back of the stage, as far away from the action as they could get. Alan couldn’t blame them.

Miss Calendar pulled Rachel out of the line up. “You’re president of the poetry club. Here’s your big chance, your fifteen minutes of fame. Say something about death.”

“I’m not president.”

“What? Rachel, I don’t have time for this.”

“Owen’s president. Just ’cause he’s not here, doesn’t mean I’m gonna usurp his authority.”

Buffy twitched at Rachel’s words. Oh, yeah, she’d been seeing Owen, hadn’t she? Alan didn’t see the attraction. Owen’d been okay when they were kids. With his own sibs being so much older, it'd been nice having a cousin the same age living nearby, but as Owen got into poetry, he fell into some sort of gloomy death vibe. All the girls fell for it, even Willow. It'd gotten old fast.


Wow, if this had been planned, it really wasn't well prepared.

“And death shall have ...”

Miss Calendar brought over a microphone. “Speak up so everyone can hear.”

“Oh, right.” The audience twittered. The girl blushed but started again. “And death shall have no dominion. Dead mean naked they shall be one with the man in the wind and the west moon. When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone. They shall have stars at elbow and foot. Though they go mad they shall all be sane.”

“Thank you, Rachel,” Miss Calendar interrupted. “I’m sure those moving words speak for the grief we all feel at the loss of two of our own: Emily Milnes and Morgan Shay.” She gestured to the sidelines and hissed. “Curtains, close the curtains.”

Wait. Morgan? What had happened to Morgan?

* * *

Clearing out the demon’s carcass had been easier than Jenny’d expected. Xander, loudly announcing it was a prop, had carried it over to Cordelia and asked if she wanted to touch it. After her shrieks of outrage, the other students had ignored it, allowing Rupert and Xander to drop it into a dumpster. They, along with Willow and Buffy, hadn't returned but the police had been called in to investigate Morgan’s death. The Talent Show had been cancelled. Between calming the students and talking to the cops, Jenny’d already had a late night.

It was about to become an even later night. She stood at the bottom of the steps, staring up at Rupert's apartment, aching for a drag. Even after six years, stress could bring the cravings back. She'd caught Rupert researching the Aurelian line. That didn't mean he was planning on killing Angelus but ... who was she kidding? Of course he meant to kill Angelus. Hell, she half-wanted the vampire dead herself. It would mean she could have her life back. It would mean she’d failed her clan. Damn Enyos for bringing her into this. “You vill vatch the vampire,” she muttered,
exaggerating her uncle's accent. “You vill see he comes to no harm. You vill ensure our vengeance.” As if a hundred years of torment hadn't been vengeance enough.

Duty demanded she leave now and talk to Enyos first, but Jenny feared what her clan might do in their fervor to keep Angelus alive. Putting Rupert at risk if he wasn't planning to kill the vampire wasn't anything she'd signed up for. Damn Enyos. Damn him, damn him, damn him.

Jenny took a deep breath and marched up the stairs, quickly, before she could change her mind. With the lights on behind him, Rupert seemed little more than a silhouette, a dark cutout cast against the light. “Jenny, or should I call you Janna?”

Damn, he knew who she was. Jenny'd been hoping he wouldn't work that out so quickly. Romani and Watchers didn't tend to see eye-to-eye. Knowing her ancestry, he might choose to fight her merely out of ancient enmity. “Jenny'll do. Can I come in?”

He stepped to one side. “If you can without an invitation.”

She bristled as she passed. He was toying with her, acting out a mockery of his role as a Watcher. She'd enjoyed his sarcastic humor but only, she realized now, because it had never been turned against her.

He led her to the living room and gestured to the couch. “Please, sit.” Flashing on the night she'd straddled him as they sank into sybaritic pleasure on the soft leather, she sat on the edge of a chair.

“Drink?”

The last time she'd been in his apartment, they'd skipped the drinks. He'd drawn her into his arms, into a kiss that had curled her toes, before he'd even opened the door. She shouldn't drink. There were too many echoes in this room, but she'd had a hell of a night. “Scotch.”

Rupert handed her a drink and toasted her with his glass as he sank into the couch. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” As he licked his lips, she felt her pulse racing.

Jenny took a quick sip to hide the blush she could feel inflaming her cheeks and stopped to stare at the amber liquid. It had tasted ... the phrase almost antique came to mind. Instead of the peaty moss she'd been expecting, she found herself savoring accents of spicy nutmeg. “You always break out the good stuff for unexpected guests?”

“Only for the right company.”

The glint in his eyes echoed within her as a deep-down and low tingle. Jenny felt her lips curl into an answering grin but caught herself and sat back in her chair. She wasn't here to socialize. “You're researching the line of Aurelian. Don't try to deny it. I saw the book on your desk.”

As his gaze turned chilly, she found herself missing that glint in his eyes. “Did you?”

“I ... I ... I need to know your intentions.”

“Are my intentions honorable?” An echo of that glint reappeared. “Not even close.”

The floor seemed to have given way to shifting sand. The pull he had on her surged within her blood, the need to throw herself at him, to sink them both into that supple leather and never come up for air. But she couldn't ally herself with him, not if he meant to kill Angelus. It'd betray everything she'd been raised to. “Do you mean to kill the vampire?”
“Whom? The Master? Angelus?”

He nodded as if she'd given something away when he'd spoken Angelus' name. “The Kalderash wouldn't happen to be the clan who'd cursed Angelus, would they?” He didn't wait for an answer. “Vampires are the Council's purview.”

“He killed one of ours.” She surprised herself. The girl had died almost a hundred years ago. She hadn't realized she cared so deeply.

“He's murdered thousands, tens of thousands.” He didn't ask why one obscure gypsy girl mattered, but she could hear the words in his voice. “If I told you he had the Slayer under his spell, infatuated with him, that he's putting her life, her work, at risk, would that change your opinion? Would you approve then?”

“Another will be Called,” she snapped. She put her glass down and turned her face from him. She liked Buffy. She did. But her clan's instructions had been specific. Nothing must come between us and our vengeance.

Janna rose to her feet. “The Kalderash clan has marked him. He is ours. Do not test us.”

He rose as well. Only a slight tensing of his jaw revealed his agitation. “Let me escort you to the door.”

As she stepped into the night, Janna realized she had one thing left to say. “I think we should cancel tomorrow's date.”

“That, my dear, is obvious.” He shut the door between them.

* * *

Giles slammed the door behind him, pounded across the room, downed his Scotch, and threw the glass hard, smashing it into the fireplace. Damn the woman. How dare she demand he spare Angelus' life? The vampire's deceptions threatened his Slayer. Demons were the Council's to destroy. The Kalderash could lay no legitimate claim.

Giles poured a double into Jenny's glass and belted down the drink. Ripper dropped the glass and rubbed a hand through his hair, slicking it back to a more youthful look. He checked the pockets as he shrugged off Giles' swish jacket. Damn, no cigs. Rupert never could be bothered to lay in a stock.

Never mind. Once he'd traded the rest of Rupert's nancy boy suit for jeans and stomping boots, he'd grab smokes before turning up a bit of fun. He sure as hell wasn't about to play with Giles' usual toys. Ripper wanted to let the dogs loose, to rumble rough and tough, and not worry that he'd been too hard on a bloody nancy boy.

Three shots later in a dive where nobody questioned your business, Ripper caught a rent boy giving him the eye from the far end of the bar. He let his lips curl into a slow smile and stared until the lad twitched. Hmm, new to the scene then. This ought to be fun. He tossed a few bills on the counter and cut out through the back door.

The lad didn't keep him waiting. Ripper handed him a bill, folded up small. They boy opened it first. His eyes wide, he stared up and asked what Ripper wanted.
“Suck my dick.”

The lad wasn't as inexperienced as Ripper'd thought but he lacked ... Ripper wasn't sure what the lad lacked but he knew what he needed. Grabbing the lad's hair, he showed his dick down the throat, hard and fast, only coming as the lad struggled and choked beneath him. “You didn't have to ...” the lad sputtered.

Ripper's steel-toed boots caught the lad in the jaw. One hand grabbed the lad off the ground. “Please, don't.”

Ripper dropped him, letting the lad crash to the ground. If he beat this shit black and blue, Rupert'd cry in his milk for a week. Wasn't worth the trouble, was it? As the lad ran off, Ripper's skin buzzed. It hadn't been enough. Ripper wanted more, but more what? More experience? More violence? Why had he even bothered with such a callow guttersnipe? Ah, it'd been something about the eyes. They'd reminded him of Ethan.

Ripper lit up a cig, blew out the smoke, and grinned. Giles'd throw a fit, but who gave a fuck? Ripper turned for home. The phone number wouldn't be a problem. Rupert, the nancy git, tracked Ethan but never bothered to call. Ripper thumbed through Rupert's files until he came up with the number.

The phone rang a half-dozen times before Ethan picked up. “This had better be good.”

“I want your lips wrapped around my cock, sucking as if your life depended on it.”

“Ripper?”

He growled. Ethan knew better than to interrupt.

“And what do I get out of it?”

“My cock rammed down your throat.”

“I've got important work, well, a paying gig anyway. I can't just up and leave.”

“Come.”

“I'm done playing this game, Ripper. I'm done letting you pull my strings.”

“You keep pulling mine or I wouldn't be calling you.”

“The dance is getting dull. I pull your strings. You pull mine. We fight or, no, not fight so much as you beat me black-and-blue and then kick my ass out of town in some self-righteous fury of indignation. I'm done.”

“Don't keep me waiting, Ethan.”
Nightmares

Since it's been a while since my last chapter, he's a summary of what went before:

- **Eyghon in Giles’ mind**: Eyghon is connected to Giles by a process called domination. Unlike possession, in which a demon takes over a human host, domination entails the creation of a psychic bond between the demon and its host. The demon does not inhabit the host but is, instead, connected to the host’s mind. The demon is, in effect, always in the back of the host’s mind, whispering directly into the host’s thoughts.

- **Giles’ split personalities**: Under the stress of Eyghon’s influence, Rupert's personality has split into three. Rupert is closest to canon Giles and has the least contact with Eyghon. Giles is the personality in charge of protecting Rupert. Ripper takes care of any dirty work Giles needs done. To keep Eyghon from tormenting Rupert, Giles has agreed to give Eyghon access to the Slayer line.

- **The Amulet of Dominion**: Giles has learned of an artifact, the Amulet of Dominion Over the Line of Aurelius, that will allow him to weaken any or all vampires of the Aurelian line. He plans to use this artifact to kill both the Master and Angelus. He already has the spell that activates the amulet but hasn’t been able to find the amulet.

- **Giles’ use of Willow’s magic**: Willow has an unusually high level of magic. Giles, in order to control that power, has put magical hooks into her that allow him to call on her magic at will.

- **Buffy’s morning meditations**: If Giles can locate the Scythe, he can give the entire Slayer line to Eyghon. The homeroom meditations sessions are meant to put her into a trance so he can use her to find the Scythe. So far he’s had no luck getting her to meditate.

- **How Buffy knows Andrew**: Andrew’s mother doesn’t want him in the house alone but doesn’t know Tucker leaves him behind when he goes out. Andrew, bored more than trying to obey the rules, goes out as well and has stumbled across Buffy’s patrols.

- **Antonia Ashworth**: When Merrick was Buffy’s Watcher, the Council decided that the next two Watchers to be assigned to a Slayer would be Roderick Travers Ashworth and Rupert Giles, in that order. Giles, to gain access to the Slayer more quickly, invoked Eyghon to kill Roderick Ashworth. Antonia Ashworth, to prevent her son Cecil’s death by quest for vengeance, has taken over that quest for vengeance herself.

- **Cecil Ashworth**: Quentin’s nephew, is known for being more interested in girls and boozing than Watching.

- **Lucas Miller**: Working for Antonia Ashworth, basically spying on Giles. He headed up the project to scan all the books in Sunnydale's library.

- **Owen**: Owen learned about Slayers, vampires, and demons when Buffy saved him from a vampire attack. In this story they continued to date, but she tried to ignore his interest in patrolling. Tucker, looking for a sacrifice so he could invoke Eyghon, found Owen wandering alone at night and led him to the zoo. In a fracas with Ripper, Weirick tried to use Owen as a shield and Giles stabbed the boy to get at the man. Owen survived by his family suddenly left town after a warning visit from the Council who wants him out of Buffy’s life.

- **Tucker**: Because the lad is so bloodthirsty, Eyghon has an interest. Giles has tried to make the lad useful, for example by sending him to Willy’s go get information for him. Tucker basically got beat up and hasn’t come calling on Giles ever since. and the two have mostly been avoiding each other? Miller, noticing Tucker is working with Giles, has assigned Amanda Kim to spy on Tucker.

- **Jenny and Rupert’s Breakup**: Jenny, noticing that Giles was researching the line of Aurelius, realized he planned to kill Angelus. Her loyalty to her clan came to the fore and she told Giles to leave the vampire alone. That pretty much broke it off between them.
Alan Wyndham-Price’s lab: Alan runs a group within the Council that studies demons. He can do pretty much anything he wants to demons. Given his sadistic tendencies, you can see how that’d go.

Why Ethan’s in Sunnydale: After his argument with Jenny, Ripper went on a tear and then called Ethan to him.

Buffy stared at the can in her hand. “I punch the tab for Diet Coke and you give me Jolt. Gee, if you can't trust the vending machine, who can you trust?”

She'd had an Americano with a triple shot of espresso before homeroom. It was the only way she could stay awake during Giles' meditations although maybe she didn't want to, stay awake that is. She already knew she didn't want to meditate. Could it be any duller?

Knowing someone else would pick it up, she left the can on the table – that much caffeine she didn't need – and stepped into the hallway. As she fought her way through the crowd, Buffy felt like a fish swimming upstream. That was a thing, right? Fish fighting the current to, um … OK, she didn't know what the fish were doing. Looking for other fish? Not in a bigger fish to fry way, obviously, but looking for their fishy friends? Oh, and there was Willow, not at her locker like she said she'd be but standing in the middle of the hallway looking at a group of, well, geeks.

Following Willow's gaze, Buffy caught sight of Alan, that guy who'd almost been guillotined the night of the Talent Show. As far as Buffy could tell, he'd said one nice thing about Willow and she'd been all obsesso-girl ever since.

Buffy turned and stared at her friend. “Come on, Willow,” she muttered to herself. “Wake up and smell the coffee. When a guy ignores you for six days …”

She paused, imagining Willow's response. “But it hasn't been six days. The Talent Show was Friday so that's Saturday and Sunday but they totally don't count because those are weekend days and there was no chance I'd run into him on a weekend day. And today doesn't count because it's not even lunchtime yet so it hasn't been a full day. So that leaves Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. That's only three days or, okay, since it is almost 10:30 it's only been three days and …” Buffy wasn't sure how far into the day that would be but was sure Willow could give her the percentage to like ten decimal places.

Right, enough of this musing. Buffy called out to her friend. “Willow.”

The girl startled, stared at Buffy a moment, and then glanced back to Alan before facing Buffy. “Oh, hi,” she said as Buffy approached.

“Tall, dark, and nerdy still being all avoidy?”

“He's not being avoidy,” Willow stammered. “I mean, I didn't expect to see him over the weekend or anything and, okay, I didn't see him for half the week or I mean I did see him but, you know, didn't get close enough to talk, but then I wouldn't because we don't have any classes together.”

“He's been avoidy,” Buffy said. “You think it's the whole almost decapitated by a demon thing? It has to be the almost decapitated by a demon thing. I mean, who could resist your Willowy charms?”

“So far? That'd be every guy on the planet.”

“But there was that comment he made, right? He said you're pretty.”
“Maybe that was just a fluke, just something he was saying and not something he was meaning in a serious way.”

“Only one way to find out.”

Buffy strode across the crowded hallway, not even slowing down for Willow's panicked shout of “Buffy. No!”

Alan had his back to her but tensed as she approached. He knew she was there. Buffy tapped his shoulder. When he turned, he looked wary but unsurprised. Yep, he'd definitely known she was there. “We should talk.” So not what she'd meant to say, or what she would have meant to say if she'd thought about it first, but it seemed to work because he nodded and suggested that the science lab would be empty. As she fell in behind him, Buffy gestured for Willow to join them. The girl grimaced but followed.

Even with the sun shining in through the windows, the lab brought back images of the night Mrs. Madison had thrown magic like a weapon. Buffy suppressed a shudder. If she hadn't pulled that mirror to deflect the spell, it would have been her, and not Mrs. Madison twitching mindlessly on the floor. She'd heard that the woman had been taken to some sort of institution, a sanitarium maybe, and had never gotten her mind back, which was good given the whole murderous rampage thing but still, it gave Buffy the wiggins to be here.

“Hey,” Willow said to Alan.

“Hey,” he replied.

So, were they going to say anything more? Maybe they wanted privacy. She'd so want privacy if it were her. “I should go.”

Willow stared Buffy down, terror clear in her eyes, but Alan spoke. “No, you should stay.”

And boy could Willow shift from terrified to glaring in a split second. Alan gulped and looked like he regretted his words. Well, too late. He'd made his bed and now he was gonna have to, well not sleep because he had to talk but now he had to talk to both of them and not just Willow. Except he didn't, talk that is. He just stared at Willow like a puppy that'd been kicked. They weren't going to get anywhere if Buffy didn't speak up so maybe it was good that he'd asked her to stay. “Willow feels like you've been ignoring her.”

“Buffy!” Willow finally found her voice. “Not ignoring, just not around as in not being in a place, or any place really, when I'm there kind of a way.”

“Uh,” Alan stammered. “Buffy's not wrong, but it's not what you think.”

“Oh,” Willow said. “Cause we thought it might be about almost getting decapitated by a demon, uh, unless you don't remember the demon which some people don't because, um, well I really don't know why but …”

Alan raised a hand to quiet the babbling. Surprisingly, it worked. “Okay, it is what you think but only sort of. I know about vampires and Slayers. I got it from Owen.”

Buffy heard herself repeating the name. Coming out of nowhere like that, it felt like a punch to the gut.

“Sorry Buffy,” she heard Willow saying. “I sort of forgot that Alan is Owen's cousin.”
“Oh. Uh, how is Owen?”

“How do you think he's doing? He was stabbed in the gut by your librarian.”

“Stabbed? Nobody said, I mean, I know he was in the hospital but …”

“Giles stabbed him?” Willow asked. “That can't be right. Giles, he's one of the good guys. He helps Buffy, but not because he's part of any mysterious organization going back to the dawn of history or anything. I mean, we all help, Xander and me and Giles too.”

“Willow,” Buffy interrupted. “Stop helping.”

Watching Willow's face fall, Buffy felt lower than an inchworm, lower than a centipede even, that was lower than an inchworm, right? Alan's glare wasn't helping. “I don't know what Owen told you.” It hurt to say his name. “But Giles couldn't have stabbed him. I mean, have you met Giles?”

Alan stared straight at her. “I trust Owen. I've known him my whole life.” He turned to Willow. “Can you really trust Giles? Or Buffy? You've known her, what, for two months? And the first thing she did was get Jesse killed.”

“Hey!” Oh, wait. He wasn't wrong.

“That wasn't Buffy's fault.” Huh, Willow sounded like she didn't blame her. Buffy wished she could feel the same. “Vampires killed Jesse. Those mysterious deaths, like BBQ fork accidents, have been going on our whole lives, long before Buffy got here.”

“But it's gotten worse since she's been here. It's like she attracts them. And you, you're close to her. What's she going to draw down on you? All this demon slaying, it's dangerous. How do you know she won't get you killed?”

“I admit, there's danger,” Willow replied, “but there always has been. It's better to know. It's safer to know what's going on around you. Knowledge is power.”

“This knowledge you think you've got isn't going to save you from someone you trust.” He glanced at Buffy but said, “like the librarian.”

“See,” Buffy said, stepping right up to Alan. “That's where I have a problem with you. Well, that and the whole ignoring Willow thing. But you keep going on about Giles like he's a killer. He's not. He's Giles. He's a librarian. He's Mr. Knowledge Guy, not Mr. Killer Guy.”

Alan looked like he wanted to run but Buffy had to give him one thing. He didn't back down. “Ask Tucker. He was there.”

* * *

Giles slammed the book shut and leaned back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose and shutting his eyes against the strain. Sending the Slayer after Angelus, which should have been the obvious choice, was unfortunately not an option. The infatuated little fool wouldn't hear a word against the vampire. No, he'd have to keep researching until he found another way to destroy Angelus.
As he stood to shelve the book, he felt eyes on his back. The library should've been empty but Giles knew he wasn't alone. He turned slowly but stopped short. The boy, pale-skinned and dark-haired, was too young to attend high-school. “Young man, are you with someone? Is there an older sibling or adult I can find for you?”

“I'm sorry.” The words, little more than a whisper, sent a chill down Giles' spine. The boy pointed to a bookcase, the one with glass doors. “What? Did you harm one of my books?” He scanned the shelves. None of the books looked damaged and none were missing. Before he could turn back to the boy, he felt something to his left. Angelus stood there, not three feet away, looming over him. Giles didn't allow his face to reflect his shock. Glancing at the glass, Giles saw only his own image. He was familiar with the phenomenon, that lack of reflection, but it never ceased to disturb. “Can I help you?”

“I know.”

The two simple words turned Giles' blood to ice. No, the vampire couldn't know.

“You're planning to give the Slayer line to Eyghon.”

“How dare you! I'm her Watcher, I'd never …”

“You're planning to evoke Eyghon into Buffy. In exchange you think, or maybe hope is a better word, that he'll kill you, that he'll finally set you free. I don't think he will. Why loosen his hooks when you're so easy to torment?”

The library's double doors burst open. “Giles! Giles!”

Giles reached for a stake. Slaying the vampire in front of Buffy would cause a problem with the girl, but he couldn't allow Angelus to share Giles' plans for the Slayer line. When he turned back to the vampire, Angelus had vanished.

“Spiders, spiders in the classroom …”

Damn, no telling where the vampire had gotten to. “What was that?”

Willow dropped into a chair. “There were hundreds of them, thousands maybe. You couldn't even move a foot without brushing big hairy creepiness out of the way.”

Buffy rested a hand on Willow's shoulder. “Breathe. Long and deep breaths.”

At least the children hadn't noticed Angelus. He could only hope he could kill the vampire before it spoke to Buffy. “Can someone explain what's going on?”

“How about someone who's not wigged?”

Buffy rolled her eyes at the boy's antics. “We were in class and Wendell opened his textbook and there were spiders everywhere. Dozens of them. Out of nowhere.”

Spiders? They'd interrupted him for spiders? “How terrifying for you all. You didn't see where they came from?”

“From nowhere,” Buffy added. “Giles, they were just there.”

“It could have been a case of translocation, although I don't know toward what end. I've never heard
of spiders being a sign of an apocalypse.”

“So,” Xander said. “Research party tonight?”

Research party? With Angelus on the loose? Definitely not.

Willow pulled Xander's hand off her mouth. “I don't think I can stay in school, not after dark, not when those eight-legged demons could be hiding anywhere.”

Xander reached a hand around Willow's shoulder and wriggled his fingers. “Big, hairy, crawly.”

Willow shrieked, saw the hand, and punched Xander's gut.

“Hey, it's funny if you're me.”

Giles interrupted before they could start bickering. “It could be an isolated incident. I'll handle the research this evening. Buffy, why don't you add the school to your patrol, just to be on the safe side.”

With any luck, Angelus wouldn't look for her at the high-school.

“Good,” Willow said. “I think we should get out of here as quickly as possible.” She bolted out the door.

“A vamoosing we will go, a vamoosing we will go, hi ho the cherry-o” Xander sang as he and Buffy followed Willow out.

After they'd gone, Giles tore through the stacks, but Angelus had vanished. Damn. And what had he been thinking, pulling a stake on the vampire? He couldn't take Angelus, not head on. If he didn't find the amulet soon, he'd have to try something desperate.

* * *

Ethan stared up the cement staircase to the apartments, a stucco beehive, ticky tacky as the song said, of identically bland homes. Ripper's Volante wasn't in the lot. Ethan assumed Ripper hadn't abandoned it even when he'd settled in this suburban wasteland. Perhaps he should have gone directly to the high-school after all. He could've at least had a chance to play with Ripper's latest toy, that Slayer he'd taken up. Ah well, given that he'd already found the flat, he'd have to settle for breaking in. He could always find Ripper's stash, comfort himself with a glass or two of Courvoisier while waiting.

By the time he reached Ripper's door, Ethan was humming to Glass Onion. As he leaned down to inspect the lock, it swung open. Dismayed by what he saw, Ripper at his stuffiest in a three-piece suit with tie firmly in place, Ethan pulled away with a wry grin. “Ripper, old chum.”

“Ethan.” At the disgust in Ripper's voice, Ethan cursed himself. Why the hell had he come running when Ripper'd called? He'd known how it'd go, how it always went. “I was wondering when you'd turn up.”

“Turn up?” Ethan wanted to shove his way in, but Ripper filled the doorway like an impenetrable wall. “You called me me. You bloody well invited me.”

“I've met someone, a woman. I don't want you coming around, mucking things up for me.”
Ethan couldn't help but laugh. “Met a woman and turned respectable have you? Of course you have. I can't imagine why it's taken you this long.” He stared at his erstwhile lover and his heart fell to his feet. “You could have told me this over the phone. Why drag me here if you don't want me?”

“There's one thing I couldn't do over the phone.” His fist flew, smashing into Ethan's jaw.

Ethan fell against the railing. Rubbing his jaw, he looked up and saw not Rupert, the respectable scion the suit suggested, but Ripper, the brawler of his youth. Ripper he could work with. “You could've at least fucked me first. I mean, really Ripper …”

Ripper's fist slammed into his gut, doubling him over. Hands sent him sprawling forward, crashing against the ground. Ethan curled into a ball, cursing himself. The kicks came, as regular as clockwork, and that disturbed him more than the attack. They were too calculated. There was no rage behind them, no passion. He heard more than saw Ripper step back into the apartment. “If you come back, I'll kill you.” The door shut with a quiet finality.

At a rustling from the bushes, something large, perhaps a big dog, Ethan pulled himself up. He didn't have much to defend himself with, but he wasn't about to sit still for another attack. A young boy, dark-haired, who looked bruised, not physically but emotionally, stepped onto the grass. “Sorry about that.” Sensing no danger from the boy, Ethan collapsed onto the doormat.

He didn't bother to move when he heard footsteps. Perhaps the boy had gone for help, perhaps not. It didn't matter. Some poor sod would call for an ambulance or at least help him stagger back to his car. Might as well look as pathetic as possible. “Help,” he called out weakly as he turned over. Oh, shit. Ripper had come around for more.

Even as he cringed back, waiting to be hit, Ethan couldn't help but notice that Ripper had changed clothes. The gray wool, so formal it had to have come out of Saville Row, had given way a dark blue Italian with a tie that had been pulled loose to suggest Ripper'd had a rough day. “When'd you find time to change?”

“Gods, Ethan, what happened?” Ripper squatted down next to him. Well, that was a surprise. Waiting a bit before starting back in on the abuse, was he? “Can you sit up? Who did this to you?”

Who did this? What the hell was Ripper playing at? Only one way to find out. “You did.”

The look of shock was quite convincing. Ethan would almost have believed him innocent if he hadn't been the one Ripper'd beaten.

“Just now,” Ethan added. “You beat me to bloody hell and back.” The exaggeration didn't bother Ethan. Almost anyone else would have a broken rib or two, but Ethan had learned to protect himself ages ago. He'd be bruised for a day or two, okay, perhaps a week or two, but it was nothing he couldn't ignore. He paused and thought a moment. “How'd you get out of there without me seeing you? Back exit?” He didn't really care but it was better than watching Ripper play the innocent.

“Out of where?” Ripper actually looked confused.

“Your flat. And you still haven't bothered to tell me why you changed clothes.”

“Ethan, I honestly have no idea what you're talking about. I'm just getting home now. Whoever bloodied you, it wasn't me.”

“Think I don't know you when I see you, Ripper? What game are you playing at?”

“Ethan, I either punch you or I don't. Games are your department. Come on, let's get you inside.”
Inside with Ripper. It was a terrible idea. If Ripper did decide to kill him, Ethan would certainly regret it, but whatever he did, he'd regret something. Ripper set Ethan on the couch. “I'm still bleeding,” He held out his hands, displaying long scrapes where he'd slid against the cement, carefully watching Ripper as he pretended to mourn the ripped sleeves, not that he had difficulty pretending. The Giza 45 cotton would be impossible to replace in Sunnydale.

“Barely.” Ripper twitched under his stare. Ah good, the guilt did still work. “I do have some experience getting blood out. The couch will be fine.”

Ripper picked up a fireplace poker and held it like a weapon. Oh shit! He'd known better, he really had.

Ripper's eye-roll was more reminiscent of Rupert than of the tough Ethan had fallen for. “You said that the person who beat you was in my apartment. I'm checking to see if anyone's here.” After moving through the entire place, both downstairs and up, Ripper returned with a damp towel. “Here, let me clean that up for you.”

Ethan couldn't help but wince as Ripper wiped at some of the worst cuts, but Ripper caring for him, it wasn't something he'd never expected to have again. He waved off the bandages and Ripper took a chair across from him, one he could see all the exits from.

“So,” Ethan said, “if you didn't call me here to tell me you'd met a bird, beat me half to death, and threaten to kill me the next time you saw me, why did you call me?” He didn't miss Ripper's flinch when he'd mentioned the bird. “You did meet someone.”

“There was someone, but it didn't work out.”

Ethan merely raised an eyebrow.

“I … I can't trust her to have my back.”

Ripper winced as Ethan laughed. “You called me here to protect you? Oh Ripper, that's brilliant.”

“No.” Ripper half-rose to his feet and then sank back into the chair. “I called you because I'm tired of being alone.”

Why did he do this to himself? Ripper pulled the strings and he came running back. “Why now?”

“Everything's falling apart. It seems to be coming together, but I don't believe it will, and even if it does …” Closing his eyes, Ripper dropped his head back against the chair. “Is it too much to ask for a little happiness in one short life?”

“What's falling apart?”

“There's too much to explain, Ethan.” Ripper sounded as exhausted as he had the night Randall had died.

“Tell me one bit of it then.”

Ripper sat up and leaned forward and Ethan couldn't help thinking that he was being manipulated, that Ripper was using body language that suggested honesty to make Ethan believe his words. “I can't find the Aurelian Amulet. It's imperative that I destroy Angelus. He … well, my Slayer has become infatuated with the vampire. I don't know what game he's playing with her, but I can't let it continue.”
Ethan sat back. Ripper was desperate for the amulet, that was clear, but he was lying about his reason. Oh, this was going to be fun. “There is a chaos ritual that could locate this amulet, but it does require a certain degree of intimacy.”

Ripper's lips twitched into a grin. Oh good, Ripper thought he was in control. This would be amusing. “If you want to fuck, Ethan, you could just say so.”

“Oh, I'd never turn down a night of pleasure with you, Ripper, but that wasn't what I had in mind. This ritual requires an enjoinment, our two minds completely open to each other.”

Ethan, grinning at Ripper's shock, was only slightly disappointed when it gave way to calculation.

“What do you say, Ripper? I'm game if you are.”

* * *

“His fight with the Hulk could have gone on longer but with Deadpool being sick from all that radiation, I guess he couldn't have held out forever or anything. There was this one awesome bit though, where Deadpool stopped the Hulk with a stop sign. Man that was …”

Buffy scanned the Bronze. She wasn't at all trying to avoid Xander's ramblings about that Deadpuddle comic book guy. Really. She needed to find Angel for, um, well, reasons. She wasn't at all thinking that Xander'd be like this, all rambling-on guy that is, ever since she and Willow had told him what Alan had said or not all of what Alan had said but specifically that bit where Alan had said she'd killed Jesse. Xander had been babbling ever since, going on and on about comics and books and movies. Who knew there was that much geeky stuff? He hadn't said one word about Alan though, or Giles, or Jesse.

In fact, Xander had never talked much about Jesse. Neither had Willow. Buffy'd figured they were being sensitive in a they knew she felt bad about getting him killed so they didn't bring him up when she was around kind of a way, but apparently not. When they were getting changed for gym, Willow filled her in. Xander had avoided the Jesse-talk ever since that night in the Bronze. It had something to do with how Jesse, vamp-Jesse and not human-Jesse, had died. Willow was short on the details but something about the vampire's death had upset Xander so much that he'd wiggled if Willow even spoke Jesse's name. So she didn't. Which meant Xander didn't talk about Jesse because he was upset, and Willow didn't talk about Jesse because she knew Xander was upset and not because she knew Buffy was upset.

She scanned the room again, actually looking for Angel this time not that she necessarily expected to find him. He could be there and she wouldn't know anything about it if he didn't want to be seen. He was awfully good at hiding for such a big guy, but if he was going to be all avoidy, why be there at all?

“Earth to Buffy.”

Buffy turned back to the table slowly, taking her time as if she hadn't just about jumped out of her chair. “Xander. Hi. So, um, your comic book guy …” She wanted to say the name but was pretty sure Deadpuddle was wrong. She tried smiling but Xander looked so miserable that she felt like an idiot sitting there grinning at him.

“It's okay,” he said. “You two can talk about the Alan stuff.”
Buffy hoped that Willow's intense stare meant she could talk about what Alan had said as long as she didn't mention Jesse. “It can't be true.” She rushed to finish the sentence before Xander assumed she was talking about Jesse. “… that stuff about Giles I mean. He's way too stuffy. And he's dating a computer science teacher. How not-evil is that?”

“He picked the lock,” Xander said.

“Huh?”

“That night at the Bronze, Giles picked the lock so we could get in.”

“He did?” How come she didn't know that? Oh, right, she'd gone in through the roof.

“He does train you,” Willow added. “He must know how to fight.” Willow must have seen something on Buffy's face because she started speaking fast, fast even for her that is. “But of course he'd never use his skills for evil. I mean, if he even has skills that is. You can teach something without really knowing much about it or how to do it at all in real life.” She petered off uncertainly.

Skills. Giles could fight. That night they'd found Angel in the Bronze, after Darla'd grabbed him, Giles had loosened her grip and dodged out of the way so Angel could shoot her with a wooden arrow. Giles had serious fighting skills and she'd never noticed. Still, that didn't make him evil, right? She could fight and she wasn't evil. “Well, I don't believe it anyway,” she said with a shrug. “This is probably Owen's way of breaking up with me, making a big scene so he doesn't have to tell me face-to-face like this guy Dave that I knew in LA. Instead of breaking up with Alicia, he just showed up at a major party with some other girl on his arm.”

Willow started to speak but jumped in her seat and turned her head just enough to glare at Xander. Buffy'd seen it enough times to know that Xander had kicked her under the table. “What?” Willow asked him. “I was going to agree with her.”

Buffy reviewed her words. Okay, maybe that whole Owen accusing Giles as a way to break up with her idea had been a bit over the top. “Or maybe that Alan guy's just a jerk.”

Willow turned her attention from Xander and drew back into her chair, looking both smaller and distant somehow, and hurt. She looked hurt. Oh, right, that Alan is a jerk line. Way to go, Buffy, insulting the guy she's crushing on. “No, he's not a jerk. I'm the jerk for even thinking he might be a jerk.”

“Why don't you go to the horse's mouth?” Xander asked.

Wait, was he saying she should ask Alan if he really was a jerk?

“Um, Xander,” Willow said. “That was sort of non-sequiturey even for you.”

“I don't know what non-sequiturey means, but Alan said to ask Tucker.” Xander nodded across the room. “Well, Tucker's here. Ask him.”

Ask Tucker if Alan was a jerk? Oh, right, they'd been talking about Giles. Alan had said Tucker'd seen Giles stab Owen, not that Giles stabbing anyone was a thing that could ever happen. Under Willow and Xander's expectant stares, Buffy glanced over. Tucker was there alright, but he wasn't alone. He was talking to a girl but it couldn't be that mean girl from the other night, the one who'd accused her of stalking Owen's house. That girl'd been a total skank. This one was wearing a long flowing shirt under a black sweater. Maybe she'd tell Buffy where she'd gotten the shirt. Not only was it a seriously cute look, but Buffy could wear it Slaying. She could move in it, unlike her faveminiskirt which was so tight that she couldn't kick in it.
The girl, laughing, turned enough that Buffy could see her face. Damn, it was that skank from the other night. Hmph, the outfit wasn't that cute. It looked sort of stupid really. Only cheap hos went for that no pants look.

“Buffy?” She glanced over at Willow. “Are you going to talk to him?”

With mean girl right there? Oh, right, Willow didn't know about mean girl 'cause Buffy wasn't about to fess up to that whole hanging outside of Owen's house at night even if she wasn't actually stalking Owen and had just happened to be in the neighborhood. “Um, no. I mean, uh ..” Buffy thought fast and found an answer. “I know who I can ask. Someone better. Less likely to lie and, uh, misdirect, stuff like that.”

“Are you sure you can get this mystery guy to talk?” Wow, and who knew Xander could be subtle with the whole not asking who the guy was thing?

“Oh, yeah, no sweat. I'm real convincing with that kind of thing.”

“Buffy, you're not going to beat someone up, are you? I mean a human someone and not a demon someone assuming it is a human someone and not …”

“Willow! No. No beating up. I promise. I'm just gonna ask some questions. He'll talk.” The problem would be just the opposite, getting him to shut up.

* * *

The couch was long gone. It's frame had broken when Tucker had … Andrew had saved the cushions, and it wasn't 'cause he was a baby like Tucker had said but because sometimes you just wanted to make a fort and there was nothing wrong with that even if you were a teenager and definitely more mature than anyone gave you credit for.

He looked the fort over. It's walls were strong. He'd be safe there, not that he had to worry about being safe 'cause he was at home and home was where you were safe, where no one, not even an older brother, would come at you just 'cause he was bored or angry or … That had been an accident anyway. Tucker hadn't meant it.

Andrew started the video and crawled into the fort. His lips moved as he read the words scrolling up the screen: A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Maybe he should have watched Return of the Jedi instead of The Empire Strikes back. He really didn't like how Lando betrayed his friends even if he did try to make it better in the end. Plus the Ewoks totally kicked ass. They weren't cuddly little teddy bears no matter what anyone said. But Yoda died in Empire even if he wasn't really dead at the end. Maybe Luke should have stayed with Yoda and finished his training. He'd have been stronger, better able to defeat Darth Vader but then who knew what Vader would have done with Luke's friends. But Luke didn't have enough of that Jedi cunning yet. A Jedi knew what the bad guy was going to do even before the bad guy did, but Luke hadn't known. He'd lost a hand. What if you didn't know? What if you trusted the wrong person just 'cause he was, like, family? Being a Jedi seemed sort of risky. If you trusted the wrong person you'd be in trouble 'cause what if you trusted them and they were more powerful and really, really dangerous. Then you'd be toast.

Han Solo didn't trust anybody. He had that blaster and he could use it too. He'd blasted Greedo before the little guy could even draw on him, but to be that fast you had to know who you could
trust.

“Then I'll see you in hell!” That was a great line. It wasn't fair of Mom to ground him for saying hell when he was just quoting Han. The really cool people knew when to stay silent. Like Boba Fett, he only spoke when he had something to say and he wore that Mandalorian armor so he was really, really safe. Nobody messed with Fett. He didn't trust anyone.

Andrew's eyes drifted closed. He opened them just enough to see the ice creature eating something bloody. Nothing would ever try to eat Fett. Monsters couldn't get past that armor. Nothing could get past that armor. His eyes drifted closed again.

Greedo thought he'd found Solo first. Fett could see it in the little guy's cocky walk. That was alright. Fett had practically led him by the hand to Solo but Greedo didn't know that. He'd flush Solo, set the prey running, and then Fett would claim the prize.

When Solo shot Greedo, some of the scum in the Mos Eisley Cantina turned to look but Fett didn't even blink. He'd been everywhere and done everything. He wasn't afraid of creatures with three heads or fangs or even huge burley muscles that could tear a man in half.

Solo flipped a coin at the bartender on the way out. “Sorry about the mess.” Fett followed. The bounty was his. Solo was a tricky one though. The bounty said Dead or Alive. Better make that dead. He aimed his blaster, counting down: three, two … A beam of blue light sliced through his weapon. Fett turned to face this new threat. Luke? But this was the cantina. Luke didn't even have his lightsaber yet.

Luke raised the lightsaber as if to strike again. Fett took a step back. He'd underestimated the Jedi. His armor would melt like butter under a lightsaber. Luke's fist shot out, knocking him to the floor. Laying there on his back, like a turtle on its shell, unable to turn over, unable to defend himself, Fett stared up at the Skywalker scion.

“Sorry Andrew,” Luke said but that voice, it wasn't Luke's. Fett blinked and looked again. Tucker stood over him, swinging the lightsaber like it was a toy. “It's not that I need you dead specifically, it's just that I need someone dead and you're convenient. Plus, I really don't like you.” Tucker raised the lightsaber.

Andrew screamed as it hit and fumbled in the darkness, shoving something off him. He sat up as a cushion flew into the wall. Oh, his fort had fallen apart. The rest must have been a dream. Still, it wouldn't hurt to check, to make sure that Tucker … or not Tucker 'cause Tucker was his brother and would never hurt him, but you never knew who might be lurking outside so it'd be best to check. He peered out the window. Was something standing in the shadow of that tree? It stepped into the light. Oh, it was just a boy, younger than Andrew even. The kid sort of looked like Boba Fett as a child, with that dark hair and all, but his skin was too pale and he was too skinny so he couldn't be Fett. His lips were moving but Andrew couldn't hear anything, not from inside the house. Maybe he was asking for help because it was awfully late for such a young kid to be out. It'd be nice to have a friend, someone he could hang with, someone who'd be here so Andrew wouldn't be alone when Tucker came home. Andrew went to the door and called out into the night. “Hello?” But the boy was gone.

* * *
As they turned up the long driveway to Ripper's hidden home, the one Ethan wasn't supposed to know about, Ripper turned off the headlights. He seemed to act automatically, as if this were a habit. Ethan, in the passenger seat, kept his grin bland and his hands from clenching the door handle. In the darkness, nothing distinguished the driveway from the rest of the property and he could only hope Ripper wasn't about to crash them into, say, some unexpected tree.

Even though Ethan couldn't properly see the building, he could tell by its silhouette, more of a solid denseness than the surrounding trees, that it was huge, more mansion than house which was hardly surprising. Ripper had never settled for the mundane. Ripper, his gaze straight on the road, seemed to hum with an unexpressed tension, and Ethan's thoughts turned to how Ripper had paled, shocked into speechlessness, when he'd suggested they perform the enjoinment ritual at Ripper's hidden home. “Ethan Randall Page?” Ethan had said, referring to the name used to purchase the mansion. “Really, Ripper, if your going to be so lazy as to use pseudonyms based on the names of your old chums, you have to expect someone will work it out.”

Ripper pulled to a stop. From inside Ripper's Volante, even with the top up, Ethan could feel the barrier spell that protected the building. That much power could never have come from Ripper alone. Ethan couldn't detect the coppery tastesmell of a binding ritual based on human sacrifice. Perhaps Ripper'd worked with that bird he'd mentioned, the one he couldn't trust to have his back? No, there was no sense of sex magic in the binding. Ripper looked upset, as if already regretting allowing Ethan into this space. “Home, sweet home?” Ethan asked to wipe that look off of Ripper's face.

He sighed. “Come on, then.” Ethan watched carefully as Ripper opened a gate but didn't sense Ripper calling on any external power, not that he'd need to merely to create an opening in the barrier spell. Inside, the mansion was more dilapidated than Ethan had expected. Oh, the bare bones of the building were solid enough and the mansion must have once held a certain elegant charm, but the years of disuse had covered it in a patina of neglect.

Ripper led him to a garden, one open to the sky but surrounded on all four sides by the mansion. Ethan noted that the lights, magical and powered by the same source as the barrier spell, directed their illumination downward to maintain the illusion of an empty and abandoned building. The garden suffered from the same neglect as the interior of the building although someone had cleared debris and vegetation from the pathways and from the open space at the center where they would perform their spell.

The ritual required little in the way of setup, nothing more than a sacred circle to sanctify the space. Ripper's circle hadn't been dedicated to Chaos, but it would serve. The spell itself, being an enjoinment, a merging of all that they were, required only their willingness and, of course, Chaos magic. Ethan, a dedicant of Chaos, would provide that himself.

Ripper and Ethan stood in the center of the circle, facing each other. Ethan raised his left hand. Ripper, unmoving, kept his hands at his side. “If you don't want the amulet, Ripper, all you have to do is say so. I'm sure there are other ways to destroy this vampire. You could call on your infatuated Slayer perhaps?”

Ripper raised his right hand and placed it, palm-to-palm, against Ethan's left. Fearing Ripper might change his mind at the delay, Ethan skipped the formal invocation to Janus and merely reached out until he felt the power bubble up within himself. Directing that magic, he brought the power to his palm and pressed, piercing the skins between him and Ripper to merge their blood. Ethan raised his left hand, the bloodied one, and pressed it to Ripper's forehead. Ripper, following suit, raised his right hand, the bloodied one, to Ethan's forehead. “The mind that denies thee,” Ethan chanted, “thou subsume. The thoughts closed against thee, thou encompass.”
Caught up by the spell, they moved their hands as one, Ethan's hand to Ripper's heart and Ripper's hand to Ethan's. “The spirit closed against thee, thou embrace. The soul barred against thee, thou lay open.”

Their hands moved lower again. Normally, laying palm to Ripper's groin would give him a sexual thrill but even Ethan couldn't fight the power of the spell. “The body held from thee, thou subsume.”

Ripper's mind … No, Ethan sensed little trace of Ripper in Rupert's thoughts. He felt a loss, saddened by how much Rupert had allowed himself to forget, by how small Rupert had become. That flash of anger-pride must have come from Rupert. Ethan mourned. Where had the boy he'd loved gone?

Loved? Yes, he'd loved Ethan. Still did. He felt a stab of regret that Ethan now knew how much Rupert loved him. Ethan could take an inch of advantage and turn it into a mile. A stab of pride, that must have come from Ethan, shot through him.

Ripper had been his wild child, well, not child exactly. Where had that wildness gone? There were holes, no, not holes, walls in Rupert's mind hiding … Eyghon? That last time they'd invoked the demon? Randall's death?

Ethan's memories held a darkness, thoughts of a ritual gone wrong, of Eyghon loose in human form, of Randall … Turn away, turn away, Giles whispered. There's nothing to see. You know how Ethan loves to exaggerate. The amulet. We're here for the amulet. “Shouldn't we find that amulet?”

Mind-to-mind, thought-to-thought, that didn't allow one to hide, but one could hide behind words. Rupert thought the amulet might be useful but he wasn't obsessed enough to allow Ethan into his mind to find it. Hope flared. Was it love? No barriers between them? But no, Rupert didn't know why he'd allowed this.

“Ethan. Please.” Let it go. Don't look for answers. He gave way to Rupert's need, or they gave way, the they that was him, that was both of them together as one.

Order could search, plodding from one step to the next, but Chaos used chance and intuition, picking not quite randomly, the better path. When it failed, it bombed, but when it succeeded … “We have received an amulet, Padre, from our most holy Mother Church.” They spoke as one, repeating the words of others, words first spoken centuries ago. They had some vague notion they were speaking in Spanish and that one of them didn't know the language, but that seemed of little concern.

“According to the missive, it is …”

“Demonic. Yes, I can feel its power.”

“It must be hidden. No one must ever suspect we have it here.”

“We will place it in the Tomb of the Juniper.”

Rage flashed through them. The Tomb of the Juniper had been searched. It had held no amulet.

“Padre Ferrer or the other?”

A flash of understanding. An infant, a boy child, taken in, had been named Junipero in honor of the Padre. He'd joined the church, as orphans raised by the brothers often did, and had grown old in its service. The amulet had come into their possession as he lay on his deathbed. It was his tomb, not Padre Junipero Ferrer's, that the amulet lay buried in.

To grab the amulet from the tomb required phenomenal amounts of power but they could draw on
the girl's power. What girl one of them thought and the answer came from neither. Willow's power, bound to Giles' service. One of them thought to ask why Giles and not Rupert?, but the other, anxious, pressed them forward. Not now. Not when we're so close. The power bent to their will. The amulet dropped, heavy, into their hands.

With the amulet found, they could draw apart, end the ritual, but there was that niggling question: holes and walls. Why were there holes and walls in …

No! Don't look. Please, just … don't.

A doorway. All their questions answered behind one small doorway, and a part of them was a devote of Janus, guardian of doorways. They pulled it open and it all came flooding in: Eyghon's rampage, the car, choosing to press on the accelerator, driving straight into Randall, beating him afterward to make sure Eyghon couldn't rise, but Eyghon, trickier, chained himself to Ripper's mind, connecting himself to the world through Rupert's very soul. Ah, that explained Rupert's visions, the waking nightmares, rivers of blood, walking corpses, all bound to one purpose, to drive Rupert to obey Eyghon's will. The breaking, the sundering of Rupert's soul into, not two but three, the two guardians, Giles and Ripper, protecting as best they could. And the cost of that protection, arranging a Slayer's death and that failure, the death of her previous Watcher, which hung heavy as a stone in their shared mind. And the unexpected bonus, a witch, a young woman, little more than a girl, of incredible power and the binding of that power to Giles' will.

The shock of it drove them apart. Ethan found himself standing, facing Rupert. No, not Rupert and not Ripper either. That look of calculation belonged to Giles. A flash of green told Ethan, not that he needed reminding, that Eyghon was there as well, at least connected if not inside to Rupert. Ethan slammed a hand into Giles' cheek and held if fast, pouring power through, power enough to fray that bond, to drive the demon off if only for a short while. It might kill the girl, Willow, but what did that matter?

Giles staggered under the weight of that power. “You can't be stupid enough to think you've stopped him. You may have weakened the bond, but there's no severing it. The demon will return.”

“Yes, well, Giles.” The man winced. Had he honestly believed he could hide two of his personalities during an enjoinment spell? Ethan reviewed Giles' thoughts. No, but he'd been desperate enough to try. “We need to talk without him listening in.” Just as Giles had, Ethan didn't use the demon's name. No need to risk invoking it. “How dare you keep this from me! I could have been working all these years to free Rupert from the demon.”

“There's no freedom …”

“Outside of death,” Ethan interrupted. “I've seen your longing for that little coda, for a chance to rest with your ancestors.”

“After all I've done,” Giles protested, “I hardly think they'd accept me.”

“Sleeping in the dust, then, to awake to disgrace and everlasting contempt, piling the guilt higher and higher, believing that you deserve such a punishment and keeping me at bay when I could have …”

“You know why I kept you out of it,” Giles interrupted. “Rupert loves you.” He's not the only one, Ethan thought. Ripper and Giles shared Rupert's feelings. Ethan knew the whole man loved him. “I couldn't risk you getting hurt,” Giles continued. “It would have killed him.”

Better than the demon killing you, all three of you. “Will the demon kill me now that I know your little secret?”
“Not immediately. He'll keep you in check, waiting until he needs leverage to use against me.”

“He must know I'll try to break the bond.”

“He knows you'll fail.”

“Then I can stay?”

After carefully placing the amulet on a bench, Giles turned to Ethan. “I can't keep you away even if I wanted to. Besides, now that Rupert knows all, he'll need you.”

Giles' face grew pale and his breath hitched. Was this an attack? Had Eyghon … No, this wasn't Giles. It was Rupert. He fell and Ethan winced as he caught him, the pain of his beating flaring up with the extra weight. “Oh, Gods, Ethan. I didn't know. How could I not know? What have I done?”

Thinking of Giles and Ripper, at their efforts to keep Rupert safe, Ethan brushed a hand over Rupert's head and thought you weren't meant to suspect.

* * *

Pulling into the parking lot and screeching to a halt diagonally, taking up not one but two spots, Giles couldn't regret that he'd missed homeroom. Buffy would be upset though, or possibly not. The Slayer had little affinity for mornings. Still, such a small sacrifice, missing one morning meditation session with his Slayer, paled against locating the Aurelian Amulet. Rupert's new-found access to all that Giles had done to protect him, the compromises, the deaths, that was less trivial. Unfortunately he knew of no way to correct it. Rupert couldn't be forced back into the box now that the enjoinment ritual had set him free. He could only hope that Ethan could help Rupert pass through the trauma more or less unscathed.

He'd planned to arrive unnoticed but more than half the school had turned out, not for him thankfully, but to watch an ambulance scream off. Gods, what now? It couldn't be Buffy. Having spotted his car – and Giles could only hope Snyder hadn't seen him pulling in – she ran over. It couldn't be Willow, could it? He'd taken quite a bit of her power the previous night, but it shouldn't have sent her to the hospital.

Buffy stopped and, unlikely as it seemed, just stared at him without speaking.

“Buffy, are you alright?”

She shrugged as if shaking something off. “It's nothing. I need you to drive me to the hospital.”

“What's wrong? It's not Willow, is it?”

“Willow? No, it's Laura.”

Who the hell was Laura? “Buffy, I've just arrived. If I leave now, Snyder will …”

“Where were you, anyway?” Right, if she could be distracted that easily, the trip to the hospital couldn't be that necessary. “You missed homeroom which was sort of nice since I wasn't stuck meditating …” She put up a brave front under his glare. “Right. Not important. But I do have to get to the hospital. Laura was beaten. I think by something demony.”
Ah, guesswork, which made Buffy's little trip completely unnecessary. “And this trip off school grounds will do, what? Other than, oh I don't know, get you out of a test?”

“Giles! There's no test. I can't believe you think there'd be a test. I need to ask questions. Talk.” She continued with a determined air. “Interrogate her. If there is a demon, you'd want to know sooner rather than later. You know you would.”

“I can't leave the school. If Snyder doesn't yet know I was late, he soon will.”

“Giles.”

Gods, could she not give in? “What if someone else could take you?”

“You mean a teacher, like Miss Calendar?”

Oh Gods, no. That'd be a disaster in the making. “No, a friend.”

“You have friends?”

“Ha, ha,” he said dryly as he started walking to the library. “Come on. I'll give him a call.”

* * *

“So, you're British, just like Giles.” Buffy didn't get this Ethan guy. While his magenta blouse and khakis were more casual than her Watcher's suits, he somehow looked almost as dapper as Giles. Buffy thought Ethan would be insulted by the almost part. Ethan seemed way too carefree to be a friend of Giles' and wasn't that a horrible thought. It wasn't as if Giles couldn't be carefree, she guessed, if he wanted to, but he was Mr. Responsibility. Something about Ethan said he'd run like a bat out of hell in the face of responsibilities. These two were friends?

“How clever of you to notice.”

Okay, he did have the Giles-like sarcasm down. He seemed to stroll casually across the parking lot but there was something forced to his stride as if he was in pain, a lot of pain, but hiding it. Had he been attacked? By a demon? But why would Giles hide that from her? Maybe Giles didn't know.

Instead of the free and clear getaway, they were gonna have witnesses, lots of ’em, at least twenty. What were all those guys doing out of class anyway? Had there been another attack? Oh, they were standing around a car, a very, very red car that looked sort of, uh, foreign maybe? Ethan's stride took on a jaunty air and, wait, was that his car?

The guys all went crazy, congratulating Ethan on having such cool wheels. Ethan almost purred at the one who'd asked for a ride. “If you play your cards right.” Okay, that wasn't at all creepy.

“Nice car,” Buffy said as she slid into the passenger seat. Not that she cared, but it seemed like something to say.

“The '69 Triumph TR6.” He turned the key and the engine did seem to purr. Maybe cars weren't so bad after all. “The best I could do on short notice.”

“So, you got here recently?” Maybe he hadn't known Giles long.
“Fairly recently.” He peeled out of the parking lot and didn't seem to even look as he tore through the gates. He screeched to a halt at the stop sign. “You drive faster than Giles.”

“Mmm, I had thought Ripper had turned into a bit of a fuddy-duddy.”

Buffy thought back to the time Giles' had found her at the zoo. No, not really a fuddy-duddy. “Ripper?”

He gave her an amused smirk. “Rupert.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Probably not,” he agreed cheerfully.

“So, have you known Giles long?”

His glance looked amused. “Is there something you wanted to know about Ripper?”

“No! No. I was just, you know, making conversation.”

They sat in silence until she noticed him glancing over. “What?”

“You're the Slayer.”

He knew about Slayers? Was he with the Council? “The one and only.”

She could feel his eyes on her. “Do you want something?”

“Never mind.” He turned his gaze back to the road.

“What is it?”

As he glanced over, his grin seemed almost sincere. “I was wondering if you'd let me have a bit of your hair, just a snip, or perhaps a clipping from a fingernail or toenail. Nothing you'd miss of course.”

“Why?”

He didn't seem to hear the chill in her voice. “For their magical properties. There are a couple of spells that depend on the physical connection to the Slayer line. As you can imagine, such elements are hard to come by.”

“You're a witch?”

“Warlock. Wizard. The name doesn't really matter.”

“And you're not afraid I'll tell Giles?”

He laughed. “Oh, dear girl, Ripper already knows.”

He screeched to a halt, parking diagonally, taking up two spots in the hospital's lot. “Can't have any dings on the car. So, is that a yes on the snippet of hair?”

“No.”

He still looked amused. It seemed to be a sort of permanent state with him. With a gesture toward the hospital, he said, “Let's find this friend of yours.”
Giles peered around the corner before stepping into the hallway. He couldn't know if Snyder had seen him arriving, but sooner or later the man would come looking for him and Giles didn't have time to waste. The door to the basement was blocked by police tape. He didn't know why the tape was there but didn't spot any activity so he ducked under the tape and climbed down the stairs, following the light of his torch past the boiler room and into unused tunnels where walls roughened by cracks echoed the sound of dripping water. Giles stopped at an intersection equidistant from the church where the Master waited, trapped and unable to wreak his vengeance on the town, and the room that Angelus had taken above the Bronze.

The spell wasn't particularly elaborate. Giles laid out a protective circle in salt and squared that circle with the Sand of Tears as he chanted. “As blood binds the line of Aurelius, so shall my will bind their strength. By my word and my word alone shall they flourish or wither. Their strength drains away, fading, diminishing. They have no power to harm, no power to defend even against the weakest of mortals.” The amulet's waxing moon grew gray and dark as the waning moon, a symbol of their diminishing powers, started glowing.

Giles pulled out a stake. Angelus first and then, if the spell held, and there was no reason it wouldn't, he'd exterminate the remainder of the Aurelian line.

* * *

Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Angel shut the book and carefully slipped it on his bedside table. Shakespeare's poems wouldn't help him understand Buffy. Maybe nothing could. When he'd first seen her in LA, sitting on the steps of the high-school, she'd shone like the sun. He'd thought she could redeem him, but all she seemed to do was talk about boys, well, to be honest one boy in particular: Owen. Angel wasn't jealous. He wasn't fool enough to think he could have that kind of relationship with the Slayer. When Whistler had promised that she'd be his redemption, it had seemed clear but now everything was murky.

Angel absently rubbed his hand on the vermilion bedspread. He should talk to her. He rose to his feet and paced between the cement floor and the abstractly patterned rug. And tell her what? That he saw her as some kind of a savior? That he was glad she'd found a human to love? That he …

Angel collapsed, crashed to the floor with a heavy thud. Unable to sit up, he tried to raise one hand. He'd lifted it about a quarter-inch, straining to raise it further, when he collapsed again, dropping the hand to the floor. His eyes glanced around the room, searching for attackers. He was alone.

Why couldn't he move? Was it a spell? A thought rose to the surface, a distant memory of rumors he'd rejected as ridiculous. A gypsy tribe had crafted an amulet or at least that's how the tale went, but it had never been used. It was a myth. But what else could have such power over him?

Darla had believed in the amulet as had the Master. They'd wasted decades searching for it. They were neither of them fools. Angel tried to raise his head and failed. It had to be true. The Aurelian Amulet did exist and someone had activated it. No vampire of his line was safe.
“I'm sorry.”

Giles cursed the delay as he swung his torch around. He needed to get to Angelus, to stab the vampire in the heart, but Giles hadn't survived this long by ignoring the unexpected. That boy, three feet down the tunnel, where had he come from? And, wait, hadn't Giles seen him yesterday when Angelus had snuck into the library? “Sorry? Why? What are you doing here?”

Someone clapped behind him, slowly, deliberately, so that each break between claps was as long as the next. Giles turned and clenched his fist tightly around the stake as he checked the Amulet of Dominion Over the Line of Aurelian. The waning moon still glowed. “You can't be here. The spell … it should have disabled you.”

Angelus stopped clapping. He looked Giles up and down as if deciding which part of him to break first. With a swipe of his foot, Angelus cut through the salt and sand, ending the spell. “There's a new power, stronger than your mortal magic. Nightmares are taking over. You let me in. You and your fear. I suppose I should thank you for that, or maybe I'll let Buffy do it, once I've told her that you plan to give her to Eyghon.”

He vanished with a flash, almost too fast to follow. Giles chased after, knowing he couldn't catch the vampire, back through the same tunnels, into the boiler room, and up the stairs. He pulled at the door. It was locked. “Hello? Hello? Can anyone hear me?” Giles pounded on the door. Surely someone would let him out before Angelus could get to Buffy.

Strength returned like a surging river breaking through a dam. Angel moved quickly. He couldn't stay here, not if an enemy had activated the Aurelian Amulet. Abandoning everything – the art he'd stolen from museum storage units, the bed that'd belonged to a couple he couldn't save, books, blood – he climbed down, past the Bronze and into the tunnels below. He didn't head straight for his bolt hole. Someone might be watching.

After hearing nothing behind for dozens of turns, he decided he wasn't being followed. He should get under cover. If the amulet was used again while he was out in the open, he'd be prey to anything that stumbled across him.

“I'm sorry.”

The boy looked human. He even smelled human, but he hadn't been there a moment ago. “Sorry?”

The boy looked past him. Angel stepped back, glanced over his shoulder, and saw Buffy. He'd never seen her like this, in a formal gown, sleeveless and white, her hair up with wisps floating down. She looked beautiful. He called her name but she turned and walked away. He chased after, catching sight of her as he turned corners only to see her vanishing, again and again, into the distance.

When he realized where she was going, he started running. “Buffy. No.” Why would she go to the
Master's lair? She had to know she'd be outnumbered. She hadn't brought any weapons, not even a stake. They'd kill her. He turned the last corner and stopped at the edge of the sunken church. Buffy lay facedown in a pool of murky water. He rushed to her, sank to his knees, and pulled her from the pool. No heartbeat. She had no heartbeat.

“Aw, so sad. Your one hope of redemption dead at my feet.”

Angel rose. “You can't have her.”

“She's mine already. Do you honestly think I'd waste a Slayer by merely killing her?” The Master held a hand down towards Buffy. “Time to wake, my dear. Come. Join us.”

Buffy opened her eyes. “Master.”

“No,” Angel shouted. The Master helped Buffy to her feet.

“What's got him down?” Angel wanted to turn away from the coldness in Buffy's eyes but he couldn't stop staring.

“He wants to be human.”

“What an idiot.”

* * *

The basement darkened as the afternoon wore on. Shadows seemed to slink and slither behind him but nothing stepped out into the small circle of light generated by Giles' torch. The air smelled fusty but the scent spoke more of mold than demonic creatures. Giles checked his watch. He'd been pounding on the basement door, a heavy slab of metal, for forty-three minutes. That couldn't be. Based on the light, or lack thereof, filtering under the door, it must be well after dark. He rubbed at his hand, which ached as if he'd been pounding for days, and struck at the door again.

It opened flooding the basement with such a blinding light that Giles held up his arm against the onslaught. As his vision started to clear, he saw a silhouette, a deformed figure, shrunken and twisted. He blinked twice and saw Snyder in the doorway. Oh Gods, no. He didn't have time to deal with this tiny tinpot dictator, not now.

“Mr. Giles, just the man I was hoping to see. Perhaps you could explain what you meant by coming in so late this morning.”

“Actually, this isn't a good …” He froze like a rabbit under the eyes of a hawk as hooded figures filled the hallway.

“Snyder.” As the unholy eldritch voice echoed around him, Snyder jumped and leaped forward, almost knocking Giles down the steps. “The Mayor wants you Snyder.”

Two of the creatures stepped forward, their eyes glowing green under the florescent lights. Snyder waved his hands as if to dismiss them. “No. No.” Each grabbed him by an arm. Snyder's feet scrambled for traction as they dragged him off. Giles thought he heard a small voice apologizing just before Snyder screamed. The rest of the creatures, a surprisingly large number actually, trailed after. It wasn't until the last had vanished from his sight that Giles felt clear-headed enough to wonder why
Snyder would have recognized Night Stalkers.

Wait, hadn't Angelus said something about fear, about nightmares taking over? Gods, this could be bad. This could be quite bad. Giles ran but the hallways seemed to stretch out before him, vanishing into a distance he could never reach. Even racing as fast as he could, he gained no ground.

“Giles.”

He stopped. “Ah, Buffy.” The halls had fallen back into place again, no longer tunnels stretching into infinity.

“This is my Dad.”

Right, her father who'd planned to take her to L.A. “Buffy, I'm not certain this is a good weekend for you to be out of town.”

Before he could come up with a reason for her to remain in Sunnydale, one that might be acceptable to her father, the man spoke up. “Oh, don't worry. Buffy's not going anywhere.”

“Huh?”

“Come on, honey. We need to talk.”

Grateful that Buffy's father had his own reasons for leaving her on the Hellmouth, Giles walked, careful not to run this time, to the library. He found Ethan poking through his teas. Giles wanted to both laugh in relief – Ethan's help would be invaluable – and rage at the man for putting himself in danger but there was no time for either. “Ethan, when you were attacked yesterday, did that perhaps remind you of a nightmare you'd been having lately?”

Giles didn't have to wait for an answer. Ethan's own memories revealed Ethan's nightmares to him. “Lately?” Ethan snorted. “For the past twenty years more like.”

“Damn. Damn damn damn.”

“What is it?”

“I think our nightmares have been given form but I can't imagine how.”

Ethan looked startled. “The boy.” He walked to the circulation desk and picked up the newspaper. “The one from your nightmares-come-true with Angelus here in the library? The boy spoke to you then. He was with me too when I thought it was you beating me. Remember?”

Giles did, now that Ethan mentioned it. “But what could it mean?”

Ethan slapped the paper down on the desk and pointed out a photo of the boy. “He's in a coma in the hospital: the first victim. Patient zero if you will.”

“I saw him in the tunnels too. He said he was sorry.” He glanced sharply at Ethan. “He was there, apologizing, every time one of these visions from our nightmares became real. Sorry for what?”

“Why don't we try asking him?”

“He's in a coma. How do you propose waking him?”

“I'm not exactly sure,” Ethan admitted. “But if he is at the heart of this, we'd better work that out and quickly.”
Ethan was right. This was no time for sarcasm. “If there is a magical component to his coma, there might be something we could do. Ethan, I want you to start scanning through Meyer's work on quantum fluctuations. You'll find his texts on the shelves at the top of the stairs, to the left of ...”

“I know where they are, but why am I stuck with the math-heavy reading?”

“If you'd prefer, I'll take Meyer and you can delve into Webb's thesis on Erebos, the land of eternal darkness, the realm of the lord of sleep. If I recall correctly, there was some reason to believe it exists as an alternate dimension.”


Instead of fetching the texts, Ethan stood there, staring at Giles. “Waiting for an engraved invitation, are you?”

“You do understand that Angelus might not know about Eyghon.”

“What?”

“Before Angelus showed up in the library the other morning, you saw the boy. That was a nightmare, my dear. What you fear most. It's fairly unlikely that Angelus knows anything about Eyghon.”

“I, uh ... He's still a threat to my Slayer.”

“Oh, yes, I completely agree. I'm merely pointing out that he's not as immediate a threat as you've been imagining.”

“Yes, well, we still have to deal with this nightmare situation.”

A few hours later, they'd worked out a tentative theory. Ethan summed it up. “If we know what fear sent him retreating into this coma and we can somehow force him to confront it, we might end the infraction of this nightmare-realm into our own.”

“When you put it like that, it does sound rather daunting.”

“Daunting? Dearheart, when I think of the things you've pulled off already ...”

Ethan's words cut off as Willow and Xander burst through the doors. “Red alert! Where's Buffy?” Xander stopped speaking as his feet came to a halt. He stared at Ethan as if shocked to find anyone other than Giles in the library. “Who are you?”

“Xander, Willow, this is Ethan.” Remembering Buffy's reaction, he added, “He's my friend.”

“O-kay,” Xander said slowly.

“We thing we've worked out what's been happening,” Giles said. “Did the boy with the spiders mention nightmares?”

“Yeah,” Willow said. “He did. He said he'd been having a recurring dream. Oh, and Xander, you had that dream about being naked in class.”

Ethan, being Ethan, glommed onto that last remark. “You were naked and I missed it?”

“Hey!”

“But he was,” Willow continued, “naked or at least down to his underwear. And he did have nightmares about it.”

“That proves the nightmares theory,” Ethan said. “Now if we were only certain that we’re right on how to fix it.”

“There’s a fix?” Xander watched Ethan warily as he asked.

“There’s a boy in a coma,” Giles said. “Billy Palmer. We believe waking him will end the nightmares.”

“Well, there are medical treatments,” Willow suggested. “Oh, but I guess the doctors would have already tried them.”

“We believe the coma was magically induced. Physical cures wouldn’t help.”

“This is the boy.” Ethan held up the newspaper. “I don’t suppose you know what he’s afraid of?”

“Oh, but I’ve seen him,” Willow said. “He’s with Buffy.”

“I thought Buffy was with her father.”

“I don’t know about that,” Willow said. “I glanced out the window and saw her with this boy outside the gym.”

Finally, a plan. “We should find Buffy.”

“Probably faster if we split up to look for her.”

“Good idea.”

Faintly, as if from a great distance, Giles heard Willow and Ethan: “Faster but not safer” vying with “Are you out of your minds?” He kept walking.

* * *

“I’m sorry.”

The hallway should have been empty. Miller had personally supervised the security protocols in the building he’d chosen for his base. The boy, dark-haired and almost waif-thin, couldn’t be there. And yet he was. Miller was about to speak when a voice called out from inside his office. “Enter.”

Miller found himself turning from the boy. He grasped the doorknob firmly, wondering who would dare take over his office, and opened the door. The oversized mahogany desk at the far end of the room, obviously meant to intimidate, wasn’t his. The assorted paintings, a quick glance suggested they’d originated in the Romantic period, weren’t his either. Covering the floor, dominating the room, the Council’s seal, a double-headed black eagle holding a pen in one golden claw and a sword in the other, had been woven into a rug. From behind the desk, Quentin Travers called him over. “Miller. Took you long enough. Get in here.”
Miller found himself slouching as he stepped forward. His eyes lowered in deference, he saw that his jacket, indeed his whole suit, mass produced in the American style, selected to provide anonymity in Sunnydale, had been replaced with tweed. He stopped before Travers' desk, not greeting the man like an equal but bowing like a sycophant.

“You failed us.”

No, that couldn't be right. He'd had decades of successes. “But sir …”

Travers waved his words away. “Don't bother to apologize. It's not really your fault. We shouldn't have set you against Rupert Giles. You just aren't competent enough for field work but don't you worry. I'm reassigning you to a department that'll be more suitable to your skill set. Don't let anyone tell you it's not an important position. After all, someone has to track demonic activity and provide statistical analyses so we know what's happening and where.”

Track demonic activity? Statistical analyses? No, they weren't dropping him into that dumping ground for incompetent sons of the Council lines. He was good at his job. He was. “Sir, I must protest …”

“And of course you'll be working with the crème de la crème, almost within the Travers line itself. Your supervisor will be … ah, here he is. No introductions necessary, I'm sure.”

Cecil Ashworth, Quentin Travers' wastrel of a nephew, sauntered in. “Miller, is it? Really, uncle, couldn't I have someone competent? The man allowed Rupert Giles to go scott-free and after he'd killed uncle Roddy. Family honor demands …”

Travers interrupted. “Family honor demands we assign someone competent to Giles. You keep Miller occupied, out of our hair. Let the big boys handle this.”

Cecil blatantly rolled his eyes. “Fine, I'll take on the incompetent little twit.”

“No, now,” Travers replied. “I'm not convinced he's incompetent. I believe laziness plays a …”

Someone banged at the door, five sharp raps. The room flashed, changing in a blink back to Miller's office: a smallish desk with a table and three chairs off to one side for conferences, a bland tan rug, and no paintings. “Sir?” Edmund Wyndham's voice called from the other side of the door.

“Come.”

Edmund had been at his side, facing certain disaster, dozens of times, and yet Miller had rarely seen the man with a hair out of place. Even when they'd faced certain death at the hands of one of the most ancient vampire lines, Edmund's suit had remained impeccable. But now his tie was askew. As Edmund reached out to close the door, his sleeve drew up, revealing a plastic medical bracelet. Before he could yank the cuff back down, Miller read the writing on the plastic: specimen VX2317. He recognized the cataloguing system as one used in Alan Wyndham-Pryce's lab. This meant that reality hadn't transformed itself only for Miller. Edmund had been elsewhere too. “What's happening?”

“People are falling in and out of their worst nightmares. The phenomenon seems to be increasing in intensity and, of course, danger. No know cause. Yet.”

Miller kept his expression professional, not allowing even a hint of sympathy to show. No need to embarrass the man about what he must have endured in his own nightmare. Wyndham-Pryce's lab. Christ. He hoped the man hadn't been to scarred by whatever torture he'd endured there. “Any relation to our investigation of Rupert Giles?”
“Not as far as we can tell. He's been focused on that minor wizard who came to town, Ethan Rayne. Although, given that Rayne is a Chaos mage, there could be some involvement.”

“Could this be a distraction? Has he tried to flee?”

“The nightmares have disrupted our investigation, but our best evidence puts Giles in the high-school. You'll be informed as soon as we have anything new. We have made progress elsewhere however. We may know why Giles broke into that local Catholic mission, Nuestra Señora de La Paz Perpetua. We believe he obtained a magical item, an amulet, referred to in the texts as the Amulet of Dominion Over the Line of Aurelius. It purportedly allows a spell-caster to strengthen or weaken any or all vampires of the Aurelian line. Even I had believed it to be no more than a legend but according to Fazal's research, the Church hid it in the tomb of Junipero Ferrer. It's all here, sir.” Edward handed a file over.

Miller stared at the folder without opening it. “If Giles can control the Aurelians …”

“Yes, sir. He's more dangerous than we'd thought.”

* * *

Giles' footsteps echoed in the empty hallways. He peered into a classroom to find overturned desks, scattered books, no people though, not even bodies. He checked another room, and then another. Based on the dust overlaying the havoc, the building had been abandoned for months if not years. “Buffy? Billy?” No reply. In fact, he heard nothing outside of an odd humming that seemed to come from the ceiling but that was only the florescent lights, buzzing as they flickered between on and off before finally choosing off. No, that couldn't be right. Lights couldn't choose to turn themselves off. It had to be a mechanical failure.

In the darkness – and shouldn't there be light coming in through the windows? – Giles couldn't see the hallways but the air held a different feel, more expansive as if he were in a larger space. The bland antiseptic scent of the hallways had given way to the slightly sweet stench of food decaying in bins. Had he gotten turned around and stepped outside somehow without noticing? He could be near the bins behind the school but he wouldn't expect so many rats to be scuttling about and how had it gotten to be so dark this early in the afternoon?

Rupert, reaching for a wall, felt the roughness of brick and yanked his hand back before reaching out again. This wasn't the smooth, painted over plaster of the high-school hallways, but it had to be. He would have remembered passing through a doorway. He must still be in the high-school, but the air felt cold, chillier than it ever did in southern California. Rupert wrapped his hands around his arms and startled at the cool smoothness of leather. No, he'd been wearing a suit, one of the Italian pieces Giles had left in his closet. The suit, smooth, yes, but almost cold in its elegance didn't provide this musky-scented comfort he felt under his hands.

Light flared in the distance. He couldn't hear the school alarm, but he wouldn't, not here. He took two steps back, taking in the Turkish dive and head shop that must have been torn down decades ago. Ahead, far past the intersection, he saw his old flat: the end terrace, the boarded-up porch, the dead pot plants, all burning, breaking down to dust and ash. His stomach dropped. Ethan couldn't be here, could he? Trapped in that inferno? No, they'd lived there years ago, decades ago. Ethan had no reason to be there and yet … Rupert glanced down at Ripper's jacket, white t-shirt, and jeans. Here he was, why not Ethan as well?
Buffy stepped into the intersection, but it wasn't Buffy, was it? Or not Buffy alone. The greenish tinge to her skin, the pointed ears … Eyghon had taken her or been given her. In her hands, the demon held a weapon, red with a curved blade at one end and a stake at the other. Damn, Giles had done it. He'd given the Slayer line to Eyghon. Damn him! Rupert knew Giles had done it to protect him, but it wasn't worth betraying the world.

“I have a present for you.” Even with his Slayer before him, corrupted by the demon, Giles breathed a sigh of relief. Death would come as a blessing. Rupert would finally be safe from Eyghon. The demon laughed. Of course it would laugh as it killed him. It had everything it wanted. It stepped aside. Ethan's body lay broken on the ground. “I wanted you to see, to watch as I killed him slowly, Watcher, but I couldn't wait to squeeze the life out of him.”

“Damn you!” Ripper shouted. Giles cursed Ripper for calling Ethan to him. He'd thought Rupert had to be protected all those years, but Ripper was the weak one. Rupert'd never been selfish enough to call Ethan. No, it'd taken Ripper to be such a bloody fool. Rupert dropped to his knees at Ethan's side. The corpse wasn't the Ethan of his youth, but the man he'd become, older but no wiser. Ethan's gut had been slashed open, one clean strike, quick at least, and his intestines had spilled to the ground, glistening darkly in the light of the flames. Ripper kissed Ethan's hand. “I'll join you soon.”

Although he'd only thought the words, Buffy's dark laughter rang out. He could feel an answering laughter in his head, the Eyghon in his mind echoing the Eyghon in Buffy's body. The demon spoke in his thoughts: *come.*

Walking beside the demon, Giles felt as if he'd stepped out of time. As Eyghon flicked the Scythe, buildings fell, rumbling as they crashed in on themselves. Giles' gut clenched at the screams but he'd known there'd be a price to pay. He'd pay anything to protect Rupert.

They came to a park, not the sunny greenness of more innocent days but a bleak wasteland, cracked cement surrounded by grass that had gone dry and brown. The fountain, a classical image of Poseidon, had been toppled and lay in five broken chunks. The park wasn't empty but crowded with men, women, and children. Each one had been scarred with jagged cuts all in the same design: Eyghon's mark. They cowered as Eyghon stepped into view. “My worshippers.” Buffy's arms spread out as if to encompass the crowd. Stepping forward, she lifted a full grown man, holding him high above her as his feet scrambled for traction. She threw him, tossing him aside. Giles heard bones crack. Buffy turned to face Giles. Her eyes glowed green. “But worshippers need a priest to lead them.”

“You bloody bastard,” Ripper shouted. “That wasn't the deal. You're meant to kill me. Rupert doesn't live to see this.”

“But tormenting you is such fun.”

Rupert turned and ran. The demon's voice rang in his thoughts: *You can't escape. I'm in you. There's nowhere you can hide that I can't find you.*

Giles thrust Rupert aside, protecting him to the end. As he ran, the flames grew brighter and steadier. The blaze of burning buildings gave way to cream-colored walls. Clear plastic sheets hung in his way. Giles tore through them. He heard laughter, but not Eyghon's. As he dove through another plastic sheet, a body came flying at him. He scrambled out of the way as the clown fell backwards, dropping to the floor. Xander stood before him, looking oddly triumphant. “Come on.” They ran, passing the last of the plastic sheeting to find Willow garbed in a blue silk kimono and when had she … Oh, Gods, yes. Ethan!

Giles could hear Xander – I feel good! I feel liberated! – but only as a background buzz as he held
Ethan in his arms. Ethan, grinning, held a hand to his face. “Hello, my dear.”

Ripper crushed him close and brought his lips down to Ethan's in a savage kiss. The children complained behind him. “Ew, gross.” and “Is this what he meant by friends?”

“Um, don't you think we should do something about all this?” Rupert broke away from Ethan to see Willow gesturing vaguely at, well, everything.

“The little girl's right,” Ethan said.

“Hey!”

Ripper pulled out a cig. “And just what do you think we can do about it?”

Ethan looked startled and stared intently at him and Giles could see him working out the personality shifts. “Weren't we going to wake that boy?”

“Buffy,” Willow interjected. “We should find Buffy.”

“And I'm thinking we could start with that cemetery.” Across the street, the sunny skies above the high-school gave way to a night covered graveyard.

“You mean the one where it's night?” Ethan asked with a gulp in his voice.

“Right, come on then.” Ripper started for the cemetery. If they were going to do this, they should just do it and not dither about.

They found the grave right off: Buffy Summers 1981 – 1998. “Whose nightmare is this?”

Rupert knelt by the grave and ran two fingers along the headstone. The stone itself felt slick and finished but the carved words were rough under his fingers. “Mine.” But given what Giles had planned for the Slayer, perhaps death had come as a blessing.

Giles' knuckles whitened as he clenched his fists. Damn! The Slayer, his best chance of protecting Rupert from Eyghon, had gotten herself killed. He'd have to fall back on Potentials but that had always been a contingency, more of a desperate idea than an actual plan.

A hand burst up through the dirt, stretching in the air as if searching for something to grab onto. Eyghon digging Buffy's corpse out of the grave? No, the hand was fully human. Ripper held his out, allowing the hand to grab on, and yanked. What came out of the grave … It was Buffy, but it wasn't. The vampires had gotten to her first.

“Buffy, your face.”

A Slayer with vampires enhancements. She'd be strong enough to hold Eyghon but the vampire controlling her wouldn't exactly want to share. Giles'd have to think that through later. They had higher priorities at the moment. “We have to stop Billy. Buffy, do you think you can hold yourself together?”

“I'll try, but we should hurry. I'm getting hungry.”

“Oh, this is just delightful,” Rupert, hearing the fear underneath Ethan's snark, took his hand and give it a reassuring squeeze.
Ethan would have preferred to avoid the coppers altogether but the children were determined to hand over Billy's baseball coach themselves. Even with Giles' memories of Sunnydale denial, Ethan was almost shocked by how few questions they asked. Watching minions of law and order acting like bumbling idiots, well, it was unexpectedly disturbing.

When the boy had woken, Ripper's leather jacket had vanished, leaving Giles in his suit. Ethan couldn't feel disappointed, not given how sharp Giles looked, but seeing Ripper in the leather had felt pleasantly nostalgic. Perhaps he could invite Ripper out to play once they'd ditched the children. It was only fair. He'd already spent time with Rupert and Giles after all.

They were about twenty feet from Giles' delight of a roadster when Buffy shouted, “Shotgun!”

“No you don't,” Ethan called back. “I'm sitting with Ripper.” He expected Giles to frown or raise an irritated brow at his old nickname but instead the man smiled pleasantly at Ethan.

“You let me sit there on the way here.” The stubbornness in that girl's voice could bend steel.

“And you'll find that anytime you're a vampire I will be unusually accommodating.

“Buffy,” Willow said, “He is Giles' boyfriend. That sort of means he gets the front seat.”

“He's what?”

Ah yes, the Slayer hadn't been around for that reveal. Ethan pointedly paused to grin before sliding into the front seat. The girl's stare, which suggested she was reevaluating not only Ethan but Ripper as well, gave him pause. Did she honestly think so little of Ripper that this minor reveal would upset her?

Willow and Xander had already clambered into the back. Xander bravely but foolishly called out, “Come on, Buffster. If you sit back here, I can wrap my arms around both my favorite girls.”

Rather than tear the boy's arms off, Buffy climbed into the back. Ethan could feel her staring. Xander, apparently realizing he'd gone too far, changed the topic. “So, rest of the day off? No more school? We did save the world. Shouldn't we get a 'get out of school free' card?”

“But Xander, we'll miss biology and we won't get to dissect the frogs.”

“Willow.” The boy sounded terribly serious. “You hate frogs.”

“Which is why I want to cut them up. So I'm sure there's one less frog in the world.”

“What's that, Giles?” Buffy asked, playing along with the lighthearted banter. Ethan could still feel her eyes on him though. “We've already faced down today's apocalypse. No patrolling? I can take the night off?”

“Certainly. Good idea.”

The girl's gaze grew more intense. Ethan could feel it like laser beams on the back of his neck and wished he could believe himself the cause of Giles' distraction, but it was more likely the man had turned his thoughts to Angelus. Still, if she was going to blame Ethan, he should at least get some fun out of it. He casually draped one hand on Giles' thigh.
Giles, blinking back to the present, raised and kissed Ethan's hand. “Later. I can't shift with your hand in the way of my stick.”

There were so many replies Ethan could make, but he just smiled as Giles tore back to the high-school. Once they'd parked, the children ran off like bats out of hell, presumably to gossip about Giles' new – well old, really, but they wouldn't know that – lover.

“Perhaps you should head home.”

Oh no you don't. “I could help with the spell, you know. The Angelus who broke the circle practically told you he was a figment of your imagination, your fears given form. The real vampire won't know where the amulet is. It'll be perfectly safe.”

“It won't be safe!” Giles spoke but some of Ripper's rage came through, not that Ethan was about to let either of them intimidate him. Giles had kept him at bay, in a vain attempt to protect him, for far too long.

“I'm not a child, Ripper.” He used the nickname to remind Giles that Ripper had always been the reckless one. Ethan liked his skin too much to take careless risks.

“This doesn't concern you. It's Watcher business. I'll thank you to keep out of it.”

“If it were Watcher business, the Council would know what you're up to. This has nothing to do with the Council. You can't wrap me in plastic and bring me out like a toy at your convenience.”

All the anger deflated out of Giles. The man seemed to cave in on himself. Ethan found himself staring into the eyes of a frightened child. “Ethan, in my nightmare you were …” He choked back a sob. “You were dead, Ethan. You're the one thing right in my life. Please. I can't risk you.”

Damn. How the hell was he supposed to answer that? “Right. Fine.” His time would be better spent researching domination, working out how to get Eyghon out of Giles' head. Ah, and where better to research? “I'll wait for you at the mansion.”

“The mansion. You can't. The barrier spell would …”

Ethan watched as Giles realized they'd shared enough of themselves in the enjoinment spell that the barrier spell would recognize Giles' energy within Ethan. There was nothing of Giles' that Ethan couldn't touch. “Don't keep me waiting long, dearheart.”

* * *

Angel tore through the tunnels, barely noticing the rats skittering behind the walls as he moved far enough from the Master's lair for the creatures to feel safe. He kept his mind blank, determinedly skimming away from thoughts he didn't want to face, until he'd shut the steel door, locking himself in a room only a little larger than a closet. The room, a hideout he'd found after moving to Sunnydale but had never used, offered two exits, the door and a manhole cover leading up to another tunnel, but nothing else. He'd abandoned his books – Browning Shakespeare, Byron, Tennyson – his art – Ivar Mendez' image of a man falling against a wall of shame, a triptych of Mary Magdalene standing before an empty tomb, Ansel Adam's image of a stark tree's desiccated leaves shivering in the wind against a barren landscape – and his blood. Someone had activated the Aurelian Amulet. He couldn't return to his rooms.
He fell to the floor, pulling his knees to his chest. He shut his eyes against Buffy's face, that demon mask the Master had given her. The first time he'd seen her, she'd been so innocent, naive perhaps, but confident, no, more than confident. Hopeful. And now she'd become a monster, a creature that would seek out that same hope and destroy it. But how could Buffy have been stupid enough to attack the Master's lair?

Buffy had been turned the same day the Amulet of Dominion had been activated. That couldn't be a coincidence. Had her Watcher gotten his hands on the amulet? Had he sent her to kill the Master? But if that were true, how had the amulet's spell been broken? Surely the man knew enough to keep an eye on the spell until Buffy had returned from her assignment. Had he been distracted? Could Xander have blundered in or …

Willow. She had that same innocence. Newly turned vampires attacked their closest friends and family. He had to warn Willow, warn them all. Angel leaped to his feet, fumbled at the lock on the door, and crashed to the cool concrete. The amulet had been reactivated. Did that mean the Watcher knew, that he was going after the Master … and Buffy … himself? Even with the strength of both her Slayer and vampire lines, she wouldn't be a match for this curse. Good. Buffy would have hated what she'd become.

* * *

Giles glanced at the time. The current set of classes wouldn't break up for another fifteen minutes. Good. Nothing barred his way to the basement. He stopped just this side of the door. Nothing barred his way except for the police tape blocking the basement door. Well, at least that hadn't been part of someone's nightmare. With a quick glance down either side of the hallway, he ducked under the tape. He barely noticed the stairs, the boiler room, and the dank tunnels. Would the spell still be in place? Had Angelus merely been a nightmare phantasm or had the vampire actually broken the circle?

Giles turned the final corner. Light shone from the room where he'd performed the spell. Giles dashed down the tunnel, only stopping once he'd reached the doorway. The amulet glowed. Its waning moon shone with the power to weaken the line of Aurelius but Giles paused and reconsidered. After facing Angelus in this same room, he couldn't shake the feeling that the spell had failed, that confronting the vampire would be the death of him but confronting an Aurelian was the only sure way to determine if the spell was working. Giles wasn't about to put himself at risk. He went looking for Tucker.

He found the lad at his locker but was almost shocked to see that he wasn't alone. How the hell had a git like Tucker gotten a pretty piece like that to stand still while he chatted her up? She wouldn't be difficult to ditch. She couldn't be impressed by Tucker's anecdotes of fighting at Willy's. It was hardly likely she even believed them. Wait, was the little shit telling her he'd fought demons? “Mr. Wells.”

The lad had the good sense to look abashed but only for a moment. Donning bravado like an ill-fitting suit of armor, he glanced at the girl as if looking for approval before strutting over.

Oh, Giles did not have time for this. “Your books have been overdue for a good two months. The complete set of Little House on the Prairie? We need to discuss their return. Follow me, please.” Now that he thought of it, the high-school's library almost certainly did not carry Mrs. Wilder's books, but that hardly mattered. His words had rattled the lad, and that had rather been the point.
“Hey! I never …”

“Now.” Giles didn't shout but the authority behind the word shut the boy down.

Tucker glanced at the girl whose wildness – the punk look did constitute wildness in the younger set, yes? – seemed more practiced, more deliberately chosen, than Tucker's desperate need for affirmation.

Staring into a compact, not catching Tucker's eye, she seemed so focused on touching up her lipstick that it was hard to believe she’d heard them although she couldn't have missed a word. She shut the compact with a loud snap. “I gotta go. You have fun with teacher.”

“I'll see you later, right?” Tucker called after her. “At the cemeter …” With a guilty glance toward Giles, he rephrased. “At our usual place?”

“Maybe.” Tucker wilted under her indifferent shrug and turned on Giles.

“What the hell did you do that for? I've never read that prairie crap.”

As they'd been talking, the halls had cleared of students. Grabbing the lad's arm, Giles dragged him toward the basement. “I have a little job for you. Something that'll actually impress the bird.” If you survive.

“Bird? You mean Mandy?”

Giles let the lad stew on impressing the girl until he'd closed the basement door behind them. “There's a nest of vampires. I need you to kill them.”

The lad paled and would have bolted if Giles weren't blocking the way.

“Don't worry. It's perfectly safe. I've weakened them with magic.” Assuming the spell was actually working. “They've been immobilized.” The lad startled as if he didn't recognize the word. Gods, what did they teach children in the States? “They can't move. All you have to do is waltz in and shove a stake through their hearts.”

Tucker, displaying more sense than Giles had credited him with, didn't seem convinced. “You gotta be shitting me. The last time you sent me out …”

“Weren't you just telling Mandy you'd taken on three Fyarl single handed at that very same bar? It would be a shame if someone gave her the true details of that night.” Giles continued quickly before Tucker could object to the threat. “I meant what I said. The vampires won't be a threat. I admit that I overestimated your skills last time. I won't make that mistake again.”

Tucker glared uncertainly. Puzzled, not quite certain he'd been insulted, Giles' threat fell from his conscious thoughts into his unconscious mind where it would be more effective, where it would convince him that he needed to defeat a real monster to win the girl.

“I'm sure the tale, with proper elaborations, will impress Mandy especially given that these stories won't be fallacious.” The lad, apparently confused by the big words, glared. “I mean that she'll be more likely to believe you and be impressed by your stories if they actually happened.”

Giles decided it wasn't worth upsetting the lad by describing the Master. “You can take out the others as well, but make sure you kill the oldest vampire you see.” As the boy vanished into the dark tunnel, stake in hand, glancing about nervously and jumping at every shadow, Giles thanked the Gods for the hormone-induced stupidity of teenage boys.
Giles stood in the tunnel, keeping half an eye on the spell's components as he waited for Tucker to return. The waxing moon in the Aurelain Amulet hadn't stopped glowing which meant the spell should still be in effect. If the lad did survive killing the Master and his minions, Giles could finally destroy Angelus. The vampire's disappearance would upset his Slayer, but better than her betrayal and death at Angelus' hands.

Tucker returned more quickly than Giles had anticipated, whooping and hollering as he bounded, half-dancing, through the tunnels. Gods, did he have no discretion whatsoever? The lad raised his hand as if expecting Giles to return the high-five. “Dude! That was fly. Those guys dusted like a basket of puppies.”

“You killed the Master?”


“Uh, which one was that?”

“Skin paler than the rest. Blood red eyes. Ears pointed like those of a bat.”

“The gnarly one? Yeah.”

Giles twisted his hand, choking off the lad's air. Tucker's fingers pulled against his hand. Giles released his grip but only slightly.

“Yes! I mean, yes sir. He's dead. I killed him.”

Giles dropped the lad, letting him scramble to his feet. The punch slammed Tucker's head into the wall, knocking him out. Giles couldn't risk Tucker interfering with the spell while he hunted Angelus.

As he dropped the lad, pain, sharp as a blade, jabbed through his brain. “Mine,” Eyghon's voice spoke in his head.

“I'm not killing him. I just knocked him out.”

“Mine,” Eyghon growled again.

“Fine,” Giles sighed. “I'll drag him back to safety.” As if the high-school were safer than these tunnels, but arguing with the demon would only get him a migraine. It wouldn't take long to drop the boy in the nurse's office and Angelus wasn't going anywhere, not while that spell was in effect.

The drive to Angelus' apartment seemed to take forever. The lights were against him and some idiot pulled out against a red, forcing Giles to slam his breaks. “Idiot!”

He hated leaving his Volante near the Bronze. It wasn't the best of neighborhoods but Giles, even after only a few months, did have something of a reputation with the criminal element. He doubted the car would be disturbed and even if it was, it'd be a small price to pay for removing the vampire.

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Unlike most vampires, Angelus lived above the ground in the top floor of an abandoned building. The door swung open at his touch. Ignoring the objects d'art, he scanned the room. “Angel? Are you here? Buffy's in trouble. I need your help.” The rooms were empty. Damn. When the Angelus of his nightmares had broken the circle, it must have temporarily disabled the spell. The vampire wasn't stupid. He'd have realized an attack was imminent. He wouldn't be returning to his lair. Giles didn't know where to begin looking but couldn't leave it like this. He had to find and kill Angelus.

* * *

Ethan stood in the doorway and stared at Giles' library, not the sham on display in the high-school but his true library, the one hidden in his mansion. It was immaculate. Ethan felt the urge to roll his eyes. His own troves of miscellanea tended towards stacks, rising like towers from tables and floors, organized not by any formal system but dumped onto any convenient space when he was done with them.

Giles' shelving system would make his search easier but it was so structured that it made Ethan's skin itch. He had to get past that. He had to find a way to remove Eyghon from Rupert's mind. Doubtless the demon wouldn't give him much time.

He stepped into the room and scanned the shelves, wondering where to start. The thought hit him like lighting striking out of the blue. His legs went weak. He scrambled for the armchair. The Council didn't believe Domination could be cured and they, being the primary group researching demons, had written almost all the articles and texts on the subject. None of Giles' books could help him.

He sat up again. No, he wasn't about to let this stop him, not after he'd learned that Ripper loved him. He'd just have to get creative. Lucky thing that. He was good at creative.

Too bad he couldn't just kill the demon. That chit Giles was training up could knock the demon down in two seconds flat, if it were incarnate. Wouldn't work though. Part of Eyghon dwelled in some damned demon realm. It'd have to be killed there, wherever the hell there was. Driscoll's translation of Nikomedes' *On Demons* was the most complete compendium in Giles' collection. It was a dull and drab slog of a book and Ethan didn't look forward to reading it but figured he could start there if nothing better came to mind.

He could shield Giles to keep the demon at bay. Ethan giggled at the thought of Giles in a tinfoil hat, not that anything so mundane would work. It would take magic, more magic than Ethan had but Giles' little witch would be up to it. Perhaps. No, even if Willow did have enough power to shield Giles, Eyghon would eventually find a way through any kind of shield.

Giles' death might break the bond although there'd be the tiny problem of bringing Giles back to life. That sounded exactly like the kind of trick the Council would try. Ethan could just see them lining up human subjects and linking demons to their minds before killing and reviving them to see if the human was still enthralled to the demon. Ah, except the Council didn't know how to determine if a demon was attached to a human mind. Giles knew but hadn't, for obvious reasons, shared that bit of research with them. Watchers were pragmatic bastards anyway. They'd just kill the human, figuring it better to destroy one life than risk letting a demon lose.

Right, Nikomedes' *On Demons* it was. Ethan found the book and settled down for a long and tedious read. He paused in disgust at Driscoll's translation of the dark abyss as the eternal netherworld where
souls are devoured by fire. Could the man not keep his Christian upbringing out of his scholarship? Yes, χάος could mean abyss or darkness but a more reliable translation would be chaos or the primal state of the universe.

The front door slammed. As Ethan returned the book to its shelf, no need to let Eyghon in on where his research was taking him, Giles's shout of damn it was followed by a muffled thump, the sound of something being hit. Ethan broke into a run and found Giles in the foyer next to a wall with a fist-sized hole.

“Dearheart?” He felt a thrill at saying the word and knowing it was true, that Giles loved him. “I take it Angelus isn't dead?”

“He wasn't home.”

“But it was still daylight when you performed the spell, yes?” Ethan's eyes widened in sudden understanding. “When you met Angelus in the tunnels, your nightmare version of Angelus I mean, and he broke the circle, that broke the spell, didn't it? Angelus, the real Angelus, knew someone was coming for him.”

Giles slammed the side of his fist into the wall, not even tearing the wallpaper much less punching a hole through it this time. “I can only hope that Buffy considers the source when he tells her that I plan on giving her to Eyghon.”

Ethan reached out and rested his hands on either side of Giles' face. “Dearheart, Angelus doesn't know. You saw a nightmare. He even said so himself. He told you that nightmares are taking over, that your fear let him in. Angelus doesn't know that you're planning on giving your Slayer to Eyghon.”

“You can't be sure of that.”

Giles sounded hopeful as if he wished Ethan could be sure. “Trust me. He doesn't know about Eyghon. All he knows is that someone activated Aurelian Amulet against him. Wait.” Ethan paused and considered. “You did end the spell, yes? I mean, Angelus isn't still lying somewhere unable to move?”

Giles pinched the bridge of his nose before looking up. “Yes, I ended the spell.”

Of course he had. If Giles hadn't shut it down, the spell would have drained and killed Willow, and then the spell would have ended anyway. Giles valued his little witch's power too much to risk her on something that wouldn't keep the vampire down for good. “Then he's long gone,” Ethan said. “Angelus has left Sunnydale.”

* * *

Angel, paralyzed by the amulet’s power, sat frozen in place, propped up by the wall he’d fallen against hours ago. He had nothing to distract him from his thoughts.

Buffy'd been Turned. Nothing he could do would save her. Even with both Slayer and vampire strength, she'd have been weakened by the spell. She'd be easy prey. Anyone smart enough to unearth the Aurelian Amulet and use it would be prepared. Buffy was dust. He was almost certain of it, but that small doubt drove his thoughts forward.
If she were gone … Angel choked on the thought. That bright light snuffed out like a match? No, he couldn't think that way. Even if her body'd survived, she'd become a monster. If she were merely dead, he'd be free to grieve but she was worse than dead. The Buffy he'd known – loved – wouldn't want her friends or family to suffer. The vampire she'd become would have gone for them first but after being weakened by the spell, she'd want revenge on those who'd harmed her. She'd want the amulet for herself. That would give him a window. He could warn Willow, Buffy's mother, and even that bumbling boy who was always hanging around. He could warn her Watcher.

He'd try the Bronze first. At home, her friends were safe. No, they weren't safe but they were safer at home. Buffy could get into the Bronze. She couldn't enter homes without an invitation. Willow, even in her innocence, was smart. She wouldn't invite Buffy in. She's see something, some small discrepancy, and know Buffy'd been Turned. She'd shut the door to keep the vampire out. But at the Bronze, there'd be no door to shut.

With his decision made, Angel's heart shattered. He felt as if shards of glass were cutting him as grief overwhelmed him. No, he couldn't give in. He had to be ready. The spell couldn't hold forever. Once it ended, he'd have to act fast to save Buffy's friends.

Angel never knew how long he'd sat there before the spell ended. One moment he was as weak as a kitten, weaker really, and the next moment power surged through him. He ran for the Bronze.

He shoved his way through the doors, ignoring the bouncer, scanning the room, and saw the boy first, in the center of the crowded floor, twitching and jerking as if being shocked by a cattle prod. Was this how kids danced now? None of the others moved that spasmodically.

When he saw Willow sitting alone, Angel realized he had no idea how to tell her that Buffy'd been Turned. How would she react? Would she cry? What would he do if she cried?

She looked up as he approached the small table. “Oh. Angel, hi.”

He had to tell her before Buffy appeared. “Willow, um, Buffy's been Turned.” At the girl's blank stare, he added, “Buffy's a vampire.”

“Oh, you saw her too?”

He fell into a chair as he took in her words. “You knew? You've seen her?” Why would Buffy have let Willow live?

“Well sure, this afternoon at the cemetery. Well, no, it's not really a cemetery. I mean it was a real cemetery, across from the high-school, but it's gone now.”

Her words made no sense. There was no cemetery across from the high-school. Angel shook her nonsense away. He didn't know what game Buffy was playing, but he had to convince Willow that Buffy was dangerous. “You weren't afraid?”

“No.” She drew out the word. “Well, okay, maybe a bit at first and, you know, also when she said she was getting hungry, that was a bit icky to think about, but then were all in the hospital and …”

“Hospital? Was someone hurt?”

“Um, I suppose Billy had been, what with being in a coma and all, but he seemed okay when he came out of it.”

This was getting him nowhere. “Willow, I don't know what Buffy's told you, but she's dangerous.”
“Well of course she's dangerous. I mean, being the Slayer and all, she'd have to be.”

“No. Willow, you can't trust her.” She stared at him. Good, he was getting through to her. “Vampires don't have souls. She may sound like your friend, but Buffy's gone. The demon that controls her might have her memories, but it isn't Buffy.”

“Oh. Oh! You don't know. Buffy's not a vampire anymore.”

“Willow …” He didn't know what to say.

“It was part of the whole nightmare-realm thing. It was Buffy's worst nightmare, being made into a vampire, Turned I mean, but now that the nightmare-realm is gone, she's Buffy again, I mean Buffy-Buffy and not vamp-Buffy although vamp-Buffy was a lot like Buffy-Buffy.”

“Nightmare-realm?”

“Yeah, um, it's sort of hard to explain but there was this boy and he was in a coma and he brought this nightmare-realm to life so everybody was living out their worst nightmares and, oh, maybe you had a nightmare too.” She sounded perky as if a vampire's nightmares wouldn't be a horror show. “Oh, you probably did, when you saw Buffy as a vampire I mean, unless you saw her in that cemetery that isn't there now. You weren't in a cemetery when you saw her, were you?”

“Willow, I still don't know about the nightmare-realm.”

“Oh, right. I was, um, talking about how everyone was living out their nightmares?”

She stared up at him. Angel, not sure what she wanted, nodded.

“Okay,” she said. “So we went to the hospital and woke Billy and he confronted his, um, but that wasn't a nightmare. I mean, it was a nightmare, a monster, but it was also the man who'd put Billy into the coma. When he confronted the monster, or man I guess I should say, that ended the nightmare and everything's okay again.”

“You're sure Buffy's not a vampire?”

“Oh, yeah, we drove back from the hospital in Giles' car and then her Dad was there, at the school I mean and not in Giles' car, and she was hugging her Dad. It was nice.” She must have seen something in Angel's expression because she added, “She was in the sun, not only on the way to Giles' car but also at the school when she saw her Dad. Buffy was totally in the sun and not bursting into flame or, uh, whatever vampires do in sunshine.”

After seeing Buffy as a vampire, Angel found it hard to believe Buffy was alright, but Willow seemed certain. Wait, after school, Willow'd said Buffy had seen her father after school. The Aurelian Amulet had been activated, the second time, before classes had ended. “When were you at the hospital?”

“What?”

“The spell, that nightmare-realm curse, when did you break it?”

“Oh, uh, it ended around one? No, more like one-thirty or maybe one-twenty-five?”

The Aurelian Amulet had first been activated, weakening him momentarily, around noon and had ended almost immediately. The second activation had started around two and had continued for hours. The first activation could have been a nightmare, but not the second. He was still in danger.
“Where's Buffy. I need to talk to her.”

“Well, talking to her's gonna be difficult until Monday, oh, or maybe Sunday night, unless you want to call her.” Willow seemed to notice his confusion. “She's in LA with her Dad.”

“Right. LA. Ice skating.”

Willow's grin suggested she was relieved she hadn't been delivering bad news, but the news couldn't be worse. The Aurelian Amulet had been activated. Buffy had left Sunnydale, left him alone and defenseless when he couldn't protect himself. Angel knew he wasn't being fair. Buffy didn't know about the amulet, but he needed her and she'd gone.

“Do you need to talk to her right away 'cause I can give you her Dad's number but I'm not sure how he'd be about a guy calling …”

“No, it can wait.”

“Oh, good. Do you want to hang here? I mean, Xander's here with me, but he sort of got up to dance and there's no one to really talk with. Not that I need to talk. I can sit here, by myself, but if you wanted to stay, you could.”

“No, I need to check … There's something.” Angel didn't tell her where he was heading. Willow thought everything was fine. He wasn't about to lay his burden on a child.

Angel wanted to run, but he couldn't draw attention to himself. He wanted to drop down the first manhole, but traps may have been laid-out this close to his home. He took a rambling path, one that allowed him to ensure that no one followed him, one that led him to a crypt. The gate was locked, a chain around the bars. He grabbed the chain in one hand and yanked. As he drew the gate open, the chain clattered against the ground. It wasn't discrete but he couldn't delay any longer.

Angel didn't handle loneliness well. Yes, he'd been alone for almost a hundred years, but that had been a burden, his punishment for the centuries of slaughter. The mere knowledge that his blood kin were still out there, doing evil certainly but alive and thriving, had kept him from total despair. Killing his Sire had been harder than Buffy would ever know.

And so, as he approached the Master's lair, Angel's footsteps slowed and he reached out his senses. On one hand, his caution could save his life. They'd kill him if the caught him. On the other, he hoped for some sound, any sign, that his fears were unfounded. The tunnels, though, echoed with nothing more than the scuttling of rats and the hush of worms digging through the earth. His heart felt heavy in his chest and he dreaded what he'd see when he turned that final corner.

Angel fell to his knees in the abandoned cavern. The piles of dust had no markers but over each and every one he saw his sister's grave. They'd been evil, they would have killed him on sight, but they'd been … Angel didn't want to use the word family to describe people he'd hated, but wasn't that what family was? People you were bound to even though you hated them?

Angel buried his head in his hands and wept.
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