Hindsight

Summary

"Give me another chance. I can fix it."

Notes

Get comfy. This could take some time.
At the moment the vampire dusted, she looked just like Willow.

She didn’t look like the monster who’d terrorized the world for the better part of a year. There was no indication that she’d gouged a hole in reality with powerful dark magicks to pull forth an army of demons. You would never guess she had personally killed thousands of people and caused tens of thousands more to be killed.

No, when she died, lit up from the inside by a blast that leveled a city block, she looked exactly like Buffy’s best friend, sweet freckled face tipped upward, eyes wide with shock.

Sometimes, the world-save-age gig totally sucked.

When Buffy felt that same silver fire light up in her own belly, felt the force of it drive her molecules apart in a million different directions—well, that sucked even more, but at least it was familiar. She had some experience with death.

God, that was an understatement, wasn’t it? Death was her gift, the first Slayer said. Her gift. Apparently, it hadn’t come with a gift receipt. If it had, it would have gone right the hell back to the store. She felt like laughing whenever she thought about it, unless it was one of those days when she felt like crying. She and death were intimately acquainted, although they hadn’t spent time together for a while. That’s how it is with old friends. You meet up again, even after years, and it’s like no time has passed at all.

This was her fourth death so...yeah...she had some experience.

This time was just like all the others. She recognized the moment of surprise, the final gasp, the feeling of surrender, and then the sweet, welcome peace that followed. It was all familiar and oddly comforting. You know, as death went.

The waiting room was new, however. Greige carpets—check. Off-white walls hung with tasteful yet generic art prints—check. Potted plants—check. Four-year-old magazines—check. People biding their time in stone-faced apathy—check. Definitely a waiting room. Buffy walked up to the receptionist’s window.

“Can I help you?” The receptionist blinked at her through cat-eye glasses, her bouffant coiffure hair-sprayed into immaculate obedience. There was cranberry colored lipstick on her teeth.

“Oh...” she said. “Summers...Buffy. I should...I think...um...” Oh, fuck it. What’s the worst that could happen? It’s not like they were going to kill her. “I have an appointment,” she lied firmly.

The woman opened an appointment book and flipped the pages, pursing her lips. Her nails were painted the same vivid red as her lips, and they curved like claws. “Have a seat. Matt will be with you shortly.” Huh. That was...way too easy. Not to mention kind of creepy. It raised more questions than it answered. Buffy just nodded and went to sit down.

She was halfway through a surprisingly engrossing article about adapting the twenty-twelve fall fashion line-up to the needs of the mature woman when she realized someone was calling her name.
“Right...uh...right there,” she said, dropping the magazine and bolting for the door. In her hurry, she tripped over the outstretched legs of the...man...in the chair next to hers. He didn’t make eye contact, but the rumbling growl he aimed at her made her stomach do backflips. What the hell was this place, anyway?

A young woman in blue scrubs led her down a hallway to a scale. “Hop on,” she said as she scribbled something on the chart in her hands.

“Should I take off my shoes?” Buffy asked. The woman rolled her eyes. “Okay, that would be a no.” Buffy stepped up on the scale. It was constructed like an ordinary mechanical scale—the kind you see in any doctor’s office—except that in place of a sliding weight there was a small platform with curved edges. The nurse reached into her pocket and retrieved a white feather, which she dropped onto the platform. The arm of the scale tilted but did not level.

“Hmm,” the nurse said, writing something else on the chart. Buffy craned her neck around, trying to get a look, but all she saw was the cover. It had the word “Duat” printed across it in capital letters. “Let’s get you into the exam room. Right over here.”

She waited alone in the antiseptic room, bouncing her heels idly against the metal base of the exam table like the hyperactive post-adolescent she appeared to be. There was a magazine rack on the wall, but it was empty. By the time she’d gotten bored enough to count the perforations in the ceiling tiles, the door opened. An elegant, dark haired woman wearing a white lab coat over a knee-length red dress walked into the room.

“Miss Summers?” the woman said, smiling warmly at Buffy. “I’m Ma’at.” There it was on her name tag, too. Not Matt. Ma’at, Egyptian goddess of the goddamned underworld, wearing an ankh on a fine gold chain around her neck, even. Buffy’s throat was very dry, all of a sudden. She swallowed hard. “Let’s see where we stand.” Ma’at flipped the chart open. “Well, it’s lucky you’re exempt from referral to Ammit, because I don’t like the direction these numbers are going.”

“Numbers?” Buffy leaned over to look at the chart. There was a list of statements, each beginning with the words, “I have not.” Some of them had check marks next to them. At the top of the page the number 19/42 was written in red ink and circled.

Ma’at tapped the chart with her pen. “The last time I saw you, right after your files were transferred to us, this was a thirty,” she said, flipping over the page and pointing to the older, much higher number. “I take your presence here to mean that you’re interested in making another effort?”

“Yes,” Buffy said. Where had that come from? It just came out of her mouth. She had no idea how she knew it, but it felt true. Was that how she had an appointment she didn’t remember making? And why was it all with the Egypt theme? “I am.”

Ma’at appeared to consider that for a moment. “You are an unusual case,” she said, looking over the chart again. She pulled a yellow highlighter from her pocket and marked the chart. “Your failures are...spectacular...but so are your successes.”

“Hey—if you’re gonna make a mistake, make a big one, right out loud, so we can all learn from it. At least, that’s what my choir teacher used to say, back in....” Ma’at did not look amused. “Sorry. Just a little joke...and not a very good joke, now that I think about it. That’s actually one of my biggest faults, saying stuff before I think about it, and I’m babbling, so I’ll just shut up, now.”

“In light of your service to the Balance,” Ma’at continued as though Buffy hadn’t spoken, “your request will be considered, provided I find no contraindications in your chart. Please—tell me what you’d like to do.”
Buffy took a deep breath to steady herself. Despite more than a hundred years of life, she was virtually unchanged from the girl who led the first Slayer army out of the ruins of Sunnydale. Because she looked so young, it was easy—too, too easy—to allow the human people in her life to underestimate her. Even Xander and Willow, who should have known better, fell into the habit as time wore on.

All the trips to other planes, originally meant to stretch the short lives of her friends over a longer part of hers, only exacerbated the problem. Three years here, five years there, another language learned, another fighting style mastered, another apocalypse averted and the would-be Big Bad foiled—every day spent in some high-velocity hell-world made her a little less human. Her eyes grew old, but her face didn’t.

Xander ran to fat, gray at his temples, behind a desk at his own construction company, which specialized in buildings with integrated wards and protection spells. Willow stayed spare and fit—her hair salon-dyed to its youthful strawberry because she didn’t use magic for trivialities anymore—all the better to attract a series of young lovers and acolytes who never stuck around long enough for Buffy to learn their names. Both of them became respectable, powerful thirty-somethings, with solid connections to the regular human world, while Buffy was still the Slayer.

With each passing year, they looked older and seemed younger, seemed slower, more mortal, more...limited...until there was nothing left to talk to them about. Eventually, she spent all her time with the surviving Slayers—and the demons who were their allies—and stopped seeing Xander and Willow altogether. During her rare interactions with humans, she acted as flighty and juvenile as they expected her to and let someone else—Giles, at first; other watchers, later—play the authority figure. She didn’t have to fight for their respect, that way. It was just easier. Away from mortal presumptions, she could behave like the century-old general she was.

Well, Ma’at was certainly not mortal. She was a god, ancient far beyond Buffy’s paltry hundred and fourteen years, and she deserved to be treated like one. It was time for Buffy to be the general. She had a proposal to make.

“Let me go back,” she said, and, again, the words just came, although she had no memory of thinking them prior to their emergence from her very own lips. It was entertaining, really, like watching a television drama. A great, explosive action sequence segued into an interesting plot twist, and this was the moment right before the big reveal. She hung on her own every word. “It doesn’t have to be that way. Give me another chance. I can fix it.” That was a bold statement, to be sure, but not quite as bold as the, “I will fix it,” that followed. Whoa. She couldn’t wait to see where this was going.

“You have considered the consequences?” Ma’at asked. Buffy couldn’t read her face.

“I have.” She had? When did that happen? Did a piece of the plot get sacrificed for an extra commercial break?

“What is your request, then?” Ma’at leaned toward her. “Specifically. You wish to return to the moment before your death?”

“No,” Buffy said. “Further back. I can prevent the necessity of my death.”

“This death? The previous death? This is...” Ma’at flipped the chart open. “This is the fourth. You were transferred to us in the midst of your...second.”

“My Champion...” she started. Ma’at laughed.
“The Champion you sacrificed?”

“Exactly. That’s the mistake that led to all the others. That’s what I want to fix. Return me to the moment he was first mine.”

“Done,” Ma’at said.

Chapter End Notes

For another perspective on Buffy's death, read "Silver Fire."
"Wonder what you did wrong? Too strong?" Spike taunted with a calculated smirk. *Come on, Slayer. Get angry. Give me a real fight. Dust me or die, but make up your mind." Did you bruise the boy?" He smacked her in the face with bone-jarring power. *Stop with the sop, Slayer. You’re better than this. Worth a thousand useless little college boys." Whatever; guess you weren’t worth a second go. Come to think of it, seems someone told me as much." He leered, watching the hurt and insecurity play across her pretty face. When her turmoil made her hesitate for just a second, he belted her again. He smelled blood.

"Who was that?" he sneered, pulling out the big guns. *If this didn’t piss her off, nothing would." Oh yeah. Angel—"

Vivid green rippled like ball lightening about the slender form of the Slayer and fanned outward in a shock wave, knocking Spike back several feet. When the wave dissipated, her eyes widened and her jaw went slack. "Spike?" she whispered. "When is...." She stared around wildly, at the campus and the bright sunlight and the green grass, before meeting his eyes in shock. "Oh. My. God. This far back? It was this far back?"

Before he could respond, she leapt at him, arms and legs splayed, and wrapped her body around his torso, chanting his name over and over again under her breath. He flailed a little before dropping to the soft grass. "You may just be the best looking man I have ever seen," she murmured, reaching up with one hand to stroke his ridged brow. "I mean, even your growly face is pretty, all sleek and golden and fierce—like a big cat." She continued stroking until he felt his face shift back to its human shape. "There we go. There's the blue. So bright." She sighed. "Sunlight suits you, you know?"

"Pretty? What—at sodding hell, Slayer?" he spluttered, struggling to get his hands up to her shoulders so he could push her off. "Is everything okay?" She didn’t budge. Had she always been this strong?

"Spike, I don’t think there are words in the English language to describe how okay everything is, right now." She ran her fingertips over his hands, paused on the ring that held the Gem of Amara. "I'm glad it’s now, glad you have the ring...." She blinked back tears.

"Something really, really huge just happened. I mean, completely ginormous. It’s beyond...." She fluttered her hands at the horizon. "It involves both of us. You and me. Can we call a truce so I can tell you about it?" When he didn’t answer, she wheedled, "Please, Spike. It’s gonna take a while to explain it all."

Spike made a token attempt at escape. "You’re not lettin’ me up ‘til I agree, are you?" He was completely immobilized, legs pinioned into the ground. He couldn’t even get enough leverage to give her trouble.

"Nope!" she said, popping the ‘p’ hard.

"Fine, then. Truce. But I need the whole story."

She let him go, unwound herself from him, and stood in one inhumanly smooth motion, before extending a hand to help him up. He took it and she pulled him to his feet, lifting him like he was no heavier than a toy. She was definitely not that strong before.
As they walked side by side across the courtyard, Buffy assessed her surroundings. She smiled and waved at a few of the passing students, turning to Spike to explain how she knew each one. "That’s Evan. He’s in my Lit class—or he will be. I’m not sure," or "That would be Holly. She’s Wiccan, but not a witch," or "That’s Jen. She survived Sunnydale High. Good with a crossbow."

She was so wrapped up in her explanations that she didn’t notice the arrival of three large, muscular young men, and she walked directly into one of them. "Ooh! Ow. God, I’m so sorry. I guess I’m just a klutz, today...oh, Riley!" she stammered as she looked up. "Hi!"

The big man grinned, revealing happy creases next to his blue eyes and dimples in his cheeks. "Hey, Buffy. Good to run into you." The men behind him exchanged amused glances.

Buffy covered her blushing face with her hands, grinning back through her fingers. "Yeah, I guess that did deserve a bad pun. Sorry," Buffy giggled. "I’m just so distracted, today. Excited, you know?" She twined her fingers with Spike’s, batting her eyes at him. "Riley, this is my friend William Pratt. I haven’t seen him in forever and he showed up today, completely out of the blue, to surprise me. Will, this is Riley Finn. He’s the TA for my psych class."

At the mention of the name he was given at birth, Spike went very, very still. He watched the Slayer out of the corner of his eye, trying to sort out the game she was playing. Nobody had that name. Oblivious to the tension, Riley stuck out his hand. "Good to meet you, Will. These are my buddies Forrest and Graham." The other men nodded. Once the round of handshakes had been completed, Riley said, "Gotta say, I don’t think I would have pegged the two of you as old friends. How’d you meet?"

Buffy giggled again and snaked her arm around Spike’s waist, underneath his black leather duster, before resting her head on his shoulder. "Guess you missed my rebellious phase, then. We were in a band. I played drums. Spike—Will, that is—he sang lead." Spike had to smile at her recycled story. "That’s so hard to believe?" Buffy raised her eyebrows. "Really, Riley, you shouldn’t be so quick to judge someone based on their appearance, ’cause you totally just underestimated Will, here. He’s really smart." She scrunched her mouth to the side prettily in perfect caricature of a So-Cal beach blonde. "He speaks oodles of languages. Went to Cambridge. Studied literature." She squeaked and spun to face Spike, taking both his hands and bouncing on her toes. "That’s what you could do! You could tutor! Would you stay in the States for a while if we could get you set up as a tutor?"

Buffy’s back was to the now disappointed-looking Riley. She maintained her bubbly demeanor, but her expression was serious. She nodded once and held his eyes. "Would you? Please?"

"We could," Spike answered slowly, "look into it, I s’pose. It’d be good to stay a while."

"Yay! I missed you so much!" Buffy squealed and bounced a little higher before throwing her arms around Spike’s neck and squeezing. She whispered so softly only he could hear, "Perfect. Thanks."

"Okay, guys. Will and I are gonna go catch up. Good to meet you Forrest, Graham. See you in class, Riley. Bye!" Buffy didn’t see the gut-punched look on Riley’s face as they walked away, but Spike
Buffy continued her previous exercise, pointing out and naming students until they were out of earshot of Riley and his friends. Then she asked Spike, "Those three guys—would you know them if you saw them again?"

"Pretty sure I would."

"I need you to be more than pretty sure. What if you couldn’t see their faces? Would you remember their scents?" She was in all-out Slayer Mode: eyes cold; voice flat; no wasted motion. Every inch a predator. A chill ran down his spine.

"Yeah, Slayer. I’d recognize ‘em, whether I could see ‘em or not. That what you need to hear?"

"Sure is." She nodded once. "Didn’t you wonder why we stood there so long? Sorry I couldn’t tell you what I was doing. You followed along okay, though. I forgot how good you were at that. So here’s what we accomplished. First, Riley and his boys saw you standing in direct sunlight. That is totally of the good. Second, we gave them a name and a background for you, fit you into the regular old human world. Third," her lips twitched, "we gave you a good reason to be hanging around on campus—ie, tutoring innocent, young, barely-verbal coeds. Fourth, we gave you the opportunity to memorize all three of them. That last one is the most important."

"Right. See that we did all that, like you say. Big question I have is why." He could be patient. He could. Slayer clearly had a plan going. She was setting it all up, careful and neat. He could see that. He took a deep, unnecessary breath and let it out slowly. Patient.

"Oh," she said. "Sorry. I should have said that first. Riley and his boys are commandos, working undercover for a top secret military organization called The Initiative, which is based in an underground facility here, beneath the campus. They capture demons and experiment on them, try to figure out what gives them their powers. The goal is to build demonically enhanced super soldiers. Oh, and to implant vampires with behavior-modifying microchips to make them into controllable, expendable weapons."

She opened a door and ushered Spike into a brightly lit, air conditioned room. "And I am not," she said, a dangerous edge to her voice, "going to let them have you."
Footage - Riley

Riley watched Buffy and Will walk away in the bright fall sunshine, laughing and chatting and holding hands. He wanted to hit something.


Forrest didn’t. “Nah. Plenty of fish in the sea. You are on a college campus in Southern California, my friend, and the party of the century is less than two weeks away.”

“Yeah?”

“You better believe it. It’s Halloween! There’ll be girls in bunny costumes, girls in devil costumes, and girls in cute pointed witch’s hats, long legs in striped stockings. There will be girls everywhere, and we’ll be the guys hosting the party!” He clapped Riley on the back. It was meant to be reassuring. It wasn’t.

Once inside Lowell House, they descended, via an elevator secured with biometric scanners, into the depths of the Initiative facility, shedding their college-boy personas as easily as they laid down their text books. That was reassuring.

Riley liked being part of the Initiative. He liked taking orders and giving them, being just one link in the chain of command, military through and through. It made him feel certain—like he was part of something bigger than himself. None of his problems were anywhere near as important as the Initiative’s mission.

And it was important. He didn’t fully understand what was going on in Sunnydale, but he knew enough to see how crucial it was to keep it contained. Some of the things he’d seen....

“Finn!” one of the surveillance guys shouted, jogging toward him down the hallway. “Hey, Riley! Wait up!”

He stopped.

“I got something for you.” The guy waved a file folder. He was panting, trying to catch up. Riley rarely got winded anymore. “These are stills from the video feed in the quad,” the guy said. “Got some new kind of daylight hostile. Don’t know what they are. Walsh says your team needs to take a look.”

“Will do, soldier.”

Riley didn’t have time to go through the file. He had a meeting with Maggie Walsh in just a few minutes. He flipped it open.

The photo on top was a blurry close up of two hostiles. The smaller of the two faced away. The larger one—a male, perhaps—snarled savagely into the camera, yellow eyes narrowed beneath the brutish brow ridge of a Sunnydale vampire.

Damn.

“Daylight?” Forrest looked over his shoulder. “My ass. That’s a vampire.”

“Yeah,” Riley said. “It is.”
“We got vampires that don’t fry in sunlight, now?” Graham blinked.

“Sure looks that way,” Riley said.

“On campus?” Forrest, again. “We got bloodsuckers on campus?”

“Yeah—look. I gotta meet Walsh five minutes ago,” Riley said. “Then I have a stack of papers to grade before class. This is officially your project.” He flipped the folder closed and thrust it at Forrest. “Let me know what you find out about vampires that sunbathe.”

Delegation. Authority. Every link in the chain connecting neatly to the next, unbroken from the highest rank to the lowest. Everyone doing their part in a seamlessly functioning unit.

Riley liked taking orders. He liked giving them, too.

Everything as it should be.

Yeah.
They entered the University Bookstore.

Buffy strode over to the racks of pens. "Ballpoint." She ran one manicured fingertip down the rows of blister packs. "Fine tip." She bent over to look more closely, displaying a toned and shapely backside. "And quick drying." She selected two pens and stood back up, brandishing them happily at Spike. "Midnight Blue," she chirped. "That’s for you. And Rainforest Green. That’s for me." She didn’t wait for a response, but turned toward the journals and blank books on the facing aisle. "You," she selected a butter-soft, black leather journal with silver-edged pages, "and me." She picked a fawn suede with a snap closure.

"Need anything else while we’re here? Notebooks, maybe?" She raised her eyebrows in mock innocence. "Rhyming dictionary?" Spike gawped at her. "Okay, so I was teasing, but do you need any of that stuff? I don’t know what you got away from Dru with and I’m, you know, buying."

"I am really going to need this whole story," he snarled, but he picked up a good dictionary, a thesaurus, a rhyming dictionary, and a handful of spiral bound notebooks, nonetheless. Buffy patted his shoulder.

"Okay," she said, after they checked out, "time to talk. Bronze alright? They have lousy beer, but good coffee and—oh hey! Those blooming onion thingies!"

Spike shrugged. "Never tried ‘em. Bronze’ll do."

"Wow! Really? You’ve never...ever?" He shook his head. "Well, it has to be the Bronze, then. Let’s go." She passed him the shopping bag and took his hand in hers, pulled it to her face for a moment, and brushed her lips against the back of it. Then she started walking.

Spike’s hands shook. Nothing about this whole day made any kind of sense. In one flash of green light, the Slayer had become...an entirely different person. Possession? He didn’t think so. She wasn’t that different. Her manner hadn’t changed; her inflection was the same, although her word choices were off, somehow. She was...he wasn’t sure. She knew more. Specifically, she knew more about him. She was stronger, faster, more confident. She moved like...well, like nothing he’d ever seen before. He thought she might be faster than him. If she were a vampire, he’d say she was a lot older.

He watched her as they walked. She seemed lighter than she had been since he’d first seen her dancing in The Bronze, years ago. She skipped through the Sunnydale afternoon like a kid at Disneyland. Every ordinary building and street sign captivated her. But every once in a while something different passed through her eyes. She looked...nostalgic, maybe; contemplative, certainly; serene and composed, like she had a deeper understanding of everything, although there was regret, too. Time had passed for Miss Buffy Summers. Yeah. Vampire or no, she was definitely older.

She was also quite pleased to have his company. She held his hand, letting their arms swing between them while she chattered. Sometimes, she would pause to drop her head onto his shoulder and smile sweetly up at him. It was affectionate. It was romantic. It was downright unsettling.

At The Bronze, she picked a table at the edge of the room near the stairs. "This," she said with a nod, "is our table." They had a table? She pulled the pens and journals out of the bag and set them out, tucking the bag out of the way on the floor between their chairs. To the waiter, she said, "Two full fat lattes, please, extra foam, and one of those blooming onion things. Oh, and could you bring the
cinnamon? Thanks so much!” She knew his coffee order? It was all too much, and he was starting to wear a little thin.

"So," he said, laying his palms flat on the table, "M not known for my patience. Feel like I’ve been more than fair, here. Went along with all the introductions an’ explanations an’ the sight-seein’. So now that we are sittin’ here, at our table, like you said, would you, if you please, Slayer, tell me what in bleedin’ hell is going on here?” He growled the last words at her, fixing her with a demon-eyed glare.

She set his journal and pen in front of him without reacting. Then she opened hers and wrote her name and phone number on the title page. "You should get your book open and your pen out. This is kinda complicated, and you’re gonna want to take notes." Patting his hand, she continued, "You should prob’ly drop the bumpies, too. Never plays well here, for some reason."

The waiter chose that moment to bring the lattes. He set the cinnamon in the middle of the table. "The onion will be out in a few moments," he said, looking everywhere but at Spike’s face. Boy was no more than a foot and a half from a master vampire in full demonic glory and he was all, "Here’s your coffee, sir, and some extra napkins," like absolutely nothing was out of the ordinary. No bleedin’ wonder it was so easy to hunt in Sunnydale.

Buffy started laughing as soon as the waiter walked away. "Oh. My. God!” she gasped between giggles. "That gets me every single time! You are...you...Spike, you’re a vampire!” She clutched her ribs. "My mom used to do that! Stuff would happen right," giggle, "in front," snicker, "of her and she would come up with these totally lame-ass explanations. Remember...remember when you showed up at the school? You and your whole pack of minions, all fangy and bumpy and obviously, you know, vampires?” Buffy laughed so hard that tears spilled from her eyes. "She hit you with an ax, for Pete’s sake. She was that close, but she still bought Snyder’s story about gangs on PCP!"

Spike’s mouth twitched despite his irritation. It was funny. "Never found another place wedged as deep in the muck of denial as Sunnydale," he said, giving the returning waiter a fang-filled leer. The waiter set the onion down on the table and practically sprinted away. Spike licked his lips. "Like shootin’ fish in a barrel."

Buffy nodded as she caught her breath. "It’s a miracle there’s anybody left here at all, isn’t it? There are moments I just want to let you eat them. All of them." She dismissed it with a wave. "I know, I know. Don’t say it. Sacred duty, and all that. Blah-dee-blah-dee-blah. Put your cinnamon in your coffee before it gets cold, sweetie," she said, sliding it over to him. He nodded and sprinkled an unholy amount of the spice into his latte, smiling as he inhaled the steam. When he pushed the shaker back toward her, she shook her head. "No thanks. Love cinnamon. Just not in my coffee."

She’d gotten the cinnamon for him. He wasn’t sure whether he should snarl or purr.

"Time travel, then, yeah? That how you know all this stuff? Buffy from the future come to avert some great apocalypse?” There, he said it. Now he just had to wait for her to laugh at him.

"Clever guy." She didn’t even smile. "Now ditch the bumpies." She pulled a petal off the onion and held it to his lips. "Be a good vampire and show me your pretty blue eyes. Then taste this." She should be laughing. Why wasn’t she laughing? Warily, he shifted back to human face and took the onion petal in his mouth.

Salt and garlic and onion and rich, deep-fried bready goodness, aromatic and wonderful. "Oh that’s," he rolled it reverently around on his tongue, "that’s just bloody brilliant!" He held his greedy lips open while Buffy fed him the onion with her fingers, one luscious petal at a time.
He sucked her fingertips into his cool mouth, curling his tongue around each of them in turn, savoring the garlic infused oils left over from the blooming onion. Her other hand was clenched almost painfully around her coffee mug, trembling, and she couldn’t make it stop. She breathed in that heady scent of sex and danger that said Spike and practically shivered from his nearness. God, but he was beautiful. She wanted to stroke him, every inch of him, and it was all she could do to keep from saying it out loud.

It was only after he’d licked her fingers clean and lowered his eyelids in unabashed sensual enjoyment that she realized she didn’t have to. This was not the Spike of the final days in Sunnydale. He was not wary of her or burdened by his soul; not tormented by The First or suffering the effects of a malfunctioning microchip. They had no painful history to overcome. She had never used or humiliated him. He had never attacked her. Neither of them had betrayed the other. They began their acquaintance as enemies, then they became allies, then enemies again—nominally, at least. Now, they had a truce and, if she played her cards right, maybe another alliance. That was as simple as things between them ever got. For the two of them, it was as good as a clean slate.

“What?” he said. Oops. She’d been staring.

“That’s quite the oral fixation you’ve got there, fangface. Is that a vampire thing or is it just you?” She knew the answer to that question from personal experience. As a group, vampires tended to sink their teeth into new experiences, so to speak, but that tongue thing was all Spike. It was like he had to lick something to truly understand it. She wanted to be understood.

“Some o’ this; some o’ that,” he chuckled, ducking his head self-consciously. The gesture was awkward and endearing—hard to reconcile with Spike’s brand of aggressive sexuality, if you didn’t know what lay beneath it—and he seemed to realize it all of a sudden. He tried to cover by drawing her pinkie into his mouth again and sucking it slowly, but it was too late. She’d already seen. In her own timeline, his Big Bad persona had cracked apart, bit by bit, under the pressure of the chip and human company. It startled her to find that it was barely more than a thin veneer, even now, and there were fissures forming. He released her finger with a soft “plop” and said, “There any other nummy treats you plan to treat me to?”

“Oh, you bet your buttons—or kittens, I guess. This is Sunnydale.” She pressed the tip of her pinkie gently into the center of his full lower lip and his eyes darkened. “But yes. Oh, emphatically yes. You gonna lick them all off my skin, like that? ‘Cause there’s a habit I could get behind.”

He laughed briefly, abruptly, like the sound was startled out of him, and this time he didn’t try to mask his reaction. “I’ll keep that in mind.” It was gratifying to watch his face soften and open up. He was transformed. She’d seen so little of that in their time together. “You are somethin’ else. You know that?”

“And don’t you ever forget it. More coffee?” She gestured to the waiter. “I’m getting a mocha, this time. I want whipped cream—mmm, and maybe some chocolate syrup.”

He licked his lips. “Not sure whipped cream is playin’ fair, Slayer.”

“Who says I have to play fair?” She shrugged, flashed him a brief but suggestive smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll lick it off my own fingers, this time. All you have to do is watch. So, catch me up—what have you been doing? How was the trip from...Brazil, wasn’t it?”
“Awful,” he said after a long moment of dead silence during which he looked at her like he wasn’t sure she was real. “Better than the last trek, ’m pretty sure. Could hardly be worse. Don’t remember the first bit too well. Was pretty broken up when I left, yeah? Bloody fungus demon—but I s’pose Harm told you that. Sobered up somewhere in Mexico and decided I had to come....” Kill her. He decided he had to come kill her to bolster his reputation and win Drusilla back. That was cute. Why was that cute?

“Well, that’s an improvement. Last time you didn’t sober up until you were headed out of town.”

He winced. “Yeah. Hope I didn’t say anythin’ too...”

She laughed. “Everybody broke up!”

“What?”

“It was a mess.” She leaned toward him and lowered her voice. “You want the gossip?”

“Course!” he said, grinning. He leaned toward her until their faces were just a few inches apart.

“Willow and Xander were a match sort of fated to happen, first of all. They met when they were in diapers, best friends ever since, called each other every night just to talk. That drill, right? We all assumed they’d get together in the end. And Willow was totally on board. She’d been in love with Xander since grade school.

“But Xander wasn’t biting. He played the ‘you’re such a good friend’ card.”

Spike’s jaw clenched. “Wanker.”

“You wait. It gets worse. He wasn’t interested until Willow had a boyfriend. Then he was all, ‘I’m so attracted to you! I can’t keep my hands off you!’ Like he wanted to keep her in reserve, like...like...a fallback girlfriend.”

She’d hate to be in Xander’s shoes, right now, the way Spike was glaring. No sign of gold in his eyes, though. It wasn’t the demon getting mad on Willow’s behalf.

“Now, Xander had a girlfriend, too. Do you remember Cordelia?”

“Pretty brunette? Big smile?” She nodded. “She went out with Xander?” She nodded again. “After seein’ him dance?”

Buffy giggled. “I’m afraid so.”

“Huh. No accountin’ for taste.”

“Not even a little.” She shook her head. “Xander’s current girlfriend is kinda gorgeous, too. Whatever it is, he’s got it. Anyway, you locked Willow and Xander in a room, together. Scared them silly. Nobody knew where they were—Willow thought you’d forgotten about them. Xander had a head injury and he’d lost a lot of blood. They were both totally sure they were gonna die.”

“So, what, then? They get naked?”

“Almost.”

He made a surprised little huffing noise. “You lot are like a bleedin’ soap opera.”

“Oh, I’m not finished,” she said, laying her hand on top of his. He tilted his head to the side, lips
parted in anticipation, and she almost kissed him. “There’s a lot more. The spell Willow was setting up? It was an anti-love spell. A de-lusting. She was trying to make the whole Xander problem go away. They had plans for the evening—all four of them. A double date. So she was going to cast this spell and then they were going to go out. That’s how Xander’s girlfriend and Willow’s boyfriend figured out they were missing, rode to the rescue, and walked in on Xander and Willow making out.” She took a huge spoonful of whipped cream off the top of her mocha and licked it delicately from the spoon with the pointed tip of her tongue.

“Two in one blow,” he smirked at her, turning his hand over so that her fingers rested on his palm. He rubbed his thumb in little circles on the back of her hand. “Not half bad, considerin’ the state I was in.”

“Three,” she said. “You got all three of us. You have an instinct for conflict, Spike. Doesn’t seem to matter how drunk you are.” He straightened up a little and lowered his eyebrows. “You got me and Angel, too. Your speech. ‘You’re not friends. You’ll never be friends!’ Well said, by the way. I wrote it down, if you want a copy.”

“Slayer,” he said, leaning toward her urgently, a worried little frown between his eyebrows. He had the strangest attacks of conscience, sometimes. It was like he enjoyed engaging in malevolent acts only so long as they were unsuccessful—a weird, imperfect compromise between man and demon. “Buffy. Pay me no mind. Was just pissed an’ blowin’ smoke, yeah?”

“Hey,” she said, dipping a spoonful of whipped cream off the top of her mocha and swirling it with chocolate. “I can take advice about my love life from whoever I want, buster. Open up.” He let her feed him the whipped cream, but the worry lines didn’t go away. “Besides, you were mostly sober by the time you said that stuff.”

“Well, yeah, but...” She scooped another spoonful of whipped cream into his mouth before he could get the words out.

“Yeah, but nothing. What you said—Spike, that’s the first time I ever wrote something someone said to me down when I didn’t have to know it for a test.” She signaled the waiter over and asked for another mocha, with a dish of whipped cream on the side. Spike wasn’t even through with his second latte, which was probably good. The vampire was squirrelly to start with. There was no telling what six or eight shots of espresso would do to him.

“That split you up?” he asked, once the waiter left again. She couldn’t make him stop talking, this time. She was out of whipped cream.

“We were supposed to be split up, already, but we weren’t. Not really. We were still together, wallowing in angst, pretending we could be friends. Not only was your off-the-cuff, half-drunken speech totally eloquent and memorable, it was right on the mark. You were right, Spike. We weren’t being honest—not with each other and not with ourselves—and nobody had the guts to call us on it.” She squeezed his hand. “Nobody but you.”

When the waiter came by to set her mocha and whipped cream down on the table, she tried to use the interruption to watch Spike. Unfortunately, he seemed to have the same idea, and they locked eyes across the narrow table. Her face flushed. “Thank you,” she said. “I’m glad you were there.”

“Can’t say as I’m too sorry you’re done with him,” he answered after a moment, leaning in and holding her eyes. Their faces were very close together, and his cool breath tickled her cheek. “Wouldn’t wish him on my worst enemy.” He winked. “Nor my best enemy, neither.”

“Hah! Now there’s a distinction. What do you have to do to become William the Bloody’s best
“Nothin’ at all, pet. Jus’ be yourself.” Laughing, he stole a scoop of whipped cream and covered it in cinnamon before popping it into his mouth.

“So,” she said, “Harmony?”

“Yeah, yeah, and what was that tosser’s name? Parker?”

“Don’t remind me,” she said, rolling her eyes. “We have tragic taste, both of us. Worse than Cordelia. Mine are all evil—by the end, at least. If I sleep with a man, it’s a guarantee he’ll be evil by morning. Yours are all crazy. It never ends well.”

For a second, she thought he might protest, but he just shook his head. “‘S true. Bleedin’ tragic.”

“Smack me if I do it again, would you? Just—make me stop?”

“Yeah. You too?”

“Deal.” They shook hands.
He’d finished the onion—his Heaven had bloomin’ onions in it, he was sure—and half his second cinnamon latte when Buffy asked, "You feeling any less confronty, yet? Done with the grrr?"

"Feelin’ fine, Slayer. A mite confused, is all. Got my book. Got my pen." He waved them at her. "Now I need a story. Think that’s where you come in." Truth be told, he cared a lot less right now than he had an hour ago. He hadn’t been this relaxed since...well, since before Buffy’d dropped an organ on him. He tried to summon some kind of indignation about that, but it wouldn’t come. For the last hour, she’d been laughing and joking and chatting with him, flirting outrageously. Turned out that when she wasn’t trying to kill him, Slayer was a bit of alright. Who’d’ve thought?

"You can put my number there, if you’d like. You don’t have a phone, right?" She was stalling, he realized, but he dutifully copied her phone number down on the title page of his journal in the ‘if found, please return to’ box while she chewed on her lower lip. "So...how should I start this?"

He affected nonchalance. "Well, until you tell me otherwise, I’m assumin’ you arrived in a shiny blue phone box."

She blinked. "You know," she said, shaking her head, "I think I was just too young to appreciate your sense of humor, before."

"Oh, and you’re so much older now? What are you, Slayer? Nineteen?"

"Um...see...that’s part of what I have to tell you."

He waited, pen poised.

"I’m, uh...if you only count time spent on this plane..."

"Well?" Ah...that’s what was going on.

"Thirty-five, give or take a few months. It’s hard to tell. Things happened..."

"I’m gettin’ that." He wrote the number thirty-five at the top of the first page of his journal. "And you were called when you were fifteen?" She nodded. "So you’ve been active for twenty years."

"Yup! Oldest active Slayer in the history of Slayerdom! That’s me." Her brow furrowed. "Or it was until just before I arrived here."

"You weren’t the active Slayer, anymore?"

"I wasn’t the active anything anymore, Spike. I died. Again. It loses its novelty pretty quick, too, let me tell you. Just has to happen once or twice and the shine wears off completely."

"Right." He wrote, "R.I.P. rinse and repeat," in his journal. "So...you died. More than once?" He kept his voice even and noncommittal. He still wasn’t sure where she was going with this.

"Yeah. Actually, that was the fourth time. The first time, I was killed by the bat-face master dude. Darla’s boyfriend."

Spike straightened in his chair. "Wait. What? He killed you?"

"Yup. Bit me unconscious and dropped me face first into a puddle. Totally messed up my Spring
Fling dress. I loved that dress. But the guy lacked follow-through. Didn’t sew up the loose ends. Xander found me. Did CPR. I staked him with a really big stake and then whaled on what was left of him with a sledgehammer. Crushing your enemies’ bones into dust? Good closure. That’s why we have two Slayers, now."

He wasn’t sure what to think. He knew she’d killed old Heinrich. Wasn’t a great loss to the world, even though family loyalty kept him from saying so. Hadn’t realized she’d died. She’d have been...what...sixteen? Slayers died so young. Now, there was an etiquette conundrum. What kind of condolences do you offer to someone whose death didn’t stick? He hadn’t yet formulated an answer to that when Buffy said, "You know, that might be the best way to do this. Let’s talk about deaths."

"Right, then. Let’s talk about deaths, seein’ as how you got yours numbered." He knocked back the last of his latte. "Four of them, you said?"

"Oh, don’t get too smug, Mister Smartypants. I’m only one ahead of you." Spike felt like he was reading from the old version of the script. Major edits had been made and he didn’t have the updates. "And you died way before I did."

"How do you figure?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"Oh, you asked for it, buster, lookin’ at me like that. It was eighteen-eighty. Drusilla found you in an alley after you ran away from a society party in London. You were writing love poetry and some jerkwad snatched it from you and read it out loud so his buddies could laugh. And Cecily? The girl you wrote the poems about? Who was so not worth your time, by the way. She’s a vengeance demon, now. She rejected you like the mean, unfeeling bitca she is, and you stormed off by yourself."

Spike dropped his pen and stared at Buffy. "Where..." He cleared his throat. "How did you...did I tell you that?"

"You did—or will, not sure exactly how that works. Bits of it, anyway. Read the police records for the rest. ‘Cause you disappeared, right? So the police had to take statements from the last people who saw you.

"Anyway, that was your first death, almost a hundred and twenty years before mine. So...how long did you spend looking for that ring?"

He tried to clear his mind, but couldn’t make sense of anything she’d just said. "Uh...the Gem? Months. Why?"

"Okay. Let me be more specific. How long did you spend so totally focused on getting the ring that you didn’t eat?"

"Uh...I don’t..."

"Spike," she said. "Tell me how long it has been since you fed."

He felt like a child. The look on her face was equal parts exasperation, worry, and affection, like he was her responsibility, somehow, and barely able to take care of himself. He wanted to snap at her, snarl that it was none of her bleedin’ business. He wanted to roll his eyes and growl that he’d lived for a long time before she was born, and would probably live for a long time after she was gone. He wanted to reassure her, just to stop that look, but he couldn’t actually remember how long it had been. Instead, he said, "I don’t know."

Too quickly for him to stop it, her hand darted to the inside pocket of his duster and pulled out his
switchblade. The blade extended with a soft "snick" and she drew it cleanly across the palm of her hand, letting the blood run into his empty coffee mug until it was about three quarters of the way full. It didn’t take long. As he watched, the cut on her hand began to close. She wiped the flat of the blade next to the wound and closed the knife, slipping it back into his pocket. "Would you clean that up for me?" she asked, extending her bloody hand toward him. "Freely given."

Then there was the dizzying scent of Slayer blood. This was richer than he remembered. Could be just because he was so hungry, but he didn’t think so. It was so strong his fangs itched. When he brought her hand to his mouth, ran the tip of his tongue along the cut, he thought he would black out from the bone-rattling pleasure of it. Once he’d licked every last drop from her palm, she tapped the rim of his mug. "Drink up. We’ll get you more, later, if you need it." As he sipped his mug of blood, he could feel himself flickering in and out of game face like a fledgling, almost mewling with hunger. This had that onion thing beat all to hell.

"So...where were we? That’s your first death, and we already went through mine. My second one comes next. It happened about..."

He watched her, awestruck, while she moved on as though she hadn’t just done what she’d done, as though she hadn’t just treated him like family. ‘Freely given,’ she said, like a cousin, like an equal. Like a vampire. "Slayer?" he interrupted after a moment. "Thanks."

She cupped his cheek with the hand she’d cut. It bore no mark, now, except a narrow white line that was fading rapidly. "Does it help?"

One sharp intake of breath. "God, yeah."

"Good," she said, and ordered more coffee.
In a dark cavern, hand carved from the bedrock beneath Sunnydale, Giles stood with Willow and Oz in a semi-circle around Harmony—the vampire. He could see her face, but not much more. Metal glinted in the light of the torch.

“Harmony? Where’s Spike?” The vampire was very close to the tunnel entrance. If she ran, they wouldn’t be able to stop her. “Does he have the gem?”

Harmony nodded. “He staked me and he took it. Tried to take it right off my finger. Like I wouldn’t have just given it to him? I’d’ve given him anything he wanted. He was my platinum baby and I loved him.”

Tear-filled eyes somehow made her demon face seem even more obscene. Giles’ jaw clenched. “Where did Spike go?”

Harmony spun and dropped down into the tunnels. The three of them gave chase, but she was gone. The ground rumbled.

“We gotta get outta here,” Oz said.

“The whole area is destabilized,” Willow said.


They ran for the car and sped toward UC Sunnydale as fast as the Citroen would carry them. “We have to find Buffy, Giles.” Willow spoke from the back seat. “If Spike has the gem....”

“If Spike has the gem, Buffy is in very serious trouble, but let’s keep our heads. Shall we check the dorms first?”

Willow let them into the empty dorm room. Giles was staring at Buffy’s unmussed bed when the door to the room slammed inward.

It smashed into the wall with all the not-inconsiderable force Xander Harris could muster, shaking a picture from its hook, and the boy staggered into the room. He began talking very rapidly. Giles could not decipher a word.

“Please,” he said. “Try again—slowly.”

He started over, apparently from the top, although his words were still incomprehensible. Willow tried to explain, which only made it worse, since now they talked over one another. He picked the word “Spike” out of their simultaneous babble, as well as the words “quad” and “gem.” He shook his head.

“Xander!” Willow finally shouted. She clamped a hand over the boy’s mouth and, to Giles’ great relief, he fell silent. “Spike has the gem, like we thought. The Gem of Amara,” she said. “He was outside—in the sun and everything, Giles.”

Xander shrugged Willow’s hand off. “It was freaky. He attacked Buffy. I tried to help, but he pitched me into a wall. When I came to, they were gone.”

“Good lord!” Giles said. Spike. With everything going on in Buffy’s life, of late, Spike was the last
thing she needed. She’d been listless for weeks following his most recent visit. Something to do with Angel, he’d surmised, although she never said directly. He pulled Buffy’s weapons chest from under her bed.

“Where was this?” He tried not to be curt with the children, but Xander’s mere presence set his teeth on edge.

“In the quad,” Xander answered. “But they were gone.”

“Where would she be on an ordinary day?” They blinked at him. “If she were fine, crisis averted, vampire defeated, where would she go?”

“Well...class, I guess.” Willow held a small duffel open for him to drop an armload of stakes in. “Psych class with Professor Walsh.”

“We’ll check there first. Make a list of other likely places. Let’s go.” He ushered Xander and Willow out of the room—Oz had to leave for a gig in LA—and across campus.

They arrived just as Buffy’s psychology class was dismissed. Willow spoke in hushed tones to the hard-faced Professor Walsh while he and Xander waited in the background. The longer the professor talked, the happier Giles was to be overlooked.

“She knows the rules,” Professor Walsh said. “She knows I hate exceptions.”

“But...sometimes there really are exceptions, and Buffy is...exceptional!” Poor Willow. The professor was having none of it. Giles wished for the thousandth time that the Council had some kind of education program in place for Slayers, something recognized in the mundane world, but the truth was that they rarely survived long enough to make it worthwhile. Buffy truly was exceptional.

“Not based on the work she’s produced for this class.” Walsh gathered her things together. “Now if you’ll excuse me.” She nodded once and strode from the room.

“Great,” Willow said. “We can’t find Buffy and she’s getting an F for the day.”

“Willow,” a big man with sandy hair spoke from the back of the room. “You looking for Buffy?”

“Oh, hey, Riley. I didn’t see you there.” She smiled and waved him over. “Have you seen her?”

“Earlier, in the quad. She was with her friend...Will...er...Spike?” He shrugged, but his smile was strained. “They were catching up.”

“She was okay? They weren’t fighting?”

“She was fine—a little distracted, maybe. They seemed excited to see each other. He’s gonna be a tutor. I didn’t know they...they fight? Is she safe with him?”

“Buffy is more than capable of taking care of herself,” Giles interjected before the TA asked too many questions. Buffy and Spike were excited to see each other? That would require an explanation. “Perhaps too much more.”

“He’s the bad influence?” Riley’s smile broadened into a grin. “She said she was a rebel.”

“And she’ll never never be any good,” Xander put in.

“Totally,” Willow said. “Her family had to move to Sunnydale because she burned down the gym at her school in L.A.” Her eyes widened. “Oh, please don’t tell anyone I said that!”
“Your secret’s safe with me. Cross my heart. It’s just really hard to picture. Don’t worry,” he said, turning to Giles. “Buffy’s got a good head on her shoulders. She’ll be okay. I counted today’s absence as excused,” he said to Willow. “It’ll just be a blank in the book—not averaged in—instead of an F.”

“You’re the best, Riley.” Willow bounced on her toes. “Do you have any idea where they went?”

“None. A coffee shop, maybe? Where do you go to talk, around here?”
"Then it hasn’t happened yet?"

"No...it happened for me already. It just hasn’t happened for you."

"You already died, but it hasn’t happened yet."

"Like I’ve been trying to say. My second death happened about a year and a half from now." He rolled that statement around in his mind like toffee candy. Time paradoxes. He understood what she was saying as well as he could without getting into the math, but the poetry of the concept was so much fun, and she was so cute when she tried to explain, that he had to tweak her a little.

"Happened," he tried to clarify, "past tense, but in my future? Is that right?"

"Exactly!" Her words were accompanied by dramatic, swooping hand gestures. He thought about suggesting she ease up on the coffee, but all the drinks here that weren’t caffeinated were alcoholic. He really did want to get this whole story. "Told you. I’m not from now."

"How’d you die, then?"

"A god came. Glorificus. We defeated her—you and me and the others, my friends—but she ripped a hole in the wall between the worlds before she died. It needed my...I jumped in to close it."

"It needed your blood," he said flatly, feeling suddenly very possessive of her blood. "Seems like a hero’s death, that, what with savin’ the world an’ all. Why aren’t you safely ensconced in whatever reward is due all good Slayers at the ends of their very short lives?"

"I was," she said without any particular expression. "I was there for a long, long time, but only gone from here for a hundred and forty seven days. I was brought back. Resurrected by an un-fucking-believably powerful witch." Spike blanched. Now, he was evil, sure, but not that evil. What kind of irresponsible, utterly selfish, power-mad git resurrected a dead Slayer? You’d pay a heavy price for an ordinary life. What would a Slayer cost? That was consequences-to-the-universe stuff. "Which reminds me." She flipped to the back page of her journal and started a "Things to Do" list. On it, she wrote, "Talk to Giles about Willow."

"Willow? Your little red-headed bird, jumps when you say ‘boo’, can barely cast a love spell, Willow? She went head-to-head with the Powers That Be?"

"Shouldn’t decide what people can become based on what they are when they start out, William. She is the most powerful witch in the western hemisphere, and right now she’s completely self-taught. She’s never even heard of magical ethics. That’s something to fix, now that I have the chance, like keeping you out of the hands of those butchers at The Initiative."

"So if she’d done that love spell...."

"Oh, it would have blown up in your face. You’d have big regrets for a long, long time, probably spend years trying to undo the damage, especially since it was aimed at Drusilla. Casting a spell on another witch? Bad juju. Never really understood what you were thinking." Her mouth twitched. "A malfunctioning Willow spell is how you and I got engaged."

While he choked and sputtered, sending coffee out his nose, she continued, "We should celebrate our anniversary. Or our not-an-anniversary, since we’re gonna keep Willow from melting down, this
time. It would be in...let’s see...oh my god. It would be in six weeks!" She consulted the calendar printed on the inside of the front cover of her journal. "That means you’d be captured by The Initiative in about three weeks...."

"I’d be what?"

"Told you. Behavior modification microchip implanted in your brain so you couldn’t hurt humans. You couldn’t feed, couldn’t defend yourself. When you first escaped, you thought it was a blanket no-violence thing. You were starving. Skeletal, almost, and so pale. Probably why you came to me for help instead of your family. Quick death from me is way better than what your relatives would do."

Yeah, that’s where he’d go if he was lookin’ to die: straight into the arms of the Slayer. Anybody else would torture him and watch him starve. "Why didn’t you kill me?" There was no sting to the question. He was genuinely puzzled.

"I don’t really know. It just seemed wrong, at the time. As wrong as trying to starve you to death with a microchip. As wrong as cutting you open, again and again, to see how fast you heal." She shook her head. "That place is horrifying, Spike. We cannot let them have you, this time."

"I’m in agreement with you on that, Slayer. Dates are duly noted in my little black book. It’s nice, by the way." He ran his fingertips over the smooth leather cover. "All this stuff you know, about the way things might happen. Makes me wonder...."

"Yeah?" She didn’t look up. Her pen scratch scratch scratched across the pages of her book as she noted down dates and times and starred key events. "How did our fight today end, in your timeline?"

"Oh," she giggled, flashing him her pearliest California girl smile. "You made that crack about Angel—I still expect an apology for that—and it pissed me off. I kicked the crap out of you, and pulled the ring off your finger. You caught fire, had to dive into the sewers."

Honestly, that’s how he’d assumed today’s fight was going to end. "Huh. Why didn’t you do that this time?"

"Could have. Didn’t want to. Want you to keep your ring. I have plans for it, and for you. Besides," she dropped her voice conspiratorially and her face heated up as the blood rushed to her cheeks, "it wasn’t a fair fight."

"How’s that, then?"

"You were pulling your punches," she explained, looking up at him from beneath her lowered lashes, "and every time you knocked me down, you stepped back and waited for me to get up again, like you would if we were sparring. You weren’t trying to kill me. You weren’t even seriously trying to hurt me.

"I didn’t notice, last time, ‘cause I was so completely offended that you’d attack me in public—in broad daylight, no less. It was against my made-up rules. Live and learn, I suppose. You know what I think, Spike? I think you’d be bored silly if I died. You’d be all alone in the world, then. Nobody to play with."

"That’s the trouble with being as good at this as we are." Spike raised an eyebrow. "Hey—not bragging, here. We paid for it, both of us, with all that time spent going after things bigger and badder than we are, getting knocked back, again and again. We just have a limited number of peers."

She was right, he realized with horror, although he’d never thought of it in exactly that way. He,
William the Bloody, Slayer of Slayers, would miss Buffy the bleedin’ Vampire Slayer if she died. Was that what made Dru leave him? Some kind of a relationship with the Slayer? Is that what she saw? He felt nauseous.

Buffy watched him carefully. "Yeah, that’s pretty much the reaction both of us had last time. I was worse, even. Power freaked. But not this time. This time I’ve got a peek at the could-bes and I wanna tell you some stuff.

"First, Drusilla isn’t coming back." He flinched, even though her tone was gentle. It was the truth, and he knew it. Stroking the back of his hand, she continued, "She’s not. Don’t waste your time wishing, okay? Since that crushes some of my pink and girly happily-ever-after hopes, I can only imagine what it must do to you, and I’m sorry. Second, and I can’t quite believe I’m saying this, Harmony deserves more than you have to give her."

"Wait—what are you on about?" Harmony? What did the Slayer care about Harmony?

"She’s actually in love with you, Spike. Really truly. And you don’t love her back. You don’t even like her back. She’s just your rebound girl, and it’s killing her.

"Third, you have more in common with me than you do with other demons."
Spike glowered at the Slayer in silence for almost a full minute before he summoned the waiter to order a jumbo platter of Buffalo wings. Then he wrote a few pages of very unflattering things about her in his journal before he was calm enough to talk again. Buffy sipped at her coffee while a little smile played about the corners of her mouth.

"What," he asked in a tone he hoped sounded reasonable, "makes you say that?"

"A lot of other demons don’t like vampires. They consider you tainted, right?"

"Well, yeah. With humanity."

"Exactly. I’ve had in-depth conversations with whole bunches of demons. The insides of demon heads are very, very different than the insides of human heads. Vampires aren’t nearly as demony as other demons. They think more like humans than demons. Following?" She waited for his nod. "But that human kind of thinking doesn’t really work for them. Most vampires are miserable. If they’d been born blood-drinkers, they’d just do it and not think about it, like carnivores do.

"But they don’t. They still see everything through that human lens, so instead of trying to be moral and good, which they know they can’t, not by human standards, anyway, they’re all, ‘We’re evil! Really really evil! Can’t you see how evil we are? Watch us all try to prove we’re more evil than the next evil vampire!’ It’s the Angelus Philosophy. An art form, my ass. That’s self-justification. He’s compensating, trying—and failing—to make peace with his humanity."

"And you are not."

He snorted. "Not like I have much choice in the matter. I don’t drink blood; I become a desiccated corpse. Unattractive end, that. No point in pretendin’ I’m doin’ it for some other reason. ‘S what I am."

"So the Spike Philosophy is ‘Accept, adapt, and move the hell on?’"

"A’right. ‘S a good way to put it." It was a very good way to put it. He wrote it down in his journal.

"So tell me, Spike. Have you ever met any other vampires who shared that philosophy? Any at all?" He closed his eyes. He really was alone in the world. She touched his cheek. "They’re out there, sweetie. In my travels—that’s my past, your future—I found a few. A handful out of the thousands upon thousands of vampires I’ve met. I never stake them," she admitted. "They make good allies."
She moved with lethal precision, blond hair spinning out behind her like a halo in the slanting light. He felt like he’d been watching her for centuries.

First, she drove her elbow into her attacker’s solar plexus. He grunted and wrapped her upper arm in a meaty fist. She smashed his instep with the heel of her boot. He howled and let go of her for just an instant. An instant was all she needed.

She slammed her head into his face. Angel heard the crack of bone and cartilage, smelled the rich, fresh blood. The guy clutched his nose in his cupped hands, and she kneed him hard in the groin. He went down.

She rolled him to his face, yanked his hands behind his back. “You have the right to remain silent,” she said, closing the shiny steel cuffs around his wrists.

“Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law—are you listening to me, asshole?” She slapped the back of his head. “You better fucking listen to me. You have the right to consult with an attorney and have an attorney present during questioning.” She shifted, driving her knee into the small of the guy’s back. “If you cannot afford an attorney, one can be provided to you before questioning at no cost. Do you understand these rights?”

The guy didn’t say anything. Bad move.

“I said, ‘Do you understand these rights?’ Yes or no?” She ground her knee in. Angel smiled.

“I got nothin’ to say to you.”

Kate Lockley’s backup arrived, slow but sure. Two squad cars with flashing lights pulled up, one at either end of the alley. Four uniforms hopped out, guns drawn, and she diminished before his eyes into the police detective she lived as during the day.

Until that moment, she could have been Buffy, all speed and strength and sacred duty, made to save the world from darkness. She could have been Darla, fighting, biting, drawing blood for the simple joy of it. She was taller, leggier, but from this distance? It was nothing. From here, she was just another savage blond killer, a monster of a singular sort.

Except that Kate Lockley was mortal.

She would never be like Darla or Buffy or...hell...even Cordelia, who could, through the high-octane mulishness that arose from a stint in Sunnydale, hold her own against the things that went bump in the night. She was not only mortal, but merely mortal. She didn’t know enough to be afraid of the dark.

So Angel left her to her work, surrounded as safely as she could be by LA’s finest, and went to find his. He leapt easily from rooftop to rooftop. Four blocks over, three down, and he was there. He waited.

He found her. Another blond in another alley, but this one was scared. He could smell it from his rooftop perch. She gasped and whimpered, staring frantically back over her shoulder as she ran. She saw nothing, stopped to catch her breath. At that moment, big hands grabbed her arms from behind, a rough voice growled obscenities. Lenny, the boyfriend, the man she was running from, slapped her to the ground and drew a gun.
That was his cue. He jumped from the roof to land right next to the guy. He smacked Lenny’s wrist from below, knocking the shot up so that it was, if not harmless, at least not going to hit his client. He punched him in the face once, with just enough force to knock a human man unconscious. Then he called the police.

Rachel—that was her name. She was grateful. She thanked him again and again and yet again while they waited for the police to arrive. She touched his arm, his shoulder, his hair, his cheek, put her hands on him at every opportunity.

As soon as the police arrived, he gave his statement, and then he fled. He stayed on the ground just long enough to get out of sight of everyone human, and then he climbed back up to the rooftops and ran all the way back home.
Spike was relieved.

"Is that what you want from me, then, Slayer? An alliance?" He could deal with that. He’d allied with the Slayer before. Looked like there were some nasties arrivin’ in the near future that both of them wanted taken down. This Initiative thing seemed ‘specially pressing. He’d be happy to throw in with the Slayer and her crew to make them go away. Like the bleedin’ Nazis all over again.

"I’d settle for that. Let’s talk about terms."

"A’right. First thing. Duration?" He jotted the term down, followed it with a dash, and waited for her answer.

"Five years."

Well, she looked serious. "That have to do with your special knowledge? Some specific event you’re holding out for?"

"Yeah. That’s the death you didn’t come back from. I don’t want it to happen this time around."

Hard to argue with that. "Right, then. Five years it is."

"Immunities. You and Dru remain undusted, along with whoever Dru’s caretaker is. Angel gets his soul stuffed back into him if he so much as looks cross-eyed at me but he doesn’t get dusty unless he’s trying to end the world. Harmony only gets staked if I can’t get her to go to L.A. If either Angel or Harmony absolutely has to be dusted, I’ll do it myself; it won’t be one of my friends. Anybody else you want to include?"

She’d volunteered Dru’s safety? Must be a strange world she came from. He shook his head. "Kind of you, Buffy, to include Dru and her beau. I’m more than fine with cursing Angelus. Dust him if you need to. Harmony’s neither here nor there. I can’t think of anybody else I’d.... You know, there might be one. Sam Lawson. Angelus sired him during the Second World War. Haven’t seen him in decades. Don’t know where he is. But he’d make a good ally."

"Wait—this is someone Angel sired while souled?"

"Yeah, and then he went away to hide his face in shame, leavin’ the fledgling to fend for himself. A right peach is our boy Angelus, no matter where his soul is."

Buffy ground the heels of her hands into her eye sockets. "There is so much I didn’t get when I was younger. So I’ll defend you and your specifically named people from mine if you’ll defend me and my specifically named people from yours."

"Fine. Who are your specifically named people?"

"Giles, Willow, Oz, Tara, Xander, Anya, Dawn, and my mom—Joyce." She ticked the names off on her fingers.

"‘Kay. Giles, Willow, Xander, and Joyce, I know. Wouldn’t hurt your mum, anyway, Slayer. Hope you know that. Who’re Oz, Tara, Anya, and Dawn? Future people?"

"Yeah. Mostly. Oz is Willow’s boyfriend, but he’s leaving soon. Tara will arrive in a couple of
months. She’s a friend of Willow’s. Anya’s already here, but she’s new. Xander’s girlfriend. And Dawn will be my sister. She’s coming in a little less than a year." Spike recorded the two lists of people carefully in his journal. Slayer was gonna get a baby sister? Neat. "I have one more stipulation," Buffy said very softly.

"What’s that?"

"You don’t hunt for the duration of the alliance." Spike’s head snapped up. "Come on, Spike. This shouldn’t surprise you. It’s too much of a conflict. It’s what I was made to stop."

"I’m not Angel, if that’s what you’re thinkin’. I’m not gonna drink pig’s blood."

"Don’t expect you to. I’ll feed you."

"Like earlier?" He was still sated from her power-saturated blood. His nerve endings vibrated. He licked his lips.

She nodded. "Will it work?"

He took her hand and turned it over. There was no evidence she’d ever been cut. Bloody buggering hell. "Yeah. Think it will."

"Good. We train together, patrol together, and strategize together. We spend the next five years joined at the hip, during which time we will learn to fight as a seamless unit and become a solid wall of death, destruction, and mayhem. That okay with you?"

He ran his fingers through his hair. He was having a really weird day.

"Sounds right nice to me, Buffy, but they might have a different opinion." He nodded at the door. Xander, Willow, and Giles had just walked in wearing thunderclouds on their faces and carrying weapons. They weren’t even trying to be discreet.

"Oh, jeez. I forgot about Xander!" She sucked a breath in through clenched teeth. “I really didn’t want to have to deal with that tonight. I’m not going to tell them everything. I’ll talk to Giles, later, but not in front of the others. Back me up?"

"Anytime, Slayer."

"Get ready, Spike." Her smile sparkled. "It’s show time!"
“Moon vine,” the girl said. Her unlikely name was Blackberry. “Bindweed. One of us, but dark. Destructive.”

He sat in the back corner of a too-hip greasy spoon upholstered in Granny Smith green, trying to make sense of his latest endeavor. He sipped at coffee that threatened the enamel of his teeth and fired questions at the group. “Male or female?”


Innocent and destructive? Ethan was intrigued. “This person will be an adept—like you?” They sought a missing coven member. Not someone they’d lost, but someone they’d not yet found.

“A shaman. Yeah. Like, but different.”

“And are you always aware when one of your number arises?”

“No. Never. Just this time—just this one. Because this one is dangerous. Destructive, right?”

That was the point he did not understand. “Blackberries,” he said. “Dandelions. Thistles. How is moon vine more destructive than any of those?”

“I don’t know,” Blackberry said, stomping one booted foot in frustration, a pout twisting her perfect lips, brown skin still flawless in the harsh diner light. “That’s just what we’re seeing.”

Blasted prophets. “And why have we begun our search in this fair city?” Not New York or London or Paris, but Sunnydale, California, a mousy little burb on the west coast of the United States, home to barely half a million individuals. There wasn’t even a decent occult shop in town.

There was, however, Rupert Giles. Here he was, again, at the very heart of his humiliation, doing work even Rupert couldn’t fault him for, and—no. There would be no reunion, this time through. He’d have to keep his head down, work quietly, or Rupert would set that harpy of a Slayer after him. The man could hold a grudge.

“This is where we lost track.” That was Thistle, the purple-haired ragamuffin with heartache in her voice. It was beauty of a different sort, and it touched him more deeply than Blackberry’s sculpted cheekbones ever could. Her widespread arms took in the whole room. “I’m sorry. That’s all the information we have.”

“Will you take the job?” The boy—Dandelion—asked, sturdy fingers splayed flat on the Formica table top.

“I’ve already taken it,” Ethan said. “Now I’m just gathering my tools.”


Blackberry and Thistle exchanged a significant look. “Half up front,” Ethan said, before they could, “and half at the end, as agreed.” He waited.

“Agreed,” Dandelion said, and passed him an envelope. “My contact information is in there, too. I’m taking point on this.” The girls gathered their things and said their goodbyes. Ethan tossed a five on the table for his coffee—shouldn’t stiff the waitress if this was going to be a repeat meet—and stood

The Contract - Ethan
to leave. “I’ll walk you to your car, man.”

He’d parked his rental car around the corner, perhaps a hundred and fifty feet from the door. It was a midlife crisis on wheels, shiny and red with a cloth top. “Rayne,” Dandelion said conversationally as they walked, “if you fuck with me, I will kill you.”

“Oh,” Ethan said. “Is that so?” In Sunnydale? He’d have to wait in line.

“I know who you are. I know what you do. I was warned about you.”

“I see,” Ethan said.

“If I hadn’t also been told you were the best choice, bar none, for this....”

Ethan stopped. “Are you going to kill me right now or not? I haven’t got all night.”

“Uh....” Dandelion shifted uncomfortably. “I hadn’t...that is, I....”

“That’s what I thought. Look.” He moved very close to the young man. “I took the job. I’ll finish it.”

“But what if you don’t find....”

“Let us be very clear. I agreed to search for. I did not swear to find. I have no certainty that the person you are looking for truly exists.”

“They do! They have to. The girls....”

He rolled his eyes. “Please.”

“They’re pretty sure,” Dandelion said. “They’ve been getting portents for months.”

“Portents,” Ethan said, “are not proof. They are, however, a start. I’ll work with what I’ve got.”

At the car, Dandelion reached for Ethan’s arm, held him in place next to the driver’s side door. “They don’t sleep, anymore. They don’t eat. This has got to be over soon, or they won’t survive.”

Ethan let his eyes go black all the way to the edges and smiled. “If there is anything to be found, I will find it.” Dandelion practically sprinted away.
As Xander and Giles stalked through the crowded club with Willow scurrying in behind them, Buffy bounced on her chair and waved. "Hey guys! Over here! There’s room. Pull up some chairs. I’ve got so much stuff to tell you!"

Willow stared, round eyes luminous. Xander and Giles trained crossbows on him. "Guys!" Buffy said. "You’re gonna get us kicked out of here." She confiscated the weapons and dropped them into the shopping bag beneath the table. "Spike? Could you help me with chairs?"

"Be happy to, Buffy. Excuse us for a moment, gentlemen? Miss Willow?" He gave them all a little half-bow, enjoying their discomfiture. Buffy was banking on his inner William. He could play that hand, ‘specially if it made her little friends twitch like that. He held the chair for Willow and pushed her gently in towards the table. She flashed him something that would have been a smile if it weren’t tinged with terror.

"So...Buffster," Xander started, once everyone was seated. "Hangin’ with the evil dead, today?" His tone dripped poison.

"Yes, Buffy," said Giles, staring a scorch mark into Spike’s forehead. "Do explain. From everything we knew, Spike was invulnerable. He acquired the Gem of Amara, and went to campus to kill you."

"I’m a little confused, too, Buff," Willow interjected, gaping at the ring on Spike’s left hand. "’Cause we all thought you were in danger and this doesn’t look like danger and...aren’t you in danger?"

Buffy tapped the ring with her fingertip. "He does have the Gem, but he didn’t kill me. After some discussion, I think we established that he wasn’t trying to. I’m remembering that right?"

"Do believe you are, yeah," Spike drawled, dropping his eyes to the table. "Slayer pointed out a, ah, disconnect between my words and my actions, and we came to an understanding." He hadn’t yet come to terms with that understanding, but the Slayer’s little pals didn’t need to know that. His world could fall apart without witnesses, thank you.

"An understanding?" Giles’ voice rose.

"A truce, Giles, and an alliance," Buffy explained with no room for argument. She carried the authority of a general, despite her apparent youth. There was not a hint of nervousness in her scent. He was, he decided, impressed and just a little bit attracted...wait...not attracted! Unsettled. He was definitely unsettled...damn, but he was hopeless at self-deception. She had him rapt, and it wasn’t just the girl: it was the sodding Slayer herself, all blaze and power—glowing. "It’s not even a new thing for us. Spike and me, we’ve worked together before to get rid of a common enemy. Here." She pushed the platter towards him. "Have some wings."

"Ye gods!" Xander’s shoulders stiffened. "The last time you two joined forces, it was over Angelus. How bad’s the big bad this time?" Spike was pleased despite himself. He didn’t think the boy paid that much attention.

"Here’s the sitch, gang. For the last few nights, I’ve been seeing these commando guys when I patrol. They’re uber-high-tech, like...James Bond high-tech, night vision goggles and Kevlar suits and pulse rifles. Definitely military. Saw ‘em hit a vamp with a Taser. Took him right down. Wrapped him in a net and hauled him away.

"When he saw them in action, Spike sorta thought I was involved with them and he was, well...."
Buffy scrunched her eyebrows.

"A mite hacked off," Spike finished. "These army guys—they’re vivisectionists. Cuttin’ demons up, over and over, to time how fast the wounds close. Starvin’ ‘em, freezin’ ‘em, roastin’ ‘em, all to test the limits of their tolerance. Figurin’ out where their special powers come from. They’re tryin’ to make soldiers...." He shuddered with exaggerated fear.

"Demonically enhanced super soldiers," Buffy continued. "I can’t begin to tell you how much bad there is in this idea."

"Nazis tried it," Spike said, "back during the war. Glad the Slayer’s not involved. Stakin’ clean is one thing. This stuff is just...."

"Wrong." Buffy left no room for equivocation. "What they’re doing is wrong and vile and repulsive, not to mention absolutely sure to spin outta control. And when something is so wrong that Spike and I agree on its wrongness, we work together."

He nodded, at least as much for Buffy as her pals. "‘S a fittin’ way to put that, Slayer. We were hammerin’ out th’ details when you lot walked up." He was on board with this, no question.

Xander, Willow, and Giles watched the two of them like they were at a tennis match, trying to follow the story Buffy and Spike volleyed back and forth between them. "Is anybody else as disturbed by this as I am?" Xander puffed. "These guys are only hurting demons, which, last time I checked, is of the good, right? Demons are the bad guys. You know, the guys we kill. Wouldn’t this fall into the ‘enemy of my enemy’ category? And what, we’re just gonna let dead boy live because he says he’s helping Buffy?"

Ah, there it was. He’d been waiting for push-back from the group. Figures Harris’d be the one to start it. Boy got on his last nerve. "You always second guess the Slayer like that? In front of the troops?" Spike asked in an undertone, letting the barest hint of a subsonic rumble slip into his voice. It was a predacious growl the humans could feel in their bones but not quite hear. Willow squeaked, and Buffy reached out to stroke her hair, pulled her into a hug. "Seems to me like that’s a good way to get yourself a free pass right out of the ranks."

Xander slid off his chair, clenched his fists, and leaned into Spike’s face. "Buffy’s my friend, dea...." He flailed a little as Buffy picked him up by the waistband of his jeans and set him back in his seat. "Buffy! What the...."

"You missing the part where I said ‘truce’, Xander? ‘Cause I asked him to work with me for a whole bunch of really good reasons. Or was it maybe the part where Giles said ‘invulnerable’, as in ‘Spike can’t be killed right now, and, if you try, he’ll hand you your ass on a platter and I won’t stop him?’ That the part you’re missing?" She shook her head. "This is done. I’m done. Giles, take Willow and Xander home. I’ll finish with Spike, and meet you tomorrow. Bright eyed and bushy tailed for the training and the strategizing. Promise."

As Buffy worked out meeting times with Giles and reassured Xander that she wouldn’t be dinner as soon as they left, Spike caught Willow’s sleeve. "You’re safe from me, Red," he whispered. "Woulda been even without the truce. Wanted to say thanks."

Willow looked at him like he’d sprouted a porcelain unicorn horn. "For what?"

"Were kind to an old, heartbroken vamp when you din’t have to be." He was not exactly sure why he felt he needed to talk to the girl. Maybe it was the Slayer blood making him feel all warm and magnanimous, or maybe it was just that Willow was off limits for the foreseeable future. At any rate,
even though he’d been pretty drunk when he last came to town, he thought he remembered that
she’d been sweet, worried for him, despite her panic. "‘M grateful."

She smiled, and all the uncertainty and insecurity drained from her face, leaving her radiant. "You’re
welcome, Spike."

He patted her shoulder. "An’ Red? ‘f you ever decide you want t’ be turned, you let me know,
a’right? You’d make an amazing vamp."

"Did he threaten you?" Xander spat as the three of them made their way out of the Bronze.

"She does, you know," Buffy said, once they were alone at the table, "make an amazing vampire.
Terrifying, amoral, and brutal. Not a good ally." Spike had no idea how to respond.
“Dance with me?” The song was slow and breathy with a grinding bass line, and other couples were already writhing around each other on the dance floor. Spike watched them like he was reading a menu until she spoke, and then he turned that gaze on her.

“To this?” The words were tinged in equal measure with amusement and disbelief. She slid to the floor from her stool and stalked toward him. “To this.” She put her hand on his knee, let it rest there for a moment, and then slid it up his thigh until it touched the edge of his duster. “But this will have to come off.” She pushed the coat from his shoulders to the back of the stool.

He shrugged out of the sleeves and licked his lips. “You’re playin’ a dangerous game, here, Slayer.”

“No games.” Dangerous, though. He was certainly that, right now. Not like.... *No more mind games.* No more mind. To cover her wince, she straightened the collar on the red button-down he wore over his usual black tee. “We’re in this for five years, Spike. We’ll be together a lot. I vote we enjoy it.” She took his hand and pulled him to the dance floor. He didn’t resist.

They settled quickly into a competition that was almost combat, each one trying to out-anticipate the other. Every time one gave ground, the other was instantly there to claim the space. When one surged forward, the other fell back, yielding as water. The end result was a fluid interplay that was as good as choreographed. By the time the first song was finished, they had an audience.

The next piece was faster, driving, and they spun into their dance without a pause. The bass player laid into each note so hard it made her ribcage vibrate. This *was* combat, without euphemism or disguise, for all that they were both pulling their punches. Although they barely touched, she was absurdly aware of every point of contact. She couldn’t get enough air and her heart pounded in her chest—more because she knew he could hear it. It was small consolation that he was breathing hard, too.

A space around them cleared, and a circle of onlookers guarded its edges. Buffy was aware of them peripherally, but couldn’t afford to take her attention off Spike. He aimed a flat-handed blow at the side of her head. She caught his wrist, used it to pull him in closer, and kicked out to sweep his legs. He used the momentum she’d given him to continue his forward motion, jumping lightly over the sweep and sliding neatly in behind her with his arm around her waist.

She arched hard, trying to smack him in the face with the back of her skull. He sidestepped and yanked his arm up sharply into the small of her back. She dropped into a bridge and executed a perfect walkover, coming to her feet behind his outstretched arm. She grabbed it and spun him around to face her. As the band brought the music to a close, he stepped forward, nearly touching her, and looked down into her eyes. The onlookers burst into applause.

“God, you’re good,” he said, lifting a hand to neaten a stray tendril of hair. He was still breathing hard. “Never seen anyone that good.”

“You’re not so bad, yourself.” She captured his hand before he could move it away and pressed it to her cheek. “Did you have fun? Should we do it again, sometime?”

“Yes....” He hissed the word out through clenched teeth. There were yellow sparks in his eyes. Distantly, she heard the band thank the dancers and announce a twenty minute break before they started their second set. The crowd around them began to break up and wander away.
She turned her face and nuzzled his palm, dropped one chaste kiss onto it. “I was hoping you’d say that. You wanna get out of here?”

“More than I can say,” he whispered, and his voice sounded odd. She looked closely at him. The architecture of his face was a little too abrupt, even compared to his ordinary angularity, and his eyes had gone completely gold. If he was struggling to stay in human face, she needed to get him out of this crowd, pronto.

“Kay. Will you go grab our things and meet me in the alley? I need to....” She trailed off and nodded at the line in front of the women’s bathroom. There were at least fifteen people waiting. “I may be a few minutes.”

“Surely will.” He flashed a smile too grateful to be a smirk. She saw fangs. Damn, but his self-control was impressive. She hadn’t appreciated that until she’d been on speaking terms with a variety of vampires. Once the demon was roused, it was near impossible to stuff it back down, and she’d had to knock more than one fangy ally unconscious to prevent a bloodbath. She couldn’t remember Spike changing faces involuntarily except when he was controlled by The First. Now, he was holding it together by force of will. They had an agreement, by god, and William was an honorable man. “Human drawbacks.”

“Yeah—got a couple of those.” She squeezed his hand. “Get some air. I’ll see you soon.” Then she went to stand in line.

Buffy was still standing in line twenty minutes later when the band began heading back toward the stage. On her way through the crowd, the lead singer stopped in front of her. She was slim and leggy with skin so dark it looked purple in the low light of the club. A mini-dress in green velveteen clung to her torso above a pair of burgundy thigh-high boots. Her cropped hair was felted into rounded dreadlocks that extended maybe half an inch from her skull and the narrow silver collar around her neck was studded with small but very sharp spikes. Behind her ear, she wore a cluster of red flowers with delicate white centers and edges. “You and your boyfriend were awesome, out there,” she said in a voice like spun sugar. “Do you two dance someplace professionally?”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” Buffy smiled. “We’ve never actually danced together before.”

The girl did a double take. “Wow. Seriously?”

“Seriously, but you’re not too far off, now that I think about it. Martial arts. He’s been my sparring partner for years.”

“But not your boyfriend?” Buffy made a face, and the girl laughed. “Thought I saw some sparks flying.”

“There may have been...sparks,” she admitted. “I’m up for sparks.” That was the understatement of the evening.

The girl clapped her hands. “So you need a little boost. I knew I brought these for a reason. Here.” She unpinned the flowers from behind her ear and fastened them carefully into Buffy’s hair. “Dianthus barbatus. Grows wild in the old world. Gallantry, finesse, and perfection. My prayer for the lovelorn: may he become what he could be.”

“Thank you,” Buffy said, touching the flowers gently. “They’re beautiful.”

“That’s us. Eden Insists.” The girl tapped the band poster on the wall next to the restroom door. “Look us up. I’ll get you in to all our shows without a cover—as long as you promise to dance.”
The rest of the band was already on stage. The singer skipped up to the microphone just as her intro
ended, leaving Buffy to wait for her turn in the bathroom.

When she finally got outside, she found Spike slouched against the wall in the alley, shopping bags
by his side, the agitation from earlier no longer in evidence. He raised his eyebrows. “Yeah, I know,”
she said, hurrying toward him. “Might’ve been faster just to go home, but I wasn’t sure how long we
were gonna....” He had the strangest expression on his face. “What?”

He opened and closed his mouth twice before saying, “You have flowers.”

“Yeah.” She patted her hair. “Aren’t they pretty? Dian...something. The singer gave them to me. She
said they were finesse, perfection, and...something else.”

“Gallantry,” he said, nodding slowly. “Dianthus.”

“You know...flowers?” She was delighted, but not surprised. This was a man rebounding hard from
a hundred-year romance. Say it with flowers? He could probably write whole novels with flowers. “I
don’t get it,” she said, shaking her head. “You are prime long term relationship material, and women
like that, whether they have fangs or not. There should have been a pack of them hanging around
just itching for you to get single.”

“Dru’s the jealous type,” he said softly, reaching out to trace the edges of each blossom with his
fingertip. “Dusted a few. Chased the rest away. Din’t leave me many options.”

“I’m sorry.” She had no words for how sorry she was—or how ashamed, in hindsight. The first time
through, she’d been cruel, mocked his despair over losing Dru, called him names. You’re not even a
loser anymore. You’re a shell of a loser. It wasn’t until she was gutted by the end of a decade-long
affair that she began to understand. She’d cried for months and she’d been the one to end it. If she
got dumped after a century, she wasn’t sure there’d be enough left of her to mock. “God, Spike. I’m
so sorry. Are you okay?”

“Dianthus barbatus,” he whispered like he thought it was an answer. “Lots of kinds of Dianthus—
pinks an’ carnations an’ whatnot. No reason for me to remember all of them, but ‘f I din’t know any
others, I’d still know these. They’re called Sweet Williams.”

“Gallantry, huh? That fits.” Not only did it fit, it followed him through every incarnation, seasoned
by circumstance but never fading, no matter how hard he wished it away. “That fits in all thirty-one
flavors. Are you hungry, sweet William?” She touched the skin of his hand. “You’re still
warm...ish.”

He looked away. “No.”

“Are you sure? You were having some trouble, in there.” She stepped directly in front of him, tried
to get him to meet her eyes, but he lowered his lashes and turned his face away again.

“Not ‘cause I was hungry.” She was missing something. Was it their dance? Her nerves still
thrummed with the intensity of it, too—why she’d never danced with him before was beyond her—
but it couldn’t be simple arousal. That didn’t make his demon twitchy. Something was really getting
to him.

She laid her palm on his chest. “I don’t mind. It won’t hurt me.”

He put his own hand on top of hers, pressed it flat where his heartbeat used to be. “I’m fine, Buffy.
Don’t fret.” Then he scooped up the shopping bag. “Ready to go?”
"It was just some ordinary human git? He shot you?" It was an ignoble way for his Slayer to die, and it made him angry. Made him want to collect an address and prevent any further firearm mishaps. They walked toward his car, taking care to avoid the commandos who roved about in Kevlar-clad couples.

"Yeah. Me and Tara. That’s what set off the Willow-based near-apocalypse. Where are you staying?" she frowned. "You’re in the tunnels, aren’t you?"

"Have been. Got a better suggestion?"

"You could stay in my room, since I’m at the dorms." Buffy stopped to rummage through the shopping bag he carried. "Reminds me," she retrieved her journal and pen, flipped the book open to the back, and wrote "Rec Letters for Harmony" on her "Things to Do" list. "Have you thought about what to do with the rest of the treasure?"

"Can’t say as I got that far, no." He hadn’t realized when he’d started his search that the Gem of Amara would be accompanied by quite so many gaudy baubles. "S’pose all that might fetch a fair price, huh?"

"You might say. So you tunneled into the treasure trove, yelled ‘Eureka!’ as you jammed the ring onto your finger, and sprinted away to find me?"

"Well...yeah. You were all I could think about."

"Wow. I’m flattered." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. Her lips were very warm. "I’d be more flattered if you’d been thinking about me in some context other than violent death. Consider lingerie, next time. Were you searching alone?"

"Uh...no...." Lingerie? That image was gonna stay with him.

"Harmony was with you?" When he nodded, Buffy sighed. "Okay, let’s go see what’s left."

When they arrived in the treasure chamber, Harmony was there with two suitcases open on the ground. They were mostly filled with clothes and shoes, but she was tucking little bits of treasure into the remaining space. "Hey, Harm," Buffy chirped. Harmony spun around to face the Slayer.

"Oh, Buffy. The Slayer. Um, long time, no see." Harmony’s glance settled on him and she narrowed her eyes. "Spike."

"You’re actually just the girl I wanted to see," Buffy smiled. For some reason, Harmony didn’t seem reassured. "Are you headed to L.A.?" Shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, she nodded. "That sounds great, Harm. Any plans for when you get there?"

"I don’t know. I’m tired of Sunnydale. I don’t want to live underground anymore. I want to go to parties and clubs and dance and be young. I mean, I’m not like a hundred years old like some people. So when Brian asked me to run away with him, I thought ‘Hey! You only live once!’ and packed my suitcases. We’re leaving town tonight."

"Well, good for you." The Slayer leaned forward and wrapped her arms around Harmony. Over Buffy’s shoulder, Harmony mouthed the words, ‘What is going on?’ at Spike, who threw his hands in the air and shook his head. "I know we didn’t always get along in high school," Buffy said, "but I
really do wish you the best. I’m sorry about the way things happened at graduation, too."

"Aww, Buffy." Harmony dropped effortlessly into the fluid social facility of the popular girl. "That’s sweet of you, but I’m over it. I like being a vampire. It’s, like, the best thing that ever happened to me. I’m stronger and faster and hey, no Botox!"

"Yup. Pretty forever! You sound just like someone else I know." Both girls giggled and rolled their eyes at him. "I get that there are advantages, but I still wish you’d gotten the choice. I’m sorry." Spike had never heard much about Harmony’s turning, but, apparently, the Slayer considered herself responsible in some way. He only vaguely remembered hearing that the two knew each other.

"No big," Harmony shrugged. "We got the snake, right?"

"We sure did! Plus, we blew up the school. There are still crispy mayor bits all over the place." They made identical wrinkle-nosed ‘ew’ faces and Spike’s stomach did a slow backward roll. He’d never noticed how similar they were, before. They were both blond haired, golden skinned, Southern California beauties, of a similar height and build. They could probably trade clothes. Their mannerisms were identical. In other circumstances, they might have been friends, and...what snake?

"Actually, Harmony, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. There’s this law firm in L.A. It’s huge, and they’re always hiring, especially support staff—like secretaries and receptionists. And they’re an equal opportunity employer. I mean, really equal opportunity. All kinds of different demons work there. Nobody would even look twice at a vampire."

"So I could get, like, a real job? And live in an apartment? And go shopping? And be...." Harmony sucked air in audibly.

"Just a girl?" Buffy grinned. "A super-strong, young forever vampire girl, maybe, but just a girl. You can type. I know, ‘cause we were in the same class and you were way better at it than me. And you always got good grades in English. You’d make a great secretary.

"So I was thinkin’. Since you were part of the group that helped take the mayor down, and I organized the whole thing, you technically worked for me. Which means I could be a...."

"JOB REFERENCE!!" the girls chorused in unison, clasping hands and bouncing happily on their toes. Spike slid to the floor and covered his mouth with his hands, saying a silent prayer for Brian.

Harmony wrote Buffy’s address and phone number down neatly in a little cotton candy pink address book. They chattered for a few minutes about things to see and do in L.A. and then Buffy said, "Call me when you settle someplace. I’ll try to get Giles to write you a letter of recommendation, too. I bet he would. So," Buffy gestured around the room, “how much of this stuff are you taking?"

Harmony shook her head. "Not much. Just a few of the gold pieces. I don’t have any way to sell the other stuff, and it’s all, like, ugly. It’s okay, though. I’ve got enough here to set me up for a while." She clicked the suitcases closed. "You know, Buffy, I’m really glad we got a chance to talk. It’s funny we never did it before, ‘cause it seems so easy, now."

"Well, Harm, I guess everybody changes after high school."
"You wanna tell me what that was all about?" Spike looked up from his spot on the floor. "I didn’t know your people had a bleedin’ mind-meld."

"Remember that thing I said about how I don’t stake the ones who can be allies?" Buffy smirked. "Believe it or not, Harmony turns out to be pretty useful. Besides, Angel’s gonna need her in L.A."

"Harmony and...Angel?" Spike was dumbstruck. Despite Angel’s affinity for blondes, he couldn’t see the old vampire putting up with Harmony’s prattle long enough to shag her.

"Oh, please, Spike. She’s his secretary. Now help me with this wheelbarrow."

Altogether, it took five wheelbarrow loads to get everything back to the DeSoto. On the second return trip, they were attacked by two large, red M’shub who roared their terrible roars, gnashed their terrible teeth, and set showers of pebbles falling from the rough-hewn ceiling, making Spike wonder if they were going to bring the tunnels down around their ears. Sure, he had that vampiric immortality thing going for him, plus the Amara Advantage, but he could still get trapped in here. He had no desire to dig his way out by hand into the bright light of the twenty-second century.

Now, M’shub didn’t typically need a real reason to attack—they were like easily offended F’yarl with ADHD, only not as bright—but these two appeared to have some kind of grudge. The calloused bullae on their backs and shoulders pulsed purple and the feathery fronds over their gill slits undulated in overdrive. Unfortunately, Spike couldn’t speak M’shub, so he had no idea what they were roaring.

Buffy seized weapons from the wheelbarrow, choosing a jeweled short sword for herself and tossing him a simply made hand ax, and faced off against her opponents. The battle was brief and bloody, and if Spike hadn’t had the gem, he would have borne the brunt of it. Both of the M’shub focused exclusively on him.

With a credible roar of her own, Buffy swung her sword hard and decapitated the larger of the two from behind. The other one finally started paying real attention to her. "Do you," she snarled, "have any idea who I am?" She swung the sword again, ducking a crushing blow from the big left fist of the M’shub. The thing roared back. Spike chopped into its chest, but his blade didn’t go very deep. Like tanks, the M’shub were. "You go back," slash, "and tell your boss," crunch, "that this vampire," snarl, "is under my protection. He is," she hissed as Spike hacked through the hamstrings on the thing’s left leg, "mine!"

The wounded M’shub fell to the ground, breathing hard but no longer roaring. It stared at Buffy poisonously before murmuring something. "Mine," she repeated, and the word made Spike shiver. Hers. He straightened up and squared his shoulders.

The M’shub roared quietly. How could something roar quietly? "Yeah, well, I’ve never really liked it when people tell me what I’m supposed to do. Can you make it home?" It nodded and she extended her hand, helping it to its feet. Then it limped off down the corridor, leaning heavily against the wall for support.

"Price on your head," she said, in the tone you’d use to tell someone it was raining outside, and started pushing the wheelbarrow again.

By the time they were finished, the DeSoto sat very low to the ground, shocks hanging on for dear
life. Both of them were exhausted. They’d filled the entire trunk and most of the back seat, including the space on the floorboards. Buffy insisted they take the wheelbarrow, so they tied it to the top of the car with twine. Then they made their way, very slowly, to Revello Drive.

They wedged the car into the garage amidst old bogey boards, badminton racquets, and in-line skates, and locked the door down from the inside. After they climbed out of the car through the rear passenger side window, Buffy said, "You know, your car is another one of the things I failed to appreciate when I was younger. We have, what...half a ton of stuff in there?"

"'Bout that. Prob'ly. Eight hundred pounds, at least. Gold’s heavy. Gotta ask, Slayer: How you plannin’ on gettin’ rid of this stuff? Can’t take it to a pawn shop."

"My mother," Buffy said, wrapping her hand around his upper arm, "is a smart lady. She knows how to moisturize, she knows how to make real hot chocolate from scratch, starting with chocolate shavings, and she knows how to facilitate the auction of rare antiquities. All of this stuff?" She waved at it dismissively. "Right up her alley."

"Knew I liked your mum. Hidden talents."

"She’s out of town, tonight. She’ll be back tomorrow, I think...I think. It’s so hard to remember. Anyway, we’ll deal with your hoard when she’s back. Now, I want a shower. Come on."

An hour later, Spike was clean and warm, damp and drowsy, his hair a crush of corn silk colored curls. He wore a borrowed white t-shirt, soft as velvet from uncountable washings, with some gray terrycloth drawstring shorts, and he was stretched out on Buffy’s bed, idly skimming a book about a little pioneer girl who came from Sweden to settle on the Minnesota frontier. It was only then that he realized she hadn’t needed to invite him in.
She sent Spike into the shower first and took his clothes away. She wasn’t sure exactly what she was going to do about the duster. It was covered in the glutinous secretions of the M’shub and needed...she honestly had no clue what would fix that mess. It needed more attention than she had the means to give. She wiped it off as best she could and hung it up on a hook in the basement before dumping the rest of their clothes in the washer. She found a spare tee and a pair of shorts for Spike to wear in a basket near the dryer, set them in a neat stack just inside the bathroom door.

The Sweet Williams went into a crystal bud vase on her dresser. She stroked their soft, spiky edges. *Eden Insists* was a lot better than the groups she remembered playing at The Bronze before—leagues ahead of the musical stylings of *Dingoes*—although she supposed that shouldn’t surprise her. Everything was different than she remembered. Her bedroom was smaller. The tunnels were bigger. Her friends were so young. Spike wasn’t who she remembered, either. He knew flowers, for one thing, and he could dance. What else might he be that she didn’t know? She jotted a reminder in her journal to find out where *Eden Insists* was playing next. They would go dancing.

“Remember that time is precious. Our forbearance is not unlimited.”

“Gyah!” she squeaked, and tripped over her own foot, landing in an awkward heap on the sun-warmed sand. It burned her fingers.

“What the....”

A large golden brown cat who was, in a way that Buffy could not quite wrap her head around, simultaneously there and not there, sat a few feet away, its tail curled neatly around its feet.

She lurched into an upright position and reached for the animal. Her hand passed through its body. The cat appeared to take no notice. “Wow. Okay. It’s you, sort of. I didn’t know you were coming with me.”

“I am the Observer,” the cat said, licking one paw and scrubbing fastidiously at an ear with it. “I have always been with you.”

“Oh.” She hauled herself to her feet and brushed the sand from her knees, straightened her hair in the mirror over her dresser, which stood in the middle of a stretch of otherwise featureless desert. She would think about the implications of that statement later. “Is there something I can help you with?”

The cat blinked its amber eyes once, slowly. “The time and place are to your liking?”

“Yeah. They’re good.” She hesitated. What kind of courtesy was due a god who intervened on your behalf in the progression of time? More, she decided, was definitely warranted. “Better than I could have hoped for. Please thank Ma’at for me.”

“It is done.” The cat’s tail twitched impatiently.

“Is there anything else I should know?” Something skittered across a distant dune. The cat followed it with its eyes. “Is there anything else I should be doing?”

“Complete the tasks you were assigned. Fulfill your obligations, and Ma’at will be pleased. Otherwise....” The cat trailed off into a sound like a shrug.

“And there’s nothing else you can tell me? But what...”
“We all want what we want,” the cat said. “You know what you need to do to get it.” It crouched and squinted in the bright sunshine. Buffy scanned the horizon, but couldn’t tell what it was looking at. “What are you here to do?”

“I’m here to prevent Spike’s death.”

“Hardly,” the cat said.

“Okay...well, I’m here to prevent my death, but I need Spike for that.”

“Is that so?” The creature sounded amused.

She became a little more certain. “Yeah. It is.” She said the words defiantly.

“Perhaps it is, then.”

She realized with creeping horror that it wasn’t true. She was here not to prevent her death, but to prevent her resurrection, that great, world-marring magic which gouged a wound into the heart of the Hellmouth and awakened the Turok-Han beneath Sunnydale.

It was her resurrection she had to stop, not only because that new, more powerful Hellmouth required Spike’s sacrifice to close it, but because it led Willow (again Willow, always Willow) to cast the spell calling all the other Slayers who, being what they were, tore each other to pieces. That she might prevent the Slayer Wars made her almost queasy with hope, but it was incidental to her purpose. Each new Slayer thinned the walls of the world just a little further, drilled the holes that allowed other realities to leak into this one.

Because that was the final thing, the last, most important item in the list of things that simply could not be. If she failed, if the Slayers were called, her reality, its entire existence, would become indistinct from those around it. It would simply fall apart.

She was here in a last-ditch attempt to keep the Powers That Be from dissolving this world back into the quantum slurry from which all worlds arose.

Well, that last one was a doozy, but there was something else. There was something she didn’t remember—something important. She rested her elbows on the dresser and dropped her face into her hands.

“You okay, Slayer?”

“Gyah!” she squawked and spun around, fell to the floor again. The heels of her hands hit hardwood and carpet. Spike grinned at her. It must have been a trick of the late-setting southern California sun that made a nimbus of his bone-white curls. She blinked it away.

“Note to self,” she said, taking the hand he offered and grinning back. “Vampires move very quietly.”

There was no cat in sight.
"Buffy, honey!" Joyce called from the hallway at nine the next morning. "Whose car is that in the garage?" Without waiting for an answer, she popped into the room, carrying a large, plastic laundry basket full of clean clothes. She buzzed around the room for a minute or two, putting the laundry into the closet and the dresser drawers before she turned to look at the occupants of the bed. "Some of this doesn’t look like yours," she said, holding up Spike’s jeans and t-shirt. "Whose is..." She stopped talking when she met his eyes.

"'Lo, Joyce."

"Oh...Spike. Hello. Are these yours?" Joyce seemed confused but not angry. She didn’t have an ax handy, either, which was another big plus.

"Yes, Mum. Buffy said I had to let her wash ‘em. There was a, uh, fight. They were covered in...fluids." That was the least offensive word he could think of. He’d done many strange things in his life, but none quite so strange as making small talk with the Slayer’s mother while lying in the Slayer’s bed.

Joyce held up a hand. "No details, please. I can only take so much. Are you both alright?"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah. We’re fine. No worries. We were just really..."

"Tired?" She reached out to stroke her only child’s hair. "I haven’t seen her drop off like this since she was little." Buffy stretched diagonally across the lower half of the bed, her head hanging down over the bottom left corner, long hair brushing the floor. She’d wrapped a throw around her torso, but her legs were uncovered, pajama pants scrunched up to her knees. "Must’ve been a rough day."

"She was gonna sleep in your room; let me stay here. Guess she didn’t make it. Last thing I remember, we were waitin’ for the dryer."

"Hey...you guys are noisy." Buffy muttered into the comforter. "Morning, mom!" she said, aiming for chipper and missing. "How was your trip?"

"It was wonderful, Buffy. I found some real treasures. Why don’t you two get dressed and come downstairs. I’ll make you some breakfast and tell you about it."

While Joyce made omelets and talked about her trip to Thailand, Buffy filled a large coffee mug with blood. He drank it gratefully, hoping Buffy’s mother would choose not to think about where it had come from. He managed to stay in human face, this time, but he felt his eyes turn gold.

He let the ladies chat, and stayed quiet, keeping his eyes down. It was never a good idea to remind people of what he was, particularly when they were being kind. Besides, he was still thinking about the conversation he’d had with Buffy the night before.

"We were talkin’ about deaths..." he prompted, as she sat on the end of the bed towel-drying her hair.

"Yeah, okay." It was disconcerting, the way she did that. She talked about dying like she was relaying the highlights of a football game. She was interested, but uninvolved. "Let’s do that. Recap: Your first, London, eighteen-eighty; My first, the Master, nineteen-ninety-seven; My second, mystic glowy portal thingy, two thousand one; My third, Warren and his big-ass gun, two thousand two. With me so far?" She was counting them off on her fingers, his on one hand, hers on the other. He
nodded.

"Alright. So...next, it’s your turn."

She relayed the story of the First Evil and the magic amulet Angel brought to her, how Angel said it was meant for a Champion, and how he—Spike himself—had worn it into the Hellmouth during the final battle, which he fought alongside all the newly activated Slayers. He didn’t flinch until she said, "And then your soul powered the amulet and it made this humongous sunlight explosion thing and the army of uber-vamps just turned to dust."

"My what?"

"Your soul."

He swallowed hard. "Was I...I wasn’t cursed, right? Not like Angel..."

"No. Oh, god, no, Spike. You’d never let that happen. No curse; no perfect happiness escape clause. You got your soul the same way you do...everything else you do. You decided you wanted it, so you went looking for it. Went to Africa. There were trials, tests, mortal peril stuff. Torture, maybe, too. I never could get you to give me the details. But you did it. You were gone for six months and you came back...damaged...but you came back with your soul."

He stared at her for a long time. "You’re serious," he said, finally.

"As death." She grinned. "You know, usually. Hey...were you reading my Kirsten?"

He was still pondering the implications of seeking out his own soul when he became aware that both women were calling his name. "Spike?" Buffy said. "You ready to ask Mom about that thing? That thing we were talking about?"

"Mom," Buffy said, "we have a proposition for you."

Between the two of them, they were mostly able to describe the tremendous quantity, age, and value of the treasure Spike had unearthed from a forgotten tomb beneath Sunnydale, although it was clear that Joyce thought they were exaggerating. Still, she was game.

"I’d be delighted to help you sell whatever it is you’ve found, Spike. I will need to take my standard twenty percent commission...."

"Of course, Joyce. More than fair. Glad Buffy pointed out you could help. Had no clue what I was gonna do with it all." That was actually the biggest reason he hadn’t worried about going back to get it right away. He didn’t have a way to sell it, and neither did the rest of the Sunnydale Underworld. The sole worth of that hoard to the denizens of the dark lay in the unremarkable green-stoned ring he now wore on his left hand.

Joyce flashed a brilliant smile at her daughter. "I’m pleased you thought of me, honey. I wasn’t sure you knew what I did for a living."

"Mom..." Buffy rolled her eyes, utterly adolescent. The Slayer had left the building. "Give me some credit. I’m a college girl, now."

"So, Spike, do you do a lot of treasure hunting?"
"Not as of late, Mum. Used to be easier to trade in gold. ‘S harder, now."

"Oh," she breathed. "I suppose it is. You know, Spike, sometimes I forget about all the changes you must have seen. You look so young." She patted his hair, which sprang back into artfully arranged curls. Buffy had turned him around at the top of the stairs and rubbed some kind of cream into it before pulling individual bits into place. It dried almost instantly, but stayed soft. "I love your hair this way, sweetie."

He ducked his head. He felt like he was being domesticated one affectionate gesture at a time, and he knew he should protest, should fight back, but there was something about Joyce Summers that made him feel safe and loved and compliant.... Bloody buggering hell. He reappraised Buffy. That was it. The changes in her speech patterns, the subtle differences in her mannerisms. She sounded just like Joyce. Slayer was turning into her mother.

"So," Joyce said, "when can I see what you found?"

Buffy and Spike spent the next half hour moving boxes from the garage to the basement so they could open the doors of the car to get the treasure out. They distributed the hoard across the living and dining rooms to allow Joyce to look closely. When they had about a third of it out, she dropped to the couch with her hands over her mouth.

"We are," she said, "going to need to have a lot of this appraised."

"So you think you can sell it?" Spike wasn’t exactly sure what to make of her reaction. He couldn’t tell if it was promising or not.

"Oh...oh, yes, I do." He could hear her heart tap-dancing in her chest. "If all of this is what it looks like..."

"Prob’ly is, Mum. It’s been down there for a bit."

"Do you have any idea how long ‘a bit’ is?" Joyce had a hysterical edge to her voice and her breathing was shallow and erratic.

"Ah...well, the first references to it..." He looked back and forth between The Slayer and her mother. Would Joyce faint?

"Mom, why don’t I get you a drink, and we’ll tell you more about it in a few minutes, okay?"

Joyce knocked the first drink straight back and was working on the second before she said, "Alright. My nerves are settling. Tell me about this treasure."

Spike told her as much as he knew. Joyce nodded and took it all in. "So it’s been hidden here in California since the tenth century, at the latest. Everything is at least that old and some of the pieces are much older than that...but that doesn’t make any sense. None of this looks Mesoamerican."

"Doubt any of it is. Not sure why it should be. Some of it isn’t even human."

"Hu...hu..." Joyce downed the rest of her second drink and handed her glass to Buffy, who refilled it.

"How can it not be human?" Joyce pleaded.

He turned a glower on Buffy. "Don’t you tell your mum anything, Slayer?"

Buffy held up her hands. "Hey. Don’t look at me. Those are the details she always says she doesn’t
want. You want to tell her about all things dire and demony, you go right ahead."
"In the beginning," he recited, with as much pompous Angelusness as he could muster, "demons ruled the earth." Joyce sat with her arms folded around herself, listening intently, while Buffy wrapped the smaller, more delicate pieces from the trove in tissue paper.

"Long before the age of humanity; long, even, before animals crawled out of the sea, this world was a demon playground. Kingdoms rose and fell. Civilizations flourished and declined. Whole schools of thought existed; whole bodies of knowledge. There was demonic art and literature, science and technology. This world belonged to them."

"Wait," said Joyce. "Them? Aren’t...forgive me, please, if this is rude, but I thought vampires were demons."

"Eh...more or less. More if you ask vampires or," he smirked at Buffy, "the Slayer. Less if you ask other demons. We’re not pure. Started out human, see? We didn’t even exist during the Demon Golden Age. Guess it’s why we have so much to prove."

"Oh," Buffy said. "Is that the reason?"

"You wanna tell this story?"

"Nah. You’re doin’ great. Just want to clarify something."

"That so?"

"Yeah. The Watchers’ Council would say that vampires are demons—no question, definitely, kill ‘em all, do not pass go—but I," Buffy gave him a smug smile, "would not."

"Huh. Novel theory you got there. You mentioned this to your Watcher, yet, pet? ‘F you haven’t, can I watch when you do?’ He snickered. "We could film it...."

"Stop it. They’re not. And they’re not human. They’re human forms, with human minds, imbued with a demonic essence through powerful blood magicks. Just like Slayers."

There was a long silence. "Blood...magic?" Joyce asked. "When was there blood magic?"

"Yeah...I’m not seein’ it either, Slayer."

"What? To make a vampire, you need two things: a ritual to replace the human soul with the demon essence, and a blood sacrifice. Right?"

"No...I mean, a’right. That’s how it works. Sire drains someone; ‘s the sacrifice. Feeds blood to ‘em; ‘s the ritual." He nodded to Joyce. "Way back when humans came to the world, they fought against the demons, right? They won; kicked all the demons out of this dimension and took over. Last demon out the door gave your kind a, uh, parting gift."

"Yup!" Buffy said. "Like herpes!"

"That sounds more like the Watchers’ Council. The Slayer bit’s the sticking point, pet. Not seeing the blood magic, ‘less there’s somethin’ big I don’ know. You gonna tell me where little Slayers come from?"

"Almost the same place as little vampires. So...story time, Slayer point of view."
"Humanity was at war with the demons for generations. It was a long, hard fight and they were losing. The men of the tribe—guess there was only one tribe, at the time—got together and talked about how they couldn’t win the war by themselves. They decided that what they needed was a really powerful weapon that they could completely control." Spike found himself edging away from Buffy. Her tone was flippant, but there was a violent glint in her eyes.

"So they kidnapped a girl, chained her to a rock, performed a sacrifice, and did their chanting and dancing. This stuffed the girl full of inky black demon essence, and bingo! They had a Slayer. When she died, that counted as the sacrifice for the next one. Convenient, huh?

"The tribal guys kept watch on their girl-slash-weapons and told them what to do for thousands and thousands of years. Eventually, they became the Watchers’ Council, and I," she picked up the ax Spike had used the evening before, in the battle against the M’shub, and polished the blade with crumpled tissue paper, "became the Chosen One: The One Girl in All the World, yadda yadda yadda." She held the polished blade up to the light before passing it over to Spike. "Shiny! You should keep it. Smells like magic."

"Right, then. Sheds some light. This part of that special knowledge we talked about, love?" He held the ax out at shoulder height, let it roll over the back of his hand, caught it, and spun it in a figure eight. Perfectly balanced and razor sharp, it sliced through the space in front of him without disturbing the air. The haft was made of some fine-grained black hardwood he didn’t recognize. It was polished to a deep, understated luster and completely unadorned: no inlay or etching; no markings of maker or provenance. It really did smell like magic.

"Uh huh. Both of those things. Got yourself an ax?"

"Do. Needs a sheath." He pulled his journal from the inside pocket of his duster, flipped to the back page, and started writing. The words "To Do List" went on the top line. "Commission Sheath for Magic Ax" was next.

Buffy leaned over his shoulder to point at the third line. "Now write, ‘Get Necrotempered Glass for DeSoto.’" He raised an eyebrow. She didn’t explain, just pointed at the book again. "Trust me. You’ll love it."

After boxing and labeling it all, they moved the treasure hoard to the basement. Joyce said, "I’ll make some calls today and let you know what I come up with, Spike. I don’t suppose you could tell me which pieces are...."

"Made by demons? Well, this, for a start." He patted the ax. "I’ll go through them with you one at a time when you catalogue them, yeah?"

"Perfect." She gave Spike a twinkle-eyed smile. "This is exciting. A new direction for me. I’ll have to be circumspect, though, or everyone will think I’m...."

"Crazy?" Buffy put in. "I wouldn’t worry too much about it, Mom. More people know about this stuff than you think. Start with whoever sold you that scary African tribal mask. You remember—the one that raised the dead?"

"Oh that one!" Joyce said, laughing and covering her face with her hands. "During the party that wouldn’t end. Oh, that was...."


"No...I was going to say, ‘kind of fun’. In retrospect." She held up a hand as Buffy started to protest.
"I certainly didn’t think so while it was happening, but it was good for me. I got to see you work. I hadn’t, before that. It was astonishing. You were in charge and you and your friends just pulled together and got it done. If I hadn’t seen that, I don’t think I would ever have understood what you did or...or what the world was really like. Hindsight alters our...Weltanschauung would be the word, I suppose.

"Now I know that the world is full of scary things that try to hurt people, and my little girl is the person who stops them."

Buffy launched herself into her mother’s arms and held on tightly. Spike could smell tears.
Secrets - Ethan

The phone was ringing when he stumbled in the door.

He scrambled for it, held the receiver to his ear, and winced. His ear was bruised, which shouldn’t have surprised him. All of him was bruised. Sunnydale held grudges. “Yes?”

“Rayne.” It was Dandelion. “I’m just...just checking in.”

Of course he was. The boy hadn’t the courtesy to wait a whole day to begin his harassment, and Ethan had neither the patience nor the energy for it. “I said I would contact you when I had something significant to tell you. Perhaps you recall?”

“I do. It’s just...we’re headed out of town and...well....”

Ethan explored the distended flesh of his left eye socket with a cautious fingertip. Thankfully, the eye itself was intact. His lower lip was not so lucky. “Well, what? Spit it out, child.”

“Thistle had another flash.”

Blasted prophets. Damn every last one of them. Ethan sighed and dropped to the edge of the bed. The sudden movement made his skull throb and threatened to bring up his dinner. He fumbled at the bedside table drawer, pulled out a pad of hotel stationery and a pen. “Very well. What was it?”

“Now, I don’t know what any of it means, right? Like, zero clue. I don’t even think the girls do. They just see it and try to get it into words as fast as they can. That’s all. There’s no guarantee that —.”

“Just tell me!” Raising his voice was a mistake. His ribs throbbed with every syllable. He held his breath until the worst of it subsided.

“Oh. Okay. ‘The...the Moon Vine takes root beside The Well of Light and blooms beneath the Blade of The Abyss.’”

Janus, but that was a prophecy fit for a Hellmouth. He had half a mind to back out now and run. Cancun would be lovely this time of year. “And that’s all?”

“Isn’t that enough? She had some kind of fit, fell onto the floor, foaming at the mouth and shaking and everything.” Dandelion swallowed audibly. “Screaming those words over and over again between spasms.”

“That is ominous.”

“Yeah. It took us hours to get her calmed down, again. She’s...they’re breaking. Anything you can do, Rayne. Seriously. Anything at all.”

“I am doing everything I can.” The boy’s barely contained panic affected him more than he was willing to admit aloud. This Moon Vine set the seer girls aflutter, dire portents coming at them like popcorn, first one pop and then another, and another, and another, until there were so many that one could not be distinguished from the din. If one pop was a grand mal seizure, what would happen to them when there were a thousand? “And I’ll call as soon as I know something.”

“Alright...and Rayne? Thanks.”
“Don’t mention it.” Calamity crawled beneath the skin of Sunnydale. He’d spent his evening in those darker places, listening to the monsters talk, but not a single one of them mentioned the Moon Vine. There were two preoccupations on every demon tongue: ‘The Eternal is unearthed!’ and ‘White walls! White walls!’ The first aroused excitement and envy and fear, while the second summoned a kind of tongue-tied horror. Asking about either of them...well, he was in no great hurry to do it again. He dabbed at his bloody lip with the edge of his sleeve. “Please do keep me apprised of any new developments.”
It wasn’t until they were in the DeSoto on the way to Giles’ house that Buffy broke down. "I didn’t think," she wheezed, "that it would be so...hard...to see my...my...mom...." Spike pulled over to the side of the road.

"What’s got you all tangled up, then?" he asked, uncertain how to handle a sobbing Slayer. Should he try to ignore it? Distract her? Comfort her? What she remembered of him was nothing like what he remembered of her, but he didn’t know what that meant. What did she expect of him? He patted her arm.

"I thought there’d been enough time since...since she...." She was shaking and crying, tears dragging her mascara down her cheeks in mottled sepia streaks. "Thought I’d be able to see her without," she whimpered, "falling apart." She curled into a little fetal ball on the DeSoto’s bench seat, wedged against the door, and buried her face in her arms.

She didn’t look like the scourge of his kind, the fierce and lethal foe from whispered horror stories. She looked like a sad little girl. That was it. He edged out from behind the steering wheel and gathered her into his lap. She wrapped her arms around him and nestled into his neck. Huh. Apparently, that was the right thing to do.

After a while, she calmed down enough to look at him. "I bet this is all kinda surreal for you, huh."

He rubbed a smudge of mascara off her face with his thumb. "I'm havin’ a weird day."

She made a helpless gesture, sort of half shrug and half shiver. "Me too. It's only gonna get worse when we see Giles."

"You keep sayin’ things that...Slayer...Buffy, what were we to each other, where you were?" He pulled a square of soft cotton jersey out of the glove box and began wiping her eyes carefully. "It would help to know, to know what you expect from me. You treat me like...." She treated him like he was precious—like he was hers. It made him want things he oughtn’t even think about.

"We were...complicated. Different things at different times."

"Uh huh." He almost laughed. If they were anything at all to each other, it could hardly help but be complicated. He steeled himself to ask, "Lovers?" and held his unneeded breath while he waited for her answer.

She only hesitated for a moment. "Sometimes. For a while. Friends, too, sometimes. Sometimes we barely tolerated each other, like when we first worked together. We fought a lot. You were honest with me which—just to let you know—isn’t always easy for me to handle, but it’s why you were sometimes the only person I could trust. You’d never lie to me, or coddle me, or try to pretend things were going to be okay when they weren’t. You were really the only one who got what it was like to be...."

He didn’t know which word she was searching for, so he waited quietly, dabbing the tears away from her eyes as they fell. This was not the brash, self-righteous crusader he’d set out to kill yesterday. This was the woman she grew up to be. She was humble and gracious, her cleverness made kinder by the empathy that comes with age. She was lovely.

"Alone," she whispered. He closed his eyes, the isolation of a century and a half washed away in the wake of that word. Oh, god. He was lost. He pulled her closer to his chest, waiting for his demon to
roar in consternation. It didn’t make a sound.

"Spike?" she said, when he didn’t respond. She sounded scared. "Please. Oh, god. Please don’t freak. I know it’s a lot, right now. This is so early. But I need that. I need you. Nobody else in the world ever...." She pressed her forehead against his. "I could have gotten through it if you were with me. It’s why I came back for you."

The backs of his eyes burned. "For...me? You came back for me? Thought you came to avert an apocalypse...." He could feel himself breathing shallow, panicked breaths, but he couldn’t make it stop. If he actually needed the air, he might have blacked out by now.

"I did. I came back to stop the one that killed you." She said it so simply, like it was the sort of thing that happened every day. He’d never had anyone do anything for him, never had anyone deliberately choose him. Well, except for Drusilla, who didn’t want him anymore.

It was the sort of sweet, absolute declaration he’d ached for his entire life. Time had not touched that ache. Blood could not wash it away. This was something pure and good and glowing, and he wanted it. He wanted it so much that he wondered, briefly, if he was still stone drunk and hallucinating in some desert in Mexico, waiting for the sun to rise.

"I understand if you don’t want us to be...I mean, I’d like another chance, but...." Shaking her head sharply, she said, "Working with me—it’s enough." It was enough, but she wanted more? From him? He felt the tears start, tried to rub them away. She pulled his hands down. "No no. Oh, please. I didn’t mean to make you do that." She touched his face with her fingertips, pressed her lips to his eyes. "I am so sorry. I always forget.... I just can’t seem to figure out how not to do this. I always hurt you. I never learn...."

Slayer was kissing away his tears. She’d come back through time to him. She’d come back through time for him, to save him. She said she needed him, crumpled up small in his arms and confessed it, and he burst into tears. He was a stupid, limp, useless fool, a failure as a demon and a man, blubbering over the girl. Drusilla was right. He growled low in his chest.

At that, Buffy dropped her hands and looked away, blinking hard. "I know. I’m sorry. I’ll stop."

He couldn’t form words, couldn’t call her name, so he did the only thing he could think to do: he tipped her face up and kissed her. "Oh," she breathed, and kissed him back, over and over again. They were late to meet her Watcher.
It was a quarter to one when Giles answered the knock at his door to find them standing on the front step in the bright California afternoon. He blinked at them. "Oh, yes. The ring. Of course. Do come in—both of you." He narrowed his eyes at Spike. "I trust that any agreement the two of you have made guarantees my safety, as well."

"You’re part of the truce, Watcher. Not gonna hurt you." Spike guided Buffy into the flat with a hand on her lower back. It was an intimate gesture, but it felt right. He had left his goo-covered coat in the trunk of the car. With his hair in loose curls and absent the armor of all that black leather, he knew he was less imposing. In the sunlight, he probably looked like little more than a boy. Good. He needed the Watcher off guard. He needed information. "‘Sides, got too many questions for you."

"Very good. And the reason for the delay?" Giles raised his eyebrows. Neither of them would meet his eyes. "My recollection is that we were planning to meet at noon. Is everything all right?"

"Yes," Buffy stammered, her face a brilliant red. "It’s fine. We’re fine, but something...came up...and...uh...." She cast an anxious glance at Spike, who moved closer and curled his arm around her shoulders. Giles’ mouth dropped open.

"We spent the morning with Joyce, Watcher. Once the Slayer fills you in, we’ll talk more, yeah?"

"Right, then. Do sit down. Tea, anyone?"

They sat on Giles’ couch sipping strong English tea while Giles inventoried his magical materials. "Two spells: a truth spell and one that checks for possession? I have...yes...yes. I have everything I need. They’re both fairly simple spells. Who is it, exactly, that you’d like me to cast these spells on?" He looked hopefully at Spike.

Buffy took one deep breath and said, "Me, Giles. I’d like you to cast them on me."

"Honestly, Buffy, I don’t see the need for that. Your behavior, while...unorthodox...as usual, hardly indicates possession. As you pointed out yourself, you and Spike have...allied...before when circumstances required it. Although I admit that I am somewhat uncomfortable with your...association, I do understand your reasoning. Spike is a...formidable...fighter." Spike smirked. What it must have cost the Watcher to get all that out.

"It doesn’t have anything to do with Spike, Giles. I’m gonna tell you something pretty wigsome and it’s important that you know I’m really me and I’m telling the truth."

Giles removed his glasses and began polishing them with a clean white handkerchief. "Are you trying to tell me," he asked, "that you’re about to exhibit behavior consistent with possession?"

Spike sighed. He had reservations about this whole endeavor. Admittedly, asking her Watcher to verify her story magically was a stroke of genius, but he was still not sure the man’s Council training would let him accept what she had to say. "Watcher, she’s not possessed. She’s not gonna act possessed. She’s just gonna tell you somethin’ a tad peculiar, an’ she’s coverin’ her bases, yeah?"

"Something she has already told you, I gather?"

"Well, yeah."

"And you believed her? You didn’t think she was possessed?"
"Yeah...sure. Slayer’s never lied to me." Spike was becoming uncomfortable with this line of questioning. "Course...I wondered about the possession thing, at first, but..."

"You required no magical assistance to confirm that?" The Watcher had a dangerous edge to his tone.

"Slayer had somethin’ better ‘an magic for me."

"Did she? And what, may I ask, was that?" He wasn’t sure he wanted to respond. He didn’t like the idea of the Watcher writing anything about William down anywhere the Council might find it.

"Dirt, Giles. I have dirt on the vampire." She giggled. "Information he would wear gingham to protect."

Spike wrinkled his nose. "I’d take a holy water sponge bath o’er that bit o’ scandal."

Giles opened his mouth, paused for a moment, and then closed it again without responding. "I just don’t have any good blackmail material on you, Giles. I’m afraid we have to do it the hard way."
She walked over to the bookshelf and knelt to choose a title. Standing back up, she blew the dust from the cover of an antique collection of Grimm’s Fairy Tales. "Mmmm, perfect. Shoo, Giles. Get your spell stuff ready. I’ll wait."

"Right, then," Giles said. "I'll get started. Be with you shortly."

Buffy sat back down on the couch next to Spike and handed him the book. "Read to me?" she asked, leaning back against him and handing him the book. She wrapped herself in the quilt from the back of the couch and tucked her head under his arm, curling snugly into his side. This, he decided, was simultaneously enervating and gratifying. He flipped the book open and began to read, stroking her hair. She was asleep before he was halfway through the first story.

"She seems extremely...comfortable...with you," Giles observed.

"Gift horses, Watcher." She'd turned over while she slept. Her head was on his lap; her face pressed into his belly. One arm was tucked under his leg and the other rested on his hip possessively. He smoothed the quilt over her shoulders. "She’s a beautiful girl. Like to think I’ll never be so old I don’t appreciate the attention, even if it only means she had a rough night and a rougher mornin’."
He could hope it meant more, but he couldn’t bring himself to believe it, no matter that he felt like his heart might start beating whenever she touched him.

"Ah. I can see how.... The two of you were out late, then?" Spike nodded. "And you...stayed together, last night?" Giles’ voice was carefully expressionless, as though the question were of purely academic interest. Spike resisted the urge to leer at him.

"Don’t get your knickers in a twist. We were exhausted. Dropped where we landed; slept a couple of hours. I wound up in the more comfortable position. ‘Spect she was more ragged than me to start. Don’ know. You’ll have to ask her."

"I’ll do that, when she wakes. Should I...I’ll let her sleep for a while. More tea?"

"'Preciate it. Yeah. Been too long since I had a decent cuppa."

Giles brought more tea for both of them, and then sat down in the armchair. "You read quite beautifully, Spike. It’s a pleasure to hear. Your accent, though, is rather different to the one you typically use while speaking. It is...refined, even educated. One might almost suspect you’d taken a diction course or two in your time."
"One might almost suspect," Spike repeated, inhaling the steam from his tea. "Lived a long time; done most everything. Won’t deny what you can clearly hear. That’s all you get on that topic without those holy water sponge baths, yeah?" He sipped his tea and sighed. "Ta, Rupert. ‘S a little bit of home. Wonder if you could do the spell to detect possession while Slayer’s still out? Let her sleep a bit longer yet?"

"Yes. Yes, of course." Giles began to cast the spell. When he finished, he set up and cast another spell. Spike noted that he didn’t disturb the ingredients for the truth spell but retrieved a new set of ingredients from the bureau and laid them out. "Well, that is remarkable," he said when he finished.

"She possessed?"

"No...nothing like that."

"Checked her aura, then, did you?" Giles nodded, and then went to his liquor cabinet and pulled out a bottle. He added a splash of scotch to his tea and then passed the bottle to Spike, who doctored his own drink and passed the bottle back. "Thanks again, Watcher. So tell me...what’d you see?"

"Well, she’s not possessed, nor is she under any magical influence, but she might as well be a different person, if her aura is any indication." Spike nodded. "It is...complex. There are indications of age and power that are implausible in an eighteen-year-old girl, however noteworthy the girl might be. Does this...any of this...gibe with your perceptions?"

"Does. She’s different." He decided against telling Giles how he’d studied her, rewound a few seconds of video tape repeatedly to memorize her moves and learn to counter them. He knew the way she moved, the way she fought, more intimately than anyone in the world, and this girl was so different he’d have to start from scratch.

"No question she seems like the same person—I would never assume she was possessed, not after watching for a bit—but she’s stronger and faster, unbelievably strong and fast. The way she moves in combat...leagues ahead of where she was. An’ her wounds healed while I watched. Flesh just knitted back together like time-lapse photography, yeah?" He wouldn’t mention why he knew that, either.

"I see...."

"If I saw those changes in a vampire, Watcher, it would mean he was older. Scores of years older, like. Not talkin’ about ten or fifteen, but somethin’ closer to a century." Giles glanced nervously down at his Slayer who slept, heedless as a child, in the lap of William the Bloody. "She’s as fast as me, an’ stronger. Don’ know what that means for what she is."

"So you saw the same changes I saw and you doubt your own perceptions? You want me to confirm them, to reassure you that your belief in her story was justified?" Spike shook his head. "I don’t understand...."

"Din’t believe her story, mate. Least, not entirely. Somethin’ missin’. What she told me was true. She wasn’ lyin’, but she din’t tell me everything. Want to know what it is she isn’t sayin’." Giles still looked skeptical. "Rupert, I’m a vampire."

"I fail to see what that has to do with...."

"You’re scared of me, for all you’re actin’ calm. Can smell it on you, in your sweat, in your blood. You’re breathin’ shallow an’ your heart’s poundin’ like to crack your ribs." Giles edged away from him and Spike smirked. "Slayer wasn’t lyin’ to me. I’d’ve known. ‘Sides, she knew things she
couldn’t’ve... Hey there. She’s comin’ to."

Buffy opened her eyes and looked up at him, blinking slowly. "Spike, you’re...are you...alive?"

"More or less." He pushed a stray tendril of hair away from her face. She was frightened. He could smell it. "Know where you are?"

"Giles...we’re at Giles’ apartment. Did we...did we see Mom?" She looked like she might start crying again.

"Yeah. Stayed at your mum’s, last night. Had breakfast with her this morning. Talked about finding an auction house." She sat up, but didn’t relinquish the quilt. "Think we might get some of that tea, Rupert? Her nerves are shaky. She could use a bit of fortitude."

"And we talked about demons?" He nodded. "’Cause some of your treasure comes from El Dorado...she’s gonna sell it...."

"Treasure? El Dorado?" Giles chorused, passing Spike a cup of hot tea that smelled of scotch. "What is Joyce going to sell?"

Buffy pulled the quilt up under her chin and sipped the tea. "Oh," she sighed. "That’s buckets and buckets better. I’m sorry, guys. Things sorta don’t feel real, right now. I have to figure out when.... My god, Giles. How old are you?"

"Pardon?"

"You’re in your—what? Mid-forties? Definitely not any older than that, right? And way fit."

"Well, forty-six, actually. Buffy, could you tell me...." The man became flustered under his Slayer’s intense scrutiny. Spike grinned.

"Ack! That’s not old. You’re not old. And you’re all trim and sophisticated and your wardrobe is, like, pricey and tailored and...tasteful. You look great. How did I ever think you were old?" She knocked the tea back in one gulp. "Ah...hot hot hot. Owie. That was dumb. Could I just have some of the scotch this time?" Giles hesitated only a moment before he poured more liquor for all three of them. Poking Spike in the shoulder, she asked, "How did I miss that?"

"Dunno, pet. Never thought he was old, myself. Never much bought into the whole tweed thing, either. Man went after Angelus with nothin’ but a torch and then stood strong through hours of my sire’s best efforts. Quite the sight, that was." He bent his head in acknowledgment of Giles’ daring.

"Oh my god! He did, didn’t he! That was...wow. Giles, you’re sorta studly. Gotta add that to the list of stuff I totally didn’t appreciate when I was younger." She took one deep breath and said, "Okay. I’m all oriented again and ready to answer questions. Got your spell set up?"
Haunted - Buffy

Buffy burned. The world was in flames and falling down around her, roiling up inside her. She twisted and screamed, the flesh melting from her bones, but nobody came to save her. She was alone, and she could hear the screams of children dying—her children, for all everyone kept calling them her sisters. She couldn’t save them. Then someone clasped her hand, lifted her up out of the rocks and rubble, pulled her up out of the cave into the sunlit college quad. Spike’s laughing blue eyes met hers. While their hands were folded together, his face cracked apart and she could see he’d taken the fire inside of him, left it blazing just under the surface of his skin. He was seething with it.

He tried to make her leave, told her she had to, but she wouldn’t go without him. She cried and begged him to come with her. The fire in him burst out through his fingertips and engulfed their joined hands. “I love you,” she said, as he flew apart into dust. Her hand was on fire, cool, this time, and painless. The flames licked their way up her arm. She could still see the afterimage of his face in front of her, washed translucent in the bright sunlight. “Please....”

“Hey there,” he said. His tone was gentle, and he was looking at her the way she remembered—like she was a gift and a miracle—and that’s how she knew it couldn’t be real. Nobody had looked at her like that in decades. It had to be a dream. He was gone. She wanted to sob with the unfairness of it. “She’s comin’ to.” Wait. Those weren’t the right words.

She blinked. He was still there. "Spike, you’re...are you...alive?” He looked solid. He looked like he might be real.

"More or less." He smoothed her hair away from her face, left his palm resting on her cheek. She pushed against it, desperate to reassure herself that he was actually there, even though it couldn’t possibly be true. There’d been an explosion, a helicopter. Willow. She’d done it, dropped a bomb and made everything explode, but she hadn’t gotten away in time, and she’d burned, too. She was dead. Except that...hadn’t she seen her mother? She remembered omelets and coffee, sunlight streaming in through the kitchen window, and a fluffy terrycloth robe that smelled like fabric softener. Her mother was dead, too, but this didn’t look like heaven. "Know where you are?"

"Giles...we’re at Giles’ apartment. Did we...did we see Mom?” That’s what she thought she remembered, but it was even less believable than the Sunnydale crater. It hurt to think.

"Yeah. Stayed at your mum’s, last night. Had breakfast with her this morning. Talked about finding an auction house.” She sat up, pulled the quilt in tighter around her. "Think we might get some of that tea, Rupert? Her nerves are shaky. She could use a bit of fortitude."

"And we talked about demons?” They’d talked about demons with her mother. Spike had explained how vampires were made. She’d explained how Slayers were made. There was...the hoard. Spike had a whole DeSoto load of treasure that was technically priceless, but worth millions and millions of dollars to collectors. He nodded encouragingly, like people do when a small child remembers something complex. That irritated her. She worked hard to come up with more detail. “’Cause some of your treasure comes from El Dorado...she’s gonna sell it...."

"Treasure? El Dorado?” Giles was there. Of course Giles was there. It was his apartment. He passed Spike a cup of tea, which Spike pressed into her hands. "What is Joyce going to sell?"

She pulled the quilt up under her chin and tucked it in to free her hands. Then she took a sip of the tea. "Oh,” she sighed, as the world slipped into place in her head. There was more scotch than tea in that cup. "That’s buckets and buckets better. I’m sorry, guys. Things sorta don’t feel real, right now.
I have to figure out when....” She looked at Giles—really looked at him. He was big, first of all, at least as big as Angel, with broad shoulders and a strong jaw, and huge, meticulously manicured hands. There were hints of silver at his temples, but his face was unlined.

“My god, Giles. How old are you?” She had to know. He was nothing like the man she remembered.

"Pardon?” He stammered the word, a little, and it was cute. Cute, for god’s sake. Adorable. Boyish. Sweet. Other adjectives that should absolutely never, under any circumstance, be applied to her Watcher. No wonder her mother had that dreamy-eyed look for weeks after the band candy incident.

"You’re in your—what? Mid-forties? Definitely not any older than that, right? And way fit.” That was putting it mildly. He was built more like a gladiator than a gym rat, useful slabs of muscle covered over with actual flesh. He wasn’t cut for show. It was all about strength, and he got that way fighting supernatural things when he was only human.

"Well, forty-six, actually. Buffy, could you tell me...." Giles trailed off uncomfortably, looking everywhere but at her, and that was charming, too. This was not good.

"Ack! That’s not old. You’re not old. And you’re all trim and sophisticated and your wardrobe is, like, pricey and tailored and...tasteful.” And perfect and elegant and gorgeous. Oh, god. “You look great. How did I ever think you were old?” Teenagers, she decided, were stupid. It was a wonder they survived to become adults. She swallowed her doctored tea in one great gulp, and burned her tongue. “Ah...hot hot hot. Owie. That was dumb. Could I just have some of the scotch this time?” She thought he was going to refuse, for a second, and she almost panicked. She didn’t want to have to beg her Watcher for alcohol, but then he poured drinks for all three of them and she sighed her relief.

Poking Spike in the shoulder, she asked, "How did I miss that?” He grinned at her—that self-satisfied smirk he always used when he’d figured something out that nobody else had. He could tell why she was all off balance, and he thought it was funny. Evil....

"Dunno, pet. Never thought he was old, myself.” He wouldn’t, of course. He was three times Giles’ age. It was funny how she’d always had the impression that Giles was ancient, calcified, even, while the Spike in her imagination was young. Giles was not even middle aged, and Spike was older than anybody human had ever been. He was only young compared to...ugh. Compared to Angel.

She got it, now, why Spike was sometimes so flippant. He would never age, never change, never gain the automatic authority granted by laugh lines and gray hair. Humans would always see him as the young man he was when he was turned, no matter how many hundreds of years passed—years which, paradoxically, made him seem even younger than he appeared to be. There was a progression, a cycle, to this that she hadn’t really understood until she went through it herself.

When she was Giles’ age, she took herself very seriously, wanted everyone else to take her seriously, too. She wore a lot of suits, cut her hair short and stopped dying it, tried to live as the general of her angry girl army. It worked, for a time, but it was hard to maintain. It drained the color out of the world. Sometime after her sixtieth birthday, she started to laugh again. All the dramas that consumed the people around her began to seem ridiculous, and she was hesitant to get involved. The older she got, the sillier it all seemed, until she couldn’t take anyone seriously anymore, least of all herself.

By the time she passed her hundredth birthday, she wasn’t even invested in her own continued existence. While she couldn’t exactly be described as reckless, she took chances she wouldn’t have when she was younger. She played games to test her skill, gave weaker enemies head starts and handicaps. She knew she could die at any time, but she was no longer afraid to. Not only had she
lived beyond human expectations, but she’d lived absurdly, fabulously, wildly far beyond any conceivable expectation for a Slayer. Nobody had ever done better. Probably, nobody ever would.

“Never much bought into the whole tweed thing, either. Man went after Angelus with nothing but a torch and then stood strong through hours of my sire’s best efforts. Quite the sight, that was.” He nodded at Giles in acknowledgment, and she almost choked. This Spike still respected her Watcher. They’d been sitting at ease with one another for—she had no clue how long. She’d slept for a while, and they were talking when she woke. Were they chatting? Reminiscing? Comparing childhood outings in London? It didn’t matter. Any conversation that didn’t end in death threats was an improvement.

"Oh my god! He did, didn’t he! That was...wow. Giles, you’re sorta studly. Gotta add that to the list of stuff I totally didn’t appreciate when I was younger." She took one deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling optimistic about the future for the first time in the better part of a century. "Okay," she said. “I’m all oriented again and ready to answer questions. Got your spell set up?”
Believe it or not - Spike

Buffy sat in full lotus in the middle of a circle made of chalk while a still obviously flustered Giles intoned phrases in something that sounded like Latin but wasn’t. She’d bounced back to her usual glibness fairly quickly, but her confusion during the moments after she’d woken had unnerved both men.

Spike became aware, early in his visit, that Giles had weapons handy should he make any kind of false move. There was a mace in the corner, a crossbow on top of the bureau, a short sword hanging on the wall, stakes under the edge of the couch, and holy water in a crystal decanter on the coffee table. True to his training, Giles kept a weapon within reach at all times. Over the course of their conversation, though, the Watcher began paying more attention to the strange behavior of his Slayer and less to the strange behavior of the vampire in her company.

"So," Giles said when he’d finished casting the spell, "would you please tell me what’s going on here?"

"Well," she said, "I died. In an explosion that took out a city block. This uber-powerful witch was turned into a vampire and became, you know, evil. I don’t mean like Spike, who is I-can-still-be-reasoned-with-'cause-I-like-the-world evil. I mean like Angelus, who is I-hate-everything-and-I’ll-send-the-world-to-hell evil. She decided that she wanted to be Supreme Ruler of the Universe, so she summoned a demon army. There were thousands of them. Nobody could get close to her, not even my Slayer army. She just knocked us all back. We couldn’t use anything magical. She sucked the energy out of the air. Eventually, I went off. I stole a helicopter, flew in low, and dropped a tactical nuclear device on her compound. I didn’t get away fast enough—I think that’s how I died. I know I got her, though. Saw her dust. I did win."

"Willow," Spike said. It wasn’t a question.

"Willow," Buffy agreed. "Please don’t turn her. Not even if she asks you to. Okay? She’s capable of world-endage all souled and mortal. Without that—well, she’s just a problem."

"Do not ever turn the redhead. Check." Now, that was a disappointment. Such a pretty little thing, that one. "Who sired her?"

"You sure you want to know?" She had something akin to sympathy in her eyes. He knew who it was.

"Drusilla." She tapped a fingertip to her nose. "Don’ suppose she makes much of an ally, does she?"

"Yes and no," Buffy said. She’d worked with Dru? "If you have common goals, she’s amazing, provided you can keep her on task and in the present. But then, suddenly and for no reason anybody can figure out, she’ll announce that the winds have shifted, or something even more cryptic, and switch sides."

"Buffy," Giles broke in, realization in the set of his mouth, "when did all of this happen?"

"Oh," she said, "I died on September fifth, twenty-sixteen. It was my fourth death. The Powers That Be allowed me to try again, to come back and change certain things rather than go to, well, where I would have gone." At Giles’ clear disbelief, she shrugged. "I know it sounds crazy. That’s why I thought the truth spell would be a good idea."

"You knew this?" Giles glared at Spike. "She told you?"
"Yeah, Watcher. She told me." He hadn’t the wherewithal to deal with the Watcher’s pique. Not now. He should have realized before, didn’t know how he hadn’t. She was a big bloody hero. She would have gone to Heaven. She gave up Heaven to avert an apocalypse. She gave up Heaven to avert the apocalypse that killed him? He cleared his throat, which felt tight and sore, all of a sudden. "I'll, uh, go make more tea," he said, and escaped to the kitchen.

"So you are a much older Buffy in the body of your eighteen-year-old self?" Giles continued his questioning, making notes on a yellow legal pad.

"I am! And, boy howdy, it’s weird. Lots of stuff I was clueless about the first time through. Like you being all studly and Euro-sexy. Missed it completely.

"Just as an aside: We need to get Willow trained, stat. Within the next couple of years, she is going to become the most powerful witch in the western hemisphere. As in, just shy of godlike. Very scary. And nobody’s ever talked to her about magical ethics. Did you know she’s descended from one of Sunnydale’s founders? Her family’s been living on the Hellmouth for six generations. Six, Giles. Think about that."

"Very well. Willow must receive training.... I’m afraid I have been somewhat remiss. I should have considered what kind of potential she might have when she re-ensouled Angel." In the kitchen, Spike almost dropped an open tin of loose tea. Little Willow bound Angelus? Damn. That was real power, now, not potential power off in the future somewhere. "My next question, then. What is it you came back to change?"

"I lost my Champion." Spike cursed under his breath as he dumped boiling water over his hand. No marks because of the ring. Why did it still have to hurt?

"Your Champion? Care to elaborate?"

"A warrior who fights by my side, serves as my lieutenant, and offers counsel. The strongest and most loyal of my companions; the one person I trust without question. I lost him." The ceramic pot full of steeping black tea hit the kitchen floor and shattered. "I need him. Without him, I was...." She bumped her hands into each other in an asynchronous, uncoordinated way, like a boat unmoored between docks. Spike sighed and set to work cleaning up the broken crockery.

"So I came back to disrupt the chain of events that led to his death." Giles watched him with outright suspicion. Buffy watched Giles. "Yes, Giles. It’s Spike. Quit glaring. You’re gonna have to get used to him. I’m not letting go of him, this time."

"You realize, of course, that all of this is very difficult to believe?"

"I do. Hence, truth spell." She wrinkled her nose. "Did you ever make sure I wasn’t possessed?"

"While you were asleep."

"Good. I’m me, not possessed by anything, and I’m not lying. So...I’ve come back in time to fix stuff. That means I have a cheat-sheet for the next few apocalypses. At least, for the ones that happen before I change so much stuff that they don’t happen the same way, anymore." Spike found another teapot in the kitchen cupboard and remade the tea while Buffy relayed details about Adam, Glorificus, Willow’s world-threatening magic abuse, and the First Evil’s attempt to open the Hellmouth.

"You...activated...eighteen hundred Slayers?"

"Sure did. That’s every potential in the world. Slayer army. Seemed like a good idea, too, until a
Hellmouth popped up for each and every one of them. One Hellmouth is a handful, no question. Eighteen hundred Hellmouths is a global war zone. Their...um...areas of influence overlapped, so demons that need that Hellmouthy vibe could...um...get together and, like, organize. It got out of control. We could literally not stop fighting."

"I imagine that would be the case. I am curious, however. Why, of all previous moments, were you sent back to this one, exactly? What was special about this time?"

She hesitated a second too long. The room became uncomfortably quiet, and Spike realized she was looking at him. "I asked to be sent back to when he...Spike...my Champion was...back to when he was first mine."

"And that happened when?"

"Yesterday," Spike answered for her, "while we were fightin’." He could practically pinpoint the moment.

"And you were aware this occurred?" Spike and Buffy nodded in unison. "How did you...how does one know when he’s been declared someone’s Champion?"

Buffy bit her lower lip. "He got all jealous of Parker." Spike became concerned with the carpet.

"Who or what is Parker?"

"Forgettable rebound sex," she said, beaming at Spike while Giles choked. "You even tried to warn me, at that frat party. That was...I think that might have been sweet. I totally didn’t get that at the time, though. I was too busy freaking out ‘cause you were there with Harmony. Oh!" She rounded on her Watcher. "Could you write a letter of recommendation for Harmony? Please? She’s going to be applying for a job, soon, and that would be really helpful."

"Harmony? The vampire?"

"Yes, please. It’s just a support job, but it’s not like she could go to college."

"We are talking about Harmony Kendall? Harmony Kendall the vampire?"

"Yes, Giles. Harmony Kendall who became a vampire during our high school graduation while she was acting under my orders. That Harmony Kendall. The Harmony Kendall who’s good at English and Social Studies, who is neat and organized, has beautiful penmanship, and types sixty words a minute. I’d ask our typing teacher, but she didn’t survive graduation."

"Buffy, I realize it’s tempting to try to see something remaining of the person she was before she was turned, but that’s not her, any longer. When she was turned, the Harmony you knew died, and a demon took over her body. What’s there now is not Harmony, but the creature...."

"But the creature that killed her," Buffy finished in a deplorable imitation of Giles’ accent. "Can the Watchers’ Council propaganda for a minute, Giles. It’s total crap." Spike hid his smile in his teacup. This could get entertaining.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Total and utter crap, Giles, made up by the Council to make sure that there would be no fraternizing with the enemy." There was something seductive in her sliding glance. "After someone is turned, they’re who they’ve always been, minus the stuff they were doing ‘cause they were worried about what other people would think.
"So Harmony, who wasn’t a people pleaser to start with, is almost exactly the same as she was before. She has no conscience, sure, but she didn’t have one in tenth grade, either. No repression, no backlash.

"She’s the same. She wants fashionable shoes, unicorn collectibles, and a cute boyfriend. She needs blood to survive, but she’d rather drink it out of expensive crystal than hunt it up herself. She’s not going to start a riot or try to end the world. She wants to get a job."

Huh. She really said all that to the Watcher. "But you said that in your time-line, Willow was turned and became extraordinarily evil. What is your explanation for that? Are you saying that the only thing keeping Willow, our Willow, from becoming a monster is her fear of what other people will think?" He crossed his arms over his chest and fixed her with a haughty, professorial stare.

"Don’t patronize me, Giles. I am not a child," she snapped. It was an order. "I’m under a truth spell. You’re not going to catch me in an evasion or an inconsistency." Heh. Fancy Rupert getting called on the carpet by his Slayer. What would the Council say?

"The only thing keeping Willow from becoming a monster is her fear of what other people will think. See, unlike Harmony, Willow is a people pleaser. She does—and doesn’t do—a lot of stuff just so people won’t think bad things about her. She’s scared of criticism, but underneath is this churning rage, a need for control, and a desire for instant gratification. When you take away that fear, she wants it her way right now and she’ll kill to get it. It’s way destructive, but there’s nothing that isn’t there already.

"Matter of fact, Giles, that’s what caused trouble before she got turned. She started changing the world to suit her—magically, I mean. Erasing people’s memories. Will-be-done spells. Luck spells to find a parking place. Glamours to avoid someone she didn’t want to talk to. Countless, thoughtless modifications of reality."

"A promiscuous misuse of magic?" Giles looked a little sick.

"Bingo! She needs ethics and she needs ’em quick. And they have to be the kind that come from inside. She can’t be trying to please anyone. Right now, all she’s got is a leash made of other people’s judgments. I’m sorry to hit you with all this, Giles. I know...I know you wanted to believe what the Council said about vampires, but it just isn’t true. Harmony is still Harmony. She has a chance to become...could you just write a letter? Please?"

"I’m presuming that whomever receives this letter will understand vampires in the same way that you do?"

"There’s no other way to understand vampires, Rupert." It was out of his mouth before he could stop it. Bloody impulsive mouth didn’t know when to stay shut.

Giles turned aggressively arched brows on Spike. Ah, damn. "You are saying that you’re essentially the same person you were before you were turned?"

"Well, point of fact, not exactly; no."

"So she’s wrong? You aren’t the same person you were?" He dripped disdain.

"Giles," Buffy growled, "you’re being obtuse, and it’s starting to piss me off. Spike is William, minus the fear of judgment, plus a hundred and twenty years. He is decades further removed from the person he was as a fledgling than you are from the youthful offender who went romping with
Spike choked on his tea. "Eyghon?! Watcher, are you daft?" This was the staid and sober scholar the Council of Watchers entrusted with the sole active Slayer? "Not that I don’t hanker for the occasional orgy of bloodshed or even just the occasional orgy, but Eyghon doesn’t play nice. Likes to ride his pets into bloody puddles. *Delicious* way to spend an evenin’, true, but ’s not a game for you fragile human types." Shaking his head at the other Englishman, he mused, "Completely around the bend. Guts, though. Gotta give you that."

"Score one for Giles the Rebel. The vampire thinks you were living on the edge." Buffy gave him a thumbs up.

Giles peered owlishly at the two of them. "Very well. A recommendation letter for Harmony, who types well, is organized, and has lovely penmanship. To whom it may concern."
"Well, Buffy, this has been most...enlightening." Giles had questioned her for the better part of an hour and had exhausted not only his prepared list of questions but all of his extemporaneous ones as well. "I'm afraid I'm out of questions for now. Could I impose upon you in the future if I think of anything else?"

"Sure, Giles. I'll answer questions honestly without the truth spell, too. I just wanted to make sure you believed me when I told you the weird stuff."

"Very good, then. I'll let you out of the cir...."

"Just a mo, Watcher. Got a question or two of my own for the girl." Buffy's eyes widened, but she nodded. "How old are you?"

"She said she died in twenty-sixteen, Spike," Giles interjected. "Surely you can do the math."

"Buffy. Slayer. How old are you?" He ignored the Watcher, held Buffy's eyes.

"Older than I should be," she said softly. "Older than any Slayer has ever been."

"You're evadin’ the question. How long have you lived?"

"A hundred and fourteen years." They both ignored the spluttering noises coming from Giles. Spike nodded.

"Thought it’d be somethin’ like that. You spent seventy-odd years in some other dimension?"

"Yes." He dropped to his hands and knees so he could meet her eyes. "Not all in one, though. Several places. Harmony negotiates...negotiated...tenses, I don’t know...interdimensional travel agreements.... She's the authority on it."

"Hmph. Nice to know the tartlet makes somethin’ of herself. Next question. How long will you live?"

"I don’t know, Spike. How long will you live?" That was an interesting response. It meant he’d asked the wrong question. Fine, then. He could be as direct as he needed to be.

"Evadin’ again, Slayer. Are you mortal?"

"No," she whispered.

This was a very different girl, this Slayer. She’d come to terms with some really hard truths. "Why’s that, then?"

"Slayers aren’t, but nobody knew that until I...." The words were barely breathed.

"Until you outlived their expectations?"

"Until. Yeah. Apparently, we grow up, but not old." That didn’t surprise him, given what she’d said earlier about the origin of the line.

"How many of the other Slayers outlived expectations?"
"Less than a hundred. I don’t know exactly." Her eyes were anguished.

Giles gasped, "You activated eighteen hundred Slayers and a dozen years later there were less than a hundred remaining?" Spike hissed, demon faced, and the Watcher fell silent.

"It was my fault." Only his vampire hearing picked up those words. "It was the only thing I could think of."

"Won’t happen this time. Not if I can help it. One Slayer’s more ‘an enough." Her eyes were wet. He wanted to reach through the circle, take her in his arms. He wanted to soothe that broken look away.

"You’ll help me? It wouldn’t’ve been like that if I’d had you there." Bloody right, it wouldn’t have.

"Said I would, didn’t I? ‘Sides, Dru already told me I was yours."

"She did?" Buffy came uncoiled, moved to her hands and knees to face him, nose to nose. Only the immaterial barrier of the circle separated them.

"Yeah. Said you were swimmin’ all ‘round me, an’ bounced me right out on my ear. Every time I tried to come back, she chased me away again, talkin’ about the sunshine. Got so mad I came to find you, get you outta my head."

"You weren’t going to kill me."

"Yeah, well—I din’t know that. Havin’ a weird day, yeah? Never had someone give up Heaven to save my miserable unlife."

"I’ve been to Heaven before. Wanted you more." Oh, god. Did she really just say that?

"That so? What is it you want from me, Buffy?" He felt his voice break on her name.

"Everything." She did. She did really just say that.

"Ah." It was less a word than a sharp exhalation, kind of an inverted gasp, as though he’d been elbowed in the solar plexus. "Everything?"

"Everything." A single tear slipped down her face. "Forever. Are you really already mine?"

"Am." He pulled her to him across the ring of chalk, disrupting the circle, felt the ‘pop’ of the magic dissipating. She settled around him like a blanket, a knee on either side of his hips, and dropped her head onto his shoulder. "‘Sides, when Dru an’ The Powers agree on somethin’, are we gonna argue?"

"I suppose not." She tilted her face up and fastened her teeth on the soft skin beneath the corner of his jaw. He shivered, and glanced over at Giles. She even looked like she was going to initiate a claim, Watcher was gonna come unhinged. As if on cue, Spike heard him clearing his throat.

"You know what you’re doin’, there, love?" She nodded, hazel eyes huge and solemn. "There’s no way to undo that. Can’t back out if you change your mind. You’d be stuck with me." He couldn’t bear the thought of being bound forever to someone who didn’t want him anymore. He’d come close enough with Drusilla, who had needed him long after she stopped wanting him.

"I’m not gonna change my mind. Next move is yours." She glanced over his shoulder. "Put the stake down, Giles. Kill him and the most powerful Slayer who has ever existed will go rogue and start
marauding through your world. Cross my heart and hope you die."

"I beg your pardon...."

"You heard me. I gave up Heaven—perfect peace and contentment—to come back here and throw myself into the fight again just so that I could find Spike. You kill him, I’ve got nothing left to lose." With that, she tucked her face back into Spike’s neck and began rolling the skin of his throat between her front teeth. Her whole body trembled. He carried her to the couch and pulled the quilt around her again, trying to soothe her.

The poet in him wept, overwhelmed by her sacrifice. He wanted to compose odes to her strength and beauty, to her merciful kindness, to her loyalty. He waited with trepidation for a response from his demon. The demon purred and exposed its throat. Oh, god. He met Giles’ eyes across the room and saw in them an echo of his own fear.

"I’m sorry," Buffy said, "for upsetting everybody. I should have said that better. It’s been a while since I’ve done anything but fight, and I’m really, really tired." She gazed up at Giles, the quilt draped around her face, looking for all the world like nothing more than the college girl she’d been the previous morning.
"No. You do the math, Watcher, like you told me earlier. From her perspective, it’s been ninety-nine years since she was called. Been fighting for her life for a century. Know what that’s like." The vampire and the Watcher were drinking together, differences set aside in their shared concern for Buffy. After a light supper, the Slayer had wedged herself between the two of them on the couch and promptly fallen asleep again. "You forget there’s anythin’ to the world but fightin’.

"You don’t think she’s unstable?" Giles jiggled his shot glass so the liquid rippled at the surface.

"‘Course she’s unstable. They all are. She’s prob’ly less than most. Lived a long time."

"Are you going to do it? Are you going to go through with the claim?"

"Dunno yet. ‘S one of those things you don’ wanna be wrong about." He knocked his drink back. "Demon wants it, though."

"That’s what I don’t understand! Aren’t you the demon?"

"Demon is me. ‘M not the demon. Tha’s very Zen...I think." He was having trouble sorting out his Buddhist sects. He thought it might have something to do with the scotch.

"That’s nonsense, is what it is. It’s utter tripe." The Watcher’s words were slurred. That definitely had something to do with the scotch.

"Why do you lot have so much bloody trouble with this? ‘S easy. We’re all made of metaphorical bits with various opinions: head; heart; gut; dick. You don’ make decisions with any one piece."

Giles muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "Speak for yourself."

"You," Spike slurred deliberately, "are drunk." He moved the bottle out of the Watcher’s reach. "Wha’d’you think? ‘Bout the claim, I mean."

"Depends on which metaphorical part of me you ask."

"Don’ wanna hear ‘bout your dick, mate."

Giles waved his hand dismissively. "Head says I should stake you ‘cause you’re dangerous. Heart says she’s just a girl, ill-used and sad, and she needs...you, I suppose, and maybe I don’t need to understand it. Gut says I couldn’t kill you, anyway, ‘cause I’m drunk and you," he set his glass down on the table, "are probably not."

"Any other parts with opinions?"

"There’s a part of me that thinks it would be beautiful," the Watcher said clearly, which stopped Spike cold. He closed his eyes as the man continued, "Uplifting, world-changing, redemptive, and many other descriptors one would not normally associate with murderous fiends such as yourself. It wants to give you a chance. I suppose that part would be my soul."

"I suppose it would," Spike said quietly.

"And that’s the thing you lack, correct? You lack the capacity to appreciate those things because you have no soul. You wouldn’t comprehend the opportunity should I offer it to you."
"You're right, Rupert." He pulled the lax body of the sleeping Slayer up into his arms and hid his face in her hair, overwhelmed by her presence, her sacrifice, and her acceptance. Without waking, she twined her fingers in his curls and murmured his name. "I have no soul." He touched his cool lips to Buffy's warm ones, felt her drift toward consciousness and press back. "And you have no demon. Ever wonder what you lack?"

"Mmm...is this a private philosophical bitch-slapping, or can anyone join?" She kissed Spike deeply, stroked his face and his hair, then reached out and took Giles' hand gently in hers. To his credit, the Watcher didn't recoil. "He doesn't have a human soul, Giles, and neither do I. It doesn't mean what you think it means. The Council is wrong."

"This is ludicrous, Buffy. Of course you have a...."

"No, Giles. Not this time. You mean the world to me, but I just...can't." She dropped his hand. "This is done. I'm done discussing it. You can do the damned research and find out exactly what I did, or you can stick with the Council and we'll go our separate ways, like we did in my timeline. Either way, I'm hungry. Spike, let's go home."
The flat felt empty after Buffy and her vampire left.

He marveled at the strangeness of those words, but he couldn’t dispute them. His Slayer was clearly in possession of the creature in a way he would not have believed possible had he not seen it himself, and he didn’t understand why. It strained credulity to believe that a truce alone could constrain a demon of Spike’s age and power.

Spike’s behavior during the visit had been surprisingly pleasant. While it could not exactly be described as polite, it was, at the least, inoffensive and non-lethal, the demise of his favorite ceramic teapot aside. At times, there were even moments of genuine camaraderie. It was unusual, although not unprecedented, to encounter a vampire with the self-control to interact with humans. Spike had already proven himself capable of that much. The care with which he handled Buffy, by contrast, contradicted virtually everything Giles had been taught about vampires.

He had rarely met human men so attentive. He could put some of it down to vampiric senses, perhaps, the predator’s ability to hear subtle changes in heart rate or breathing, but that would only make Spike aware of tiny shifts in Buffy’s emotional state. It wouldn’t make him so responsive to them. The vampire had to have chosen to do that.

It was quite like the way the Slayer treated her vampire. For all that she called him her Champion, which implied a relationship more martial than amorous, she obviously cared for him, treated him as gently as he treated her. Her history-making offer to claim him stood as testament to her...feelings. The strongest and most loyal of her companions, she’d said. That phrase rattled around in the dusty corners of his memory, niggling at him, so he jotted it down with everything else she’d said.

His legal pad was nearly filled with lists of dates, events that might not actually occur, warnings of things to come, suggestions and asides, along with the bombshell of Buffy’s insistence that she did not have a soul.

He pulled down every book he had on his shelves which contained any information on the origins of the Slayer. It amounted to no more than a dozen densely written paragraphs, eight of which were in hyperbolic blank verse. All of them had been translated through at least two other languages, and none said anything specific about the creation of the line. It was a dead end—disappointing but not surprising. He would have to make some phone calls.

He glanced at the clock and pinched the bridge of his nose. Ten minutes of nine. In London, it was not yet five in the morning. It would be at least three hours before anyone who might be able to answer his questions would be awake. Damn.

In an effort to kill some time, he skimmed idly through the few prophesies about the Slayer that he had on hand. The sheer number of different names by which the Slayer was called struck him. How did the translators determine whether a prophecy was about the Slayer if there was no consistency in how she was described? “The Slayer” was, of course, the most common, although “Warrior of the People” was a close second. “The Chosen One” ranked near the top, as well. Then there were more obscure titles. “The Hand of God” was mentioned more than once, as was “Guardian of the Abyss.” In the oldest, least complete writing, the one translated to English from Latin, which had been translated from the earlier Sumerian text, which was quoted from an even earlier text in an unidentified language, she was referred to as “The Demon Bound.” Bugger the time difference. He placed a call to London.
It took most of an hour to convince an extremely sleepy and irritated Robson to send the information without mentioning it to Travers. Not only did he have to promise an undisclosed future favor to the man, but he had to agree to pay for the fax, as well. He hoped it got him somewhere. A thousand page trans-Atlantic fax was pricey.

He caught a few hours of sleep, picked up the fax at Kinko’s, and spent the entire next day going over it. He found nothing.

Robson had printed information directly from the Council database. The first hundred pages or so of the fax consisted of records of the known Slayers: their names and countries of origin, how old they were when they were called, when they died—tidbits of data, certainly compiled from the Watchers’ Diaries. They were always described in the superlative. Each girl was the fastest, strongest, purest, bravest, best, and most beloved, right up until she died, and then the next girl inherited the title.

There were thirty-five names on each of about a hundred pages. The Council had record of roughly thirty-five hundred Slayers, the vast majority of which only lived between one and three years from the time they were called. These pages represented about seven thousand years of Slayer history, and the names at the start were recorded in the same way as the names at the end—routinely, and by tradition. The line had not begun at any time in the last seven thousand years.

Well, that certainly made the research more difficult.

Robson’s package also contained a handful of extremely well written but completely contradictory essays about what a Slayer was, exactly. They ranged from the beneficent—a beautiful young girl, strong and pure of heart, chosen to embody a heavenly being and become a literal avenging angel—to a sort of deal with the devil—wherein a demon, no different than the demons she was battling, was captured and forced to work against her nature and her kind. In the latter scenario, the creature looked like a young girl, but mustn’t, in any case, be treated like one. The writer of the most extreme version of that point of view lived during the middle ages, and kept his Slayer locked in a cage during the day.

Slayers who were located by the Watchers’ Council before they were called lived longer—he knew that to be a fact, although nobody had ever explained the reason for it. One essayist asserted that it allowed the demon spirit which inhabited the Slayer when she was called to imprint on her Watcher. He likened it to the vampire’s bond with his sire. Most writers dismissed this idea as both fanciful and indefensible, crediting the extra longevity to additional training. Giles agreed with the majority opinion. In the beginning, Buffy was untrained and undisciplined. She took a great many unwarranted risks. He struggled to teach her maneuvers that would have come much more easily to a younger girl.

There were two pieces he was able to dismiss outright. Although the writers disagreed about the identity of the spirit inhabiting her, they both thought that the Slayer was the product of possession by a singular entity who moved from shell to shell, discarding each body as it became too damaged to use. In this scenario, only one Slayer could exist at a time because there was only one spirit to animate her. This basic theory—in one form or another—held favored status for several hundred years. It had the advantage of Slayer dreams and collective memories as evidence.

When Kendra was called, it had to be discarded, although there were still a few hangers-on. These people insisted that Kendra was the One True Slayer and that Buffy Summers was really still dead. Whatever it was that wore her body was not her, was not the Slayer, and should be eliminated for the safety of the human race. Giles recalled heated discussions with several well-placed members of the Council who held this minority opinion. Kendra’s death, followed by Buffy’s disappearance, only added steam to the movement. He had no proof, but suspected that cadre of being behind the choice.
of opponent for Buffy’s Cruciamentum.

A thousand pages, twelve solid hours of reading, brought him no closer to an answer than he’d been when he started. A call to an old friend at the British Museum netted him nothing in particular. Nor did a late-night conversation with an acquaintance who had arcane connections. He was stymied. A year or two ago, his next call would have been to Philip or Deirdre—or even Thomas—someone from his Eyghon days with whom he had some tenuous connection remaining. Unfortunately, the only person left alive from that group was Ethan Rayne.

No knowledge in the world was worth that phone call.
“Hey.”

Riley was surprised when he heard the voice. There shouldn’t have been anybody else on the block. They weren’t anywhere near capacity, so he was on inventory duty by himself for the whole week. Only his squad had clearance for this wing, in any case, and that was not one of his guys.

But he hesitated. Maybe someone took a wrong turn. This facility was huge and new, after all, and people were still finding their way around. Or maybe someone had been sent to find him. There could be some kind of emergency topside.

So without missing a step, he dropped the cover back over his clipboard and scanned the bright white corridor that separated the two rows of active holding cells. He didn’t see anyone.

“Hey,” the voice came again. It had a weird timbre, somehow both high pitched and gravelly, with an upward lilt.

He rotated a hundred and eighty degrees and kept walking, looking down the corridor in the other direction. Still nothing.

As he turned back around to continue on his way, however, one of the hostiles leapt forward and roared, startling him. He couldn’t help himself. He made eye contact with it. It pounded its deep red fists against the plexiglass, screaming defiance, and he stumbled backward into the barrier on the opposite side of the corridor.

The hostile in that cell extended the spikes in its forearms and smacked them against the barrier. They rebounded with a clatter and Riley jumped away.

He had been trained to move unobtrusively when he was taking inventory in the blocks, not to dawdle or make any sudden moves, and especially never to meet the hostiles’ eyes. He’d violated all the rules in a matter of seconds, and now every last one of the hostiles was staring at him.

He edged away from the cells where the three enormous humanoid hostiles—yellow, red, and yellow in sequence—were housed. One of them growled at him.

“Hey! Down here.” He spun—and looked down.

On the floor of a cell he’d assumed was empty sat something that looked like a cross between a blobfish and a toad, but it had a tail like a tadpole extending from its lower spine. Its skin was mottled the dark yellow and brown of an overripe banana, and it left a trail of viscous yellow fluid behind it when it crawled, toad-like, across the clean white floor. Also, it was about sixteen inches high.

“Who you?” it asked. “Who?”

“Holy cow! You talk?” The thing glared poisonously.

“Who you?”

“Special Agent Finn of the Initiative.” If the words hadn’t come out of his mouth automatically, they wouldn’t have come out at all. He hadn’t known he was going to have a conversation with an amphibian when he woke up this morning—or any morning, when you got right down to it. What was it Forrest said? Chalk it up to the Sunnydale Strange and move along.
“Who you work for?” It edged closer to the barrier and pressed one sticky...hand...foot...paw...to the plexiglass. He knelt to look more closely at it. Four digits. The outermost digit was opposable.

“The United States Army.”

“Slayer?” It pressed its other forelimb to the plexiglass and pulled itself up onto its hind feet. He had a sudden urge to put his hand against the barrier. He gripped the clipboard in both fists behind his back, instead. “You work for Slayer?”

“I don’t know what that means.” Riley shook his head. Did it want his name, rank, and serial number?

It made a noise like an air horn. His ears popped. “You work for Slayer? You Slayer?”

“I don’t understand.” He edged back and pulled himself to his feet.

“Yo, Joe—she wants to know if you’re working for the Slayer.” A vampire sat cross-legged on the floor of another cell watching him steadily with yellow eyes. “Are you?”

Riley shook his head. “What’s a slayer?”

“Not a. The. The one and only. A nightmare shaped like a little girl.” It bared its fangs. “Stronger than them.” It nodded at one of the humanoids. “So fast she blurs. Kill one, another comes. Unstoppable.”

So the Slayer was...what? An urban legend? A morality play? A fairy tale for monsters? “And it’s real?”

“Real as you,” said the vampire. “Real as me.”

“Slayer!” croaked the toad thing.

“Slayer!” bellowed the red humanoid, barely intelligible. The yellow hostiles in the cells on either side of it roared wordlessly and pounded the walls of their cells.

“The Slayer,” said the vampire. “You work for her?” He hesitated. “She work for you?”

“No...I’ve never heard of...her.”

“Figures. You’re in over your head.” The vampire shook its head slowly and lowered its eyes. It was apparently finished with the conversation, but the hostiles in the other cells never stopped their chant. Riley fled, an inhuman cacophony ringing in his ears.
They had gotten no more than a half dozen steps outside Giles’ front door when the attack came.
There were five of them, all vampires, all unarmed. As an exercise in symmetry, Spike didn’t draw a
weapon, either, but fought with fists and fangs, leaping atop and immobilizing his first opponent
before twisting his head off. It was an enjoyable fight, if not especially challenging, and it was over
too soon.

A few feet away from him, the Slayer was dancing. She toyed with the remaining four vamps,
smacking each of them down in turn without doing so much damage that they couldn’t get back up.
A jumping roundhouse kick into the chest of one was followed by a lapel grab and head butt to the
face of another. She was fragile golden destruction, a whirling nightmare of horror and pain spinning
so fast she blurred. She was exquisite.

He’d never seen anyone move like that, like her entire being was a weapon in the hand of some
vengeful god. He wanted to tackle her to the ground and fuck her until she screamed his name, or
throw himself at her feet, belly exposed, just for the privilege of dying at her hand. Some faint, sane,
*human* voice, speaking from the dim recesses of his psyche, was alarmed that he didn’t care which,
so long as she was touching him.

One at a time, their attackers tired, tried to fall back. Spike picked them off as they turned to go,
twisting their heads until they dusted or punching through their hearts. He smelled the cameraman’s
fear long before he heard his footsteps. When only one attacker remained, Spike leapt into the bushes
and retrieved a young male vamp in the process of fleeing with an expensive movie camera.

"Smile, pet!" Spike said, shaking the terrified vampire. "You’re on Candid Camera!"

"He was...filming...us?" Buffy raised her eyebrows. "That’s...weird...and sort of an invasion of
privacy."

"Eh," he shrugged. "I, uh, filmed you when I first came to town. Was trying to figure out how to
fight you. Needed every advantage I could get. Still have the tapes, if you wanna watch ’em,
sometime."

“Aww, ” she said before smacking herself in the forehead with the heel of her hand. “Wait. I was
about to get all nostalgic over your practice-killing-Buffy videos. That’s...no. I should be mad at you,
right now.” She followed up with a half-hearted glare.

"Be my guest," he said, feeling somewhat nostalgic himself. "Tapes are amazing. You should watch
‘em. You were already the best. So...what should we do with our cameraman?"

"How’s my hair?" She took the cameraman’s hand and pulled him around to face her. He was small,
maybe five foot six, with straight brown hair and gray eyes. His features were regular and reasonably
attractive, but nothing stood out. If Spike were to use one word to describe him, it would be
’nondescript’. A second might be ‘inoffensive’. If he’d felt his signature in a crowded room, he
would have eliminated absolutely everyone else before he decided this was the vampire.

"Fi...fine. You look...g...good..."

"Thank you!" She patted him on the shoulder. "Don’t worry so much, sweetie. You’re going to
survive this. Turn the camera on and point it at me and Spike." When the young vampire turned
frightened eyes on the bleached blond master, Buffy said, "Oh, your boss didn’t tell you who you
were filming, did he? Do you know who I am?" He shook his head. "I'm Buffy, The Vampire Slayer."

She helped the cameraman set back up. Now that he was out in the open, he was much more exacting about his equipment. He pulled lights out of a large black duffel and aimed them carefully at his subjects. While he worked with the camera, his self-consciousness evaporated. There was something familiar about the young man, who hadn’t flickered into game face once during the conversation. "Tell me ‘bout yourself, boy," Spike said. "What’s your name? Who’s your sire?"

"Is he rich like me?" Buffy chimed in. Spike rolled his eyes, but the boy grinned.

"Sean Walden. Don’t know who my sire is." He shrugged. "I was a film student at U.C. Sunnydale. Didn’t grow up around here, though. From Portland...Oregon, not Maine." He looked through the viewfinder on his camera and commented, "You two look really good on film." He adjusted a few more dials and knobs and then stuck his head out from behind his camera. "All set. You wanna make a porno?"

As soon as he was sure that neither combat blond was planning to kill him, Sean relaxed. He did several takes of Buffy’s menacing message to his boss and let her choose her favorite. Spike watched over her shoulder as she made her choice.

The take she picked featured her standing in front of Spike and very slightly to his right. They had their arms folded across their chests in identical postures of grim, uncompromising threat. "Allow me to introduce myself," said the Buffy on the screen. "I am the Slayer, and this is my town."

"With me is my ally William of Aurelius, known as Spike. It has come to my attention that you have repeatedly attacked him in an attempt to obtain an artifact in his possession. This can only be regarded as an act of war against the rightful Master of Sunnydale. Should the attacks continue, we will have no choice but to retaliate. Let me reiterate: If your attacks continue, we will destroy you."

"We have taken as hostage Sean Walden, who will serve as emissary between our two groups. Henceforth, he is under my protection. Any attack against him will be construed as an attack against me." The Buffy on film gave a little forward half-bow without lowering her eyes and the picture faded to black.

"Man, that is hot. Definitely the best take." Sean popped the tape out of the camera and kissed it before handing it over to Buffy. "You guys are the real deal. Wish I’d gotten to film subjects like you when I was in school instead of," his lip curled, "theater majors. So...am I really a hostage?"
They put Sean in the back seat of the DeSoto and drove him to the burned out factory on the edge of town. Buffy started giggling first.

"What is it about this place?" she asked. "Have the walls been rubbed with vampire-nip?"

"What’s wrong with it?" Spike growled. "It’s a perfectly good...."

This set Sean off. "Trite, hackneyed, unoriginal," he gasped. "With the dark and dank, and the broken pipes, and the boarded up windows...." He clutched his stomach and howled with laughter. "Oh, man. It looks like the set of a b-grade vampire movie."

They dropped the tape off with the minions that met them as they entered, doing their best to look like they were holding Sean against his will. Once they were back in the car, Buffy asked, "Do you have a place to stay, Sean? Other than...." She waved her hand at the factory.

"Oh, god, yes. I’m not a minion," he said with horror. "The minions are those guys willing to die for the greater glory of their august and venerable clan. I don’t have a clan. I have skills. I get paid for what I do and then I go away. Wanna see my apartment?"

It was a tiny basement studio in a Brachen-owned building near the university. "I never officially died," Sean explained, "I just disappeared for a few days, so I still have the trust fund I got when I turned eighteen. It’s not huge, but it’ll get me through for a while. I still have a bank account and a driver’s license and a voter registration card. Technically, I’m still a student. I take a night class in film editing twice a week so I can use the film department’s equipment.

"I moved, after I was changed. Figured I should be more careful with money, get a cheaper place, but I like it alright." It was decorated in layers of gray and dusty green. Everything was flannel or corduroy, anything with an obvious, soft nap. The lights were electric, but dimmed and filtered through heavy linen shades. It was not dank.

Spike circled the place, running his hands over every surface. It was put together with vampire senses in mind, from the filtered light to the touchable textures of the upholstery to the fabric wall hangings which muffled all the noise from outside. The boy even had potted ferns and mosses—richly green plants made for the dark forest floor. He loved it. He wanted it. Was he getting old? Going soft, like Dru said? He opened the refrigerator in the tiny kitchen. In addition to a few soft drinks and a couple of bottles of decent German beer, there were a half dozen or so containers of blood variously labeled: cow, chimpanzee, otter, AB negative.

"You don’t hunt," he said, turning back to Buffy and Sean who were discussing the care of some emerald green draping moss.

"No, I don’t." Sean looked uncomfortable, maybe embarrassed. "Is that something I’m just supposed to know how to do? Like a vampire instinct?" He folded his arms across his chest. "‘Cause nobody ever showed me how and I...I guess I’m just not a natural."

Spike stared at the boy. This, then, is what Angelus was afraid William would become unless he was knocked straight: no killer instinct, the demon almost completely submerged. Sean was nearly human. His game face hadn’t come out once, not during the whole evening, not even now that he was angry. "No. Huntin’s not instinct. Only instinct is the hunger, an’ huntin’s nothin’ like that. ‘S what your sire’s supposed to teach you." He tilted his head, fixing Sean with a predator’s measured
regard. "You’ve never hunted?"

"I, uh, once. Right after I woke up, I killed a goose." He hung his head. "It was already hurt. Lame. Okay? I know I’m lame."

"You woke up, drained a wounded goose, and then what? What did you do? How did you survive?" He’d agreed to five years without hunting, allied himself with the Slayer against his own kind, spent the afternoon with her head in his lap. It was unreal, unheard of for his kind, let alone his kin. If he’d been left to himself as a fledgling, is this what his life would have looked like? Spike found himself feeling a sense of kinship to the unassuming young man.

"I went to the butcher’s and bought a bunch of pig’s blood. Used my debit card. The guy didn’t even look at me funny." He gave a bitter little laugh. "You know, right up until that moment, it never occurred to me that most towns don’t have butcher shops that stay open until midnight."

"What, that wasn’t in the college promo brochure?" Buffy patted Sean on the shoulder and then caught Spike’s eyes. "Okay...what’s up, Spike? You look all conflicted and...worried. Is he...do we need to add him to your list? It’s okay with me if you think we do. You had fewer people than I did, anyway."

He considered that for a moment. "Yeah. Think maybe we do." They both took out their journal books and added Sean’s name to Spike’s list of protected people. "Wonder whose he is. Smells like...family...maybe. Not close. Not Dru. Not Angelus... Dunno. You weren’t buried, boy? You didn’t dig out?"

"Oh, god, no. Is that what normally happens?" Sean’s pleasant face went slack when Spike nodded. "That’s awful. I’m glad whoever it was just ditched me." He appeared to consider it for a moment. "Would it have been better? If I’d had my sire, would it have been better for me?"

Spike looked him up and down, from soft body to soft hands to soft face to keen, sensitive eyes. There was no trace of despair in the younger vampire. "No, lad. Don’t think it would."
"He’s an artist," she said, her hand brushing his as they walked back to the car. "I like him."

"Figured that. When was it you started fraternizin’ with the enemy?" To be fair, the little vampire boy was likable. ‘Course, that wouldn’t’ve stopped Angelus, who’d’ve taken the lad apart. Or worse.

"When they stopped being the enemy." He didn’t say anything. This world she came from, where vampires and Slayers were not enemies, was mightily hard to believe, despite the certain fact that he believed her. She elaborated. "When all the Hellmouths opened, most of the vampires and a lot of the settled demons figured out we were on the same side. Hell, even some of the Slayers figured it out. Besides," she said, watching him out of the corner of her eye, "why should he be my enemy? He’s never killed anybody."

"I have." That was the crux of it. He didn’t understand why she would trust him, why she would defend him—why she wanted him. Maybe he could have been like innocuous little Sean, once, if he hadn’t been taken under Angelus’ wing, if there hadn’t been a century of bloodshed intervening, but he wasn’t like him now. It was too late for that.

"I know exactly what you’ve done." That was even harder to believe. It made him antsy.

"Do you?" She nodded. He searched her face, but couldn’t find any hint of deception. "An’ it doesn’t bother you?"

"It did the first time," she said. "It doesn’t anymore."

"Why’s that, then?"

"You’re a hero, Spike, one of the best and brightest, a genuine first order white hat. You’re the Champion granted to me by The Powers That Almost Never Give Me a Fucking Break, and I need you. I wouldn’t even be here to argue with you about this if you hadn’t died saving the whole goddamned world." Her voice had risen while she spoke until she was nearly yelling.

"I haven’t done any of that, yet!" he snarled back. "You’ve got no guarantee I will." He wasn’t sure why her insistence bothered him so much. Was she setting him up to fail? Could he compete with the memory of the great sodding paragon who wore his face? Would she hate him if he couldn’t? He wasn’t Angel. The thought of disappointing her made his insides ache.

"You’ve already done it once," she said, arms stiff at her sides. She bristled with irritation. Her volume hadn’t come down any, either. "You kept Dru off me so I could send Angelus to Hell. As of this moment, the result of your existence has been, on balance, more good than evil. You—soulless, evil you—have saved more lives than you’ve ended. Work with me for the next five years—like you’ve already agreed to do—and you’ll completely redeem yourself, soul or no soul." She was right in his face, now, mere inches away. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes flashed furiously. He wanted to bury his hands in her hair and kiss her breathless. Instead, he clenched his fists. "You wanted to be one of the bad guys forever? You shouldn’t have called that first truce."

He had nothing to say to that. He stuffed his balled up hands into his jean pockets and stalked back to the car. He felt small.
"You wanted to be one of the bad guys forever? You shouldn’t have called that first truce," she said. She knew she was yelling. She didn’t care. Spike’s hands were clenched at his sides, like he was angry, but his eyes looked lost. He stuffed his fists in his pockets and stomped back to the car. Sighing, she followed.

“Spike,” she said, after a silent moment in the parked DeSoto. “Could you tell me what’s bothering you?” His eyes were closed and his hands lay limp in his lap.

“No,” he said without looking at her. Well, that was helpful.

“Can’t or won’t?”

“I don’t know.” His voice broke and he stopped talking, swallowed hard. She took his hand, held it between hers, and waited. Eventually, he said, “Your strategy—you’re just gonna hand me everything I’ve ever wanted?”

“Pretty much.”

“Why?” He did turn to look at her, then, and she almost wished he hadn’t. There was something desperate in his eyes, terrified and wild. She was, when you got right down to it, alone in a car with a vampire. It was entirely possible he’d decide she complicated his world too much and snap her neck, just to end the confusion. As a group, vampires weren’t known for their equanimity, and Spike was less even-tempered than most. “M not him—your pet vampire. Not souled.”

“I know.” She stroked his fingers. “Shh.”

“M not gonna be,” he insisted, a little more quietly.

“Not asking you to,” she said very softly. “If you ever decide you need to do that, I want to go with you. I can’t help—not with the trials—but I can make sure you don’t have to deal with the aftermath by yourself.”

He blinked. “It was that bad?”

She nodded, pulled his hand up to her face, and kissed the back of it. “Worse. It was...not right. Unjust. I wouldn’t wish that on my best enemy, either.”

His expression became a little less caged beast and a little more nervous suitor. It was a big improvement. “M not like that kid. Sean.” He cocked his head. “You knew he didn’t hunt. ‘S why you were so friendly.” She nodded. “How’d you know?”

“Two ways, actually.” She nuzzled his fingertips. “The first is that you feel different when you’re hunting. Blood is life, sure, but life is life, too. You following?”

He started to nod, but then shook his head. “Not really.”

“Blood is the physical anchor for life force, which exists in the aetheric realms—the dreamlands. You guys only look like blood suckers. You’re really life suckers.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough, I s’pose.”

“Bagged blood is already cut off from its source. It’s life, but not life, like draining a victim is. When
you drain someone completely, you take their source, their whole life force. It’s way more powerful
than what you get from the blood bank.”

“That makes us feel different?” She smiled. There it was: real human curiosity. Good. He wasn’t
going to kill her—at least, not right now. She felt like Scheherazade.

“Sure does. You have no life force. You’re like a walking life force siphon, a great big, black hole in
the psyche of the world, and the more you put into it, the bigger it gets. In the dreamlands, an old
master like you is this glacier-sized field of ice-cold, pee-your-pants terror, empty of all life, ravenous
for more—I don’t think it’s possible to use too many scary words to describe it.”

“Me?” He looked half flattered and half disbelieving. “Really?” Everyone else might cringe and
cower from him, but he still felt like Angelus’ recalcitrant fledgling, the Dennis the Menace of his
Order. Nothing she’d ever read addressed low self-esteem in vampires.

“Yeah, you. I have nightmares every time one like you lands in town. I can feel you coming for
miles.” She kissed his hand again. “That’s how I’d know what you’ve done even if you hadn’t
confessed it all to me, post-soul.”

He raised his eyebrows. “An’ Sean isn’t a glacier?”

“Sean isn’t even a snow flurry,” she said.

He pondered all of that for a moment. “An’ what’s the other way? The other way you knew the boy
wasn’ hunting.”

“Besides his refrigerator? In the Othertime, I knew someone who knew him.” It was Clem who
knew Sean, spoke well of him. She’d have to look him up in this timeline, bring him to meet the
gang. That would gray up their neat black-and-white world a little. There was nothing like a Clement
to completely derail anti-demon bias. It would be educational and funny. “We never met, but I
recognized the name.”

“Huh. All that’s interestin’, Slayer, but you haven’t answered my first question. Why are you here
playin’ William’s Fondest Wish Fairy?” He didn’t pull his hand away, but his skin stopped
responding to her touch. He went still in that way that was only possible when you didn’t have a
heartbeat, and he watched her.

“I don’t know, Spike.” She blew out one anxious breath. That was a vampire looking at her. She
suspected he was doing it deliberately to remind her of what he was. Stupid vampire. An evil thing
had no business being quite that honest. “Because I didn’t, before, and I should have? Because you
swore you could be...something totally new...and I didn’t believe you? Because I actually got in your
way when you tried to change, and you did it anyway? Because I was wrong, and you were right,
and I don’t know exactly how right, but you had tea and scotch with my watcher while I was
sleeping on your lap, so you’re looking really right, right now.” She shrugged. “I’ve probably
stopped making sense.”

“Nah. Dru.” He pulled his hand free and put his arm over her shoulders, tugged her up against him,
and pressed his lips into her hair. “But what if I wasn’t as right as all that?”

“Then you’ll decide I’m not worth the trouble and you’ll kill me. I’ll go to...wherever the Powers
send me...and it’ll be over.” She didn’t want to think about where she’d go, this time. She’d struck a
risky bargain.

“An’ you’re not scared?” His nostrils flared. The question was rhetorical. Her fear was obvious.
“Terrified. Aren’t you?”

He chuckled. “Yeah.”

“I’m tired, Spike. I’ve been fighting for longer than I was ever meant to fight. If you kill me—well, at least it’d be you.” An expression of deep weariness passed over his face, and she understood. That was why he’d come to her when he couldn’t hunt, anymore, that Thanksgiving day that was not yet and long ago. He was done, and if he had to die, at least it would be her. “You’d want it to be me?”

“S what I came here for.”

“Really?” He nodded. “I thought you came here to kill me.”

“Either or,” he said. “Didn’t think I had a chance, though. Thought you’d take the ring an’ watch me burn.”

“Just so you know,” she said, as she burrowed into his chest, “I’m not gonna kill you.”

“Not ‘specially interested in killing you, anymore, either,” he said, nuzzling her hair.

“Awww. That’s sweet, but you shouldn’t promise until you’ve been around a while. I’ve never had a boyfriend who didn’t eventually want to kill me.” It was her very best imitation of her younger self, and it made him laugh.

“You’re crazy, you know. Absolutely bleedin’ crackers.”

“You’re evil.” She batted her eyelashes as coquettishly as she could manage under the circumstances. “It’s destiny.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Weren’t you supposed to stop me from doing that?”

“Sorry. Conflict of interest,” she said, and then she kissed him.
They eventually wound up at Willy’s eating bar food. The room fell silent when they entered. Demons of every description tried futilely to pretend they weren’t staring while Buffy sat across the table from him, holding his hand. It was a strange familiarity, different in spirit than their time at the Watcher’s flat because it was an exhibition. The demon world was watching, and she knew it.


"Hey, Willy!" Buffy spoke just loudly enough to be certain that the whole room could hear. "I don’t want any trouble tonight, either. I’m just hungry. You got a menu?" The weaselly man handed over a pair of plasticoated sheets.

"Can I bring you lovely people something to drink while you look at the menu?"

"Bottle of Jack, Willy. Need a glass," Spike said. This was how they were gonna play it? Fine, then. He could be dashing and romantic for an audience. That had been part of the eternal love mythology surrounding his relationship with Dru. He lifted Buffy’s hand to his lips and kissed her palm, gazing at her like she was the only other person in the room. "An’ whatever my lady would like. Put it on my tab."

"You got a good kshikle’un on tap?" Everyone stopped pretending they weren’t staring, even Spike. Kshikle’un was a pretty, frothy, pale green beverage made from processed corn stalks and a variety of herbs. It was sharply sweet with a caustic aftertaste, non-alcoholic, and poisonous to humans. Willy nodded slowly but didn’t say anything. Buffy gave the bartender what appeared to be a genuine smile. "That would be perfect, Willy. Thanks."

"Okey-dokey. I’ll be right back with your drinks, folks," he said, and high-tailed it back behind the bar.

Buffy spent the next few minutes reading over the menu. When Willy returned with their drinks, she sipped at the kshikle’un and then lowered her eyelids in obvious sensual pleasure. "Now that’s good. Goes right to the sweet tooth. Willy’s Bar has to be added to the list of things I failed to appreciate when I was younger." She ordered a selection of appetizers from four separate demon cuisines. She got all the accents right.

"Slayer, it’s not like me to interfere. Live and let live, I always say. But...." His eyes darted back and forth between his order pad and her drink. "As a rule, I try to steer my customers away from things that might kill them. Better for repeat business."

"Bet it is, sweetie, but it’s okay. None of this will hurt me. After all," she laughed, and raised her voice just a little. "I’m not human."

Their dinner was interrupted no less than four times, with the disturbances evenly divided between attempts to take the Gem of Amara away from Spike and belligerent challenges to Buffy’s very existence. Buffy sat back and watched while Spike took care of his own attackers, lifting her drink away when he smashed someone’s face down onto the table. Spike dusted both of his, leaving the dust for Willy to deal with. Buffy broke one demon’s arm and another one’s jaw, after which she escorted each of them to the door.

When Willy came by to refill her drink saying, "On the house," she pulled him aside. He held his
hands up. "Look, Slayer. I want you to know I had nothing to do with—."

"I’m not gonna hold you responsible for these idiots, Willy. You can piss me off all by yourself. Why would you need to outsource?" She grinned. "Relax. I’m hoping you can help me with something."

"Sure! Helpful is my middle name." He leaned in close to them, put his elbows down on the table and whispered. "Slayer, do you know what you’re doing, here? You’re getting lots of publicity, tonight, and none of it good."

"Yup! That would be the point." She gave Willy a strangely affectionate mock-punch in the jaw. "I don’t wanna cause trouble for you, Will. I don’t wanna kill your customers or mess up your bar, but I need to get the word out. Spike and me—we gotta go public with this, get everyone used to the idea, so that my people don’t kill his people and vice versa. Worlds collide, you know?"

"You two—you’re an item, now? Really?" Willy looked back and forth between them. When Spike nodded, Buffy broke into a brilliant smile, leaned forward to press a kiss onto the corner of his mouth. "Huh. I did not see that coming. Live and learn." Willy flipped a dining chair backward and straddled it. "So what is it I can do for the happy couple?"

Buffy answered at length in a language Spike did not recognize. Willy’s knuckles went white on the chair back, but he eventually responded, firing questions back at Buffy in that same strange tongue. The conversation was hypnotic.

"Wow." The bartender nodded, blinking rapidly. "Lucky guy. Hope he appreciates it. But yeah. Sure. Stay as long as you need to. When you finish your drinks, I’ll take you up, get you the keys." He narrowed his eyes at Spike. "Wow. Some guys."

"Wanna tell me what that was about?" Spike asked, the moment they were alone again.

"There’s a space at the back of the building. No windows, vampire-safe, reinforced door, magical locks. Got him to agree to let us stay there." She sipped at her kshikle’un, swirling the liquid around in the bottom of the glass. Her eyes were soft and smiling, full of secrets. "Appealed to his sentimental nature."

His what? He’d never known Willy to express anything resembling sentiment. That lowlife would auction off his own grandmother if he could get the bidding started. "Right, then. Why’d he keep looking at me like that?"

"’Cause I told him why I wanted it."

The space Willy led them to was tastefully but anonymously furnished, like a hotel room. There was a queen-sized bed covered with a dark blue comforter, two pine side tables with drawers, and a television on top of a large, empty bureau. The adjacent bathroom was clean and white with fresh, fluffy towels. Willy gave them instructions for allowing or disallowing people through the magical barrier as well as a real, physical key.

"Dibs on first shower!" Buffy said, as soon as he was gone, ducking quickly into the bathroom and closing the door. Spike stripped down to his jeans and stretched out on the bed, draping one arm over his eyes and drifting off to sleep.

He woke to warm lips moving against his belly button. A freshly scrubbed, stark naked Buffy leaned over him on her hands and knees, trailing kisses from his stomach up his chest to the hollow of his throat, before stretching out on top of him, skin to skin, to bite and suck on the soft flesh at the crook
of his neck. He arched his back, wrapped his arms around her hard enough to break human bones, and growled low in his chest.

"Hey," she whispered. "Do you really need those jeans?"
Buffy was nervous.

Terrified might be a better word. The door dropped closed behind them with a final-sounding click, and Willy went back out to his bar, back out to the roomful of demons who had just watched the Slayer disappear into a private room with her nemesis. If this didn’t work...well, it had to. She’d already made her public statement, already told Giles and Willy and, well, Spike. There was no turning back now.

But she wasn’t ready. "Dibs on first shower!" she yelled, and bolted for the bathroom. Then she closed the door, turned on the water, and sat down on the edge of the bathtub to cry.

"This is what you wanted," the familiar voice murmured from inside her skull. “It is exactly as you asked it to be.”

“It is,” she whispered. It was exactly as she asked it to be—better, even. She should be overjoyed. The Powers never passed out bonuses. Since she’d arrived earlier in the timeline than she’d thought she would, she had a real chance to stop the out-of-control downward spiral of hell gods and hellmouths. Showing up now made saving the world a whole lot easier.

But it made saving herself a whole lot harder.

This Spike wasn’t in love with her. He hadn’t been chipped, hadn’t declared his love with Taser and chains. He was attracted to her, flattered by her attention, sure, and obviously infatuated. He was already hers, he’d said. Dru had told him so, and this is when the Powers sent her, so it must be true, but it wasn’t what it became later. Now, she wasn’t sure if it ever would be. She hoped it would be enough.

“We have kept Our word,” it continued, calm and inhuman, “yet you hesitate.”

“I...I just need a minute,” she answered. She hated that she sounded so scared.

“One minute or ten. One year or a hundred. It makes no difference. Complete the tasks upon which We agreed, or forfeit the challenge.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

The cat materialized in the sand at her feet. “Do you? You disrupted the balance of this world. We corrected it.”

“I know.”

“We have unraveled Our work, undone Our changes, reset Time itself at your request. We will not correct it again.”

In other words, fix it or the world ends, but hey, Buffy—no pressure! Fucking Powers. She curled an arm over her face, blocking out the bright sunlight.

She probably should have been a little less enthusiastic about the demony treats she’d scarfed down, earlier, but they were so good—take a moment to deal with that memory-splintering reality: the food at Willy’s was really, really good—and she couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten an actual meal in an actual restaurant. Having Spike across the table from her, holding her hand, vivid blue
eyes bemused but content, made everything seem soft-focus and dreamlike, despite the parade of attackers, so she’d gone with it. Now, she just felt sick.

The cat’s paw darted into the fountain and snatched out an orange and black koi. It flopped on the sand for just a moment before its head was torn from its body. “Remember, too, that your Champion carries a destiny of his own. Should you disrupt his journey....”

Oh, god. That was the detail she couldn’t dredge up during the cat’s last visit. The risky bargain. If Spike didn’t become a capital-H Hero in a shiny white hat, she would take his place in capital-H Hell. Why did she only remember that now?

“I am aware of the consequences!” she snapped, with more irritation than it was ever smart to express to an emissary of the Powers That Be. “I will not forfeit,” she continued more softly. “I will meet the challenge.”

“See that you do,” the voice purred, and then it said nothing else.

Buffy squared her shoulders and stepped into her shower. By the time she walked out of the bathroom, still damp and fortified by the steam, Spike lay on top of the dark blue comforter. He had shucked his boots and socks, and stripped naked to the waist. One arm draped languidly over his eyes and his pale chest rose and fell with the rhythmic regularity of sleep.

She’d forgotten he did that. How could she have forgotten? She’d thought everything about him was flash-branded into her memory, and this...habit...was so quintessentially Spike that it made her throat tighten. None of the other vampires she’d met breathed when they were unconscious, not even the very humanlike vampires she knew from the final days. There were a few who affected human mannerisms consciously, but this—it was autonomic. He wasn’t trying to seem more human. He just was more human.

She’d also forgotten how small he was. If you took away the Big Bad strut, stripped off the black leather trophy, and smoothed out the sneer, the man left behind was delicate. Vulnerable. If he opened his eyes right now, just for an instant, for a tiny fraction of a second before the gates slammed shut, she’d see the lovelorn Victorian poet staring out at her. The gaps in her memory felt like a betrayal. She moved closer, dropped her towel on the carpet. She could remember more, if she tried. She would.

He read the Romantic poets—Byron, Keats, Shelley—but also E. E. Cummings and Pablo Neruda and, frankly, whatever he could get his hands on, although he’d never admit to any of it. He’d hidden his books in cracks and crevices in his Sunnydale crypt. He still wrote, although he didn’t admit to that, either. Every once in a while, she’d catch him with a blue-black ink smudge along the pinkie edge of his left hand, but she never said anything. He couldn’t admit to the poet at the heart of the man, and she couldn’t admit to the man at the heart of the monster. She didn’t read his writing until after he was gone.

He listened to punk in public and jazz in private. He knew all the words to every Gilbert and Sullivan song ever written, even though he’d only sing them when he was very, very drunk. She didn’t know that first hand. Dawn told her, after Sunnydale fell. Another betrayal. Another chance lost.

He loved strong flavors—things that were very sweet or very bitter or very spicy. Marshmallows, black coffee, jalapenos, curry, garlic, ginger, lemon, and cinnamon were all favorites. He’d combine them sometimes, for fun, into flavor sensations unpalatable to human tongues: curry-spiced coffee with marshmallow crème on top; hot peppers rolled in lemon sugar; club soda and Tabasco. Dawn told her that, too. It was one of the many things her little sister learned about him during the long
summer after she leapt from Glory’s tower. That would not happen, this time. She sat down on the edge of the bed, dizzy without the weight of the years she no longer carried on her back.

Spike would have handled this better, she was sure. He’d have shrugged his shoulders and rewritten history without a backward...forward...damn time travel...glance, probably laughing as he did, laughing like he had while the Turok-Han blew away on the wind and Sunnydale fell to rubble around him. Was it telling that he’d stopped laughing not long after they knocked a house down together?

She did remember one way she could still make him laugh, though, even during the worst of their...relationship. He was ticklish. The backs of his knees, his ribs, the soft skin just below his belly button, and the soles of his feet were all excruciatingly sensitive. She reached one hand out, touched a fingertip to the soft skin on his hipbone, just above the waistband of his jeans, and he sighed, shifting toward her in his sleep. She stroked his stomach, his chest, and he murmured something that might have been her name. A lot of him was sensitive. She’d figured that much out without Dawn’s help.

With a whispered prayer to beg forgiveness in advance for the mess she might make of this, she crawled onto the bed between his knees, drew a line of gentle kisses from his belly to his throat, and stretched out on top of him, covering his cool body with hers. He yanked her to him, chest rumbling, and held her like he was scared she’d run away.

"Hey," she whispered, smiling into a brief glimpse of the poet’s startled blue eyes. "Do you really need those jeans?" He shook his head slowly, mute for only the second time since she’d met him in the alley behind the Bronze, a wildly varying number of years ago, depending on perspective.

She slithered back down him and unfastened his jeans, slid them off over his hips, and dropped them to the floor. She bit gently into the flesh on the inside of one thigh, nuzzled the other one, and had begun pressing her face to the soft skin between them, when Spike made a strangled gasping noise and hauled her up to the pillow next to him. He rolled toward her and kissed her ferociously, one trembling hand resting on her cheek, the other moving absently through her hair. “You know this is wrong, yeah? Wrong in too many ways to count.”

“Tha’s supposed to be my line.” She leaned in to kiss him again. Wrong or not, he didn’t pull away. “I told you,” she whispered between kisses, “what I want. Question is, what do you want? Like you said—you can’t back out if you change your mind.”

“What if I say no?” He tried to sound like he was teasing her, but there was a catch in his voice.

God, but he was scared—almost as scared as she was—and he was right to be. The Powers were never gentle with their tools. “Well, it depends on what you’re saying no to.” She knew she couldn’t be quippy or reassuring, so she settled on direct. “If you want me to stop touching you and put my clothes back on, well—I might need to take another shower, ‘cause a lot of me is really invested in the idea of touching you.” She kissed him, wrapped a leg up over his hip and pulled him more tightly against her, arching her back. He gasped.

“But if you mean the claim, I’d understand.”

He licked his lips. “Yeah?”

“God, Spike. Completely. That’s big...huge...more than I have any right to ask you for, right now. And we already have the truce, which is all I really need.” She laid her palms against his chest, felt the muscles tense beneath them. “Won’t promise not to ask you again, though—and again and again, until I wear you down and you finally give in.”
She watched the war in his eyes. It wasn’t about what he wanted. He wanted...her...wanted everything. He wanted forever, just like she did, and it wasn’t the demon hesitating. The demon had recognized her the moment they met, simple creature that it was, and it wanted its mate. It was the man who was afraid. He’d had his heart broken more than once in recent memory and wasn’t eager to do it again.

“I don’t know what...or how you....” He let out one ragged breath. “Don’ mind me. Bein’ stupid. Beautiful girl offers....”

“Are you trying to figure out if I’m in love with you?”

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Guess I am.”

“Will you be more or less freaked out if I say yes?”

He laughed shortly. “I don’ rightly know.”

“Almost. You are almost him, that one, the one I came looking for. Almost.” She kissed his eyelids, one after the other, then the tip of his nose.

“What’s the difference?” He barely got the question out. His voice shook. “S not the soul....”

“He was in love with me. You’re not.”

“Oh.”

“If you want to wait until you are, I can be patient, I guess, but Spike,” she whispered, “William. I’m sure. I’ve been sure for a very long time.”

That must have been it, because his eyes widened and he swallowed hard. When he spoke, his words were choked. “I can’t... I couldn’t bear it if....” He turned his face away, blinking. “I don’t want to be...wrong.”

“Hey,” she said. She ran her fingers up through his hair, stroked his face. It was different than she remembered, all of it. This time would be different. This time, she would touch him gently, treat him well. This time, she wouldn’t hurt him. She would give him what he needed to keep him with her. “Look at me.” With great effort, he turned back toward her and met her eyes. “I will stay forever. I swear it. I will never leave you alone again.”
He ran down a darkened street followed by a crowd of little girls who had his sister’s eyes. They screamed his name, over and over, their shrill voices brittle in the cold night air, but it wasn’t the right name. It was a name he had all but forgotten. His breath came in gasps and his heart pounded so hard he could hear it.

They were getting closer, close enough for him to see the rotting wounds that marred their narrow necks. Their graying skin was mottled, puss oozed from their eye sockets, and when they opened their mouths, he could see their blackened tongues twisting about like maggots behind their teeth. He dodged down an alleyway, turned onto a narrow street paved with cobblestones, and ran.

He came to a dead end, tried to turn back, but they were too close. He’d misjudged, trapped himself in a walled cul-de-sac with no way out. He tried to climb the bricks, but they became slippery with putrefying blood wherever he touched them. He yanked his hands back and spun to face his pursuers. They were upon him, now. “Liam!” they shrieked, clawing at him with tiny, skeletal fingers. The night seemed to get darker, black clouds closing in, pushing down on him. He screamed.

There was a gasp from the girls, and they lifted their faces to stare at the sky. He looked, too.

A single bright star shone amidst the blackness, pulsing faintly. It grew brighter. Then it was joined by other stars and still others. They grew bigger and brighter until their edges touched and the whole sky was flooded with brilliant white light.

One at a time, the girls before him paled until they were transparent and the light shown through them. When they were nothing but silver outlines, they burst into blue flame. They gaped like hooked fish, unmoving as they burned to a fine ash which blew away on the wind.

He lay on his back on the cobblestones, exhausted. The light spread over the horizon, making the buildings and walls and ground transparent, too, turning all of existence into a line drawing, silver on white. When it reached his body, he felt a kind of vibration, a hum in his skin. He looked down at himself. Pinpoints of light emanated from the palms of his hands. As he watched, more pinpoints broke through his flesh, and more, and more, until he was pierced by a thousand tiny shards of light which grew brighter and stronger, bigger and bigger until they merged and he exploded outward like broken glass.

He hung in the air for one interminable moment, a shimmering cloud made up of jagged bits of light, before he fell into the sea.

The water lapped around him, through him, shallow ripples shimmering with reflected stars which were, in turn, reflections of his shattered self, as though sky and sea were two mirrors facing one another. It struck him as strange that any part of him could be reflected, although he couldn’t recall why that might be so.

Gradually, after years and years, the shining bits of him came together, again, into a semblance of human form, and this, too, was reflected in the night sky. The stars drifted toward one another, a few massing together to form a larger star, which drew the others to it, leaving the space around it bare. Ages passed and they became a single blazing light which streaked the sky with blue.

He smiled into the warmth of the sunlight, felt it caress his face, and then he burned to dust and blew away.
Angel jolted awake to the sound of screams. Someone had been screaming, off in the distance, and it had woken him. He didn’t hear it now. It was midmorning, still, not time to get up. He lay in his bed, in the basement apartment beneath his office, and stared at the ceiling.

“Angel?” someone said. “You were yelling. Are you okay?” It was Cordelia. She stood at the base of the stairs, peering around the corner at him. “You have a phone call. It’s Buffy.”
Battle of Wills - Spike

When Spike woke, hours later, every muscle in his body ached, but he was suffused with contentment. His ring—the gem at the root of at least part of the previous evening’s controversy—sat on the table next to the bed, where Buffy had put it last night so that he could be wounded, so that she could draw blood and complete the ancient claiming rite that made him hers.

Hers. The whole idea boggled. He felt bisected by the claim, half of him rejoicing in the everlasting union he’d craved since Drusilla had plucked him, tear-stained, out of an alley more than a lifetime ago, and the other half shivering, shell-shocked by his unlikely choice of mate. He was hers. He was hers forever.

Buffy herself was curled up small, still sleeping, against his chest. Two perfect puncture scars marked her neck, just below her jawline, matching the delicate semi-circular scars on his. He brushed his fingers over the soft skin of her throat, over the signature of his own fangs, and smoothed her hair away from her face. She was his, too, this glorious golden monster, as much as he was hers.

He stretched out a tendril of thought to explore the edges of the link between them. It was like concentrating on a limb. He sensed physical things that operated without her conscious thought: the warmth of her skin; how relaxed her muscles were; the slow, steady thumping of her heart. He reached in further to the indistinct mélange of her sleeping mind, let it wash over him until something coherent began to coalesce. He could feel her dreaming, so he closed his eyes to listen.

She walked, barefoot, along a pale agate cobblestone street flanked on both sides by white adobe buildings with arched entryways. Every arch gleamed with delicate traceries of inlaid gold and silver. Scattered here and there among the buildings were fountains or springs, their retaining walls planted with vivid tropical flowers. Small children splashed naked in the water or led short-furred, calico, fennec-like creatures on sisal leashes.

The sky overhead was nearly purple and there were no clouds for as far as she could see. The air pressed down upon her, heavy and still. She entered one of the arches and found herself in a thickly planted courtyard. Beneath her bare toes a cool carpet of dark green moss was laid out like a pathway. On either side of the path, varicolored jungle grasses grew in neatly groomed bunches, interspersed at their roots with creepers and small succulents. The walls of the courtyard were draped in hanging vines and clustered blossoms in a riot of reds and golds. Several small trees, bent over and gnarled like bonsai, offered restful patches of shade beside their night-black trunks.

Someone called her name, spoke to her in soothing tones. It was a man’s voice, and the language was incomprehensible to Spike, although dream-Buffy recognized the words as a summons. She ran forward, laughing, to the edge of a pool that was hidden in the greenery. A slender black-haired man, naked body suntanned to a gleaming bronze, lay on his stomach in a patch of soft grass, idly trailing his fingers through the water.

She pulled her coarse-woven shift off over her head and jumped into the pool, splashing him with soaking accuracy as she landed. He splashed back, tossing his shoulder-length hair out of his eyes, then lifted his head and smiled. Spike found himself staring into the narrow, angular face of Willy the Snitch.

He startled a little when Buffy said his name, jerking him back to the present, to the real, physical world. "That’s Will. After we got him back home, it was over a year before he put any clothes on. He’s always cold, here." She giggled. "That’s how I felt when I lived in London—constantly chilled and damp—but this is southern California. You’d think he’d adapt, after half a century or so, but he
hasn’t. He really belongs there."

"Was warm. Beautiful. Liked rememberin’ the sunshine, way you saw it. ‘S not like that, even with
the ring." He tried to hold on to the serenity of the dreamscape, but the demon was snapping and
snarling in the back of his mind, threatening to dismember any competition for his mate’s attention.
He did his best to ignore it. "Where was that, then?"

"Cibola, province of. It’s not on this plane." She gnawed gently on his jawline. "That’s why none of
those Spanish explorer dudes ever found it."

"An’ that’s where he’s from?" At her nod, Spike said, "Thought he was human. Smells human."

"Mmm, he is, more or less." She slid her fingers down his hip and thigh. He could feel her arousal
through the link. "Few differences. Will’s been stranded here since the late forties. Aging’s different.
Heals faster—not like either of us, but faster than human. Sun’s not right. Hurts him. Can’t have,"
she breathed the words into his mouth as she kissed him, "shellfish. Blows up like a balloon. Very
unpleasant...."

There was something almost too casual in the way she talked about the man. He did not like it. "You
were...together?" He felt his eyes go gold.

She sighed and tucked the comforter around both of them. "Serious conversation time, huh?" Gentle
ripples of affection and reassurance washed over him. It didn’t help. "We were involved, for a little
while. It wasn’t...didn’t...last. He was a very big pain in my butt for a whole lot longer." He wished
she hadn’t looked so fond when she said that.

"Did you love him?" He didn’t want to ask the question, but the answer to it was the only thing that
would derail the demon’s possessive tantrum. Like a switch was flipped, she grabbed his mood and
ran with it.

"Oh, you did not just ask that." Irritation rolled off her in waves. He opened his mouth to try to
explain. "Stop it! I’ll answer, but I gotta know: Is this gonna happen every time I have a dream?
Cause we could talk about Harmony, if you really want to get into that." She poked him in the chest.
"You remember Harmony, right, Spike? She was your girlfriend until the day before yesterday."

More rational parts of him winced, but the demon was unimpressed and refused to retreat. The
Slayer, apparently, was even less impressed. "Or," she said, "we could talk about Drusilla, the
forever and ever love you gave up on only when she kicked you out—three months ago." She was
eye to eye with him, staring the predator down, no ground ceded. "But no. Instead, we’re going to
talk about a fling I had eighty-something years ago that never had a chance to be anything more
’cause I was still sick with regret over an entirely different Will.

"Listen, vampire." She raised a hand to his face, pricked her fingertip on the point of his fang, let the
blood drip onto his lower lip until he sucked her finger into his mouth. "Yours," she growled. "I am
yours, you moron."
"Man, I can’t believe she went through with it." Buffy had eventually gotten out of bed and gone to class, leaving him on his own for the first time in a couple of days. He hadn’t gotten very far. Willy poured him a third or fourth glass of something not technically toxic and shook his head. "That’s it, man, for both of you. ‘Til death do you part. Serious stuff."

"You can’t believe she went through with it?" He had a hard time not manhandling the bartender, despite Buffy’s assurances that he was no competition. The demon was a very visceral creature. It couldn’t get a handle on the idea that his mate vividly remembered an affair that hadn’t happened yet and now wasn’t going to.

"Nah, nothing like that." It was early in the day, and the bar wasn’t open yet. Willy was still setting up for the evening to come. He busied himself refilling salt and pepper shakers, stuffing napkin holders, straightening, neating, and wiping things down. Spike was surprised at how polished the place looked. Did Willy do this every day just to see it totally trashed every night? No wonder he worked himself into a snit whenever a fight broke out. "It’s just...you and me, we been around for a while, figured out what the world has to offer. She’s just a kid."

She hadn’t let Willy in on her secret, then. She’d told only him and the Watcher. That did more to calm the demon than any reassurances she could offer, but he was still peeved. "Buffy’s a big girl. Old enough to know what she wants."

Willy held up a hand. "Hey, Spike, no argument, here. I’d be the first to say the Slayer gets what she wants, and the last to stand in her way when she sees it. I like all my limbs attached at their original locations, thank you very much. No, I get you musta made some kind of big impression, ’cause that—it came out of nowhere. As a single guy with a somewhat-less-than-crowded social calendar, I just wanna know what you did to sweep the girl off her feet."

"Yeah. Me too."

"No clue?" Willy searched his face for one long moment, but he wasn’t kidding. Buffy’s interest in him had come literally out of nowhere. He’d done nothing to win her—nothing at all. "Well, aren’t you just the lucky guy." The door from the alley banged open. A small, gray-skinned demon of a variety Spike didn’t recognize skittered into the room, followed closely by two men in military armor. "Hey! Hey, there!" Willy protested, coming out from behind the bar and, to Spike’s way of thinking, drawing too much attention to himself. "Whaddya think you’re doin’? We don’t open for two more hours!"

One of the men nodded briefly at the bartender who came to stand in front of him, glaring directly up into his face. "Sorry to interrupt, sir. We’re just pursuing...." The soldier glanced around the room, abruptly realizing that his quarry was nowhere to be seen. "We’re looking for an animal that escaped early this morning."

"I don’t see any animals in here. Been here all day. Haven’t seen any animals." Willy slipped into a tone composed of equal measures of snivel and swagger. It was calculated to irritate, designed to distract. "Spike, you seen any animals come in here?"

So he was part of this dog and pony show, too? Right, then. He spun around on his stool, tilted back against the bar. "Can’t help you. Haven’t seen any animals...Finn?" Of course he’d recognized the man as soon as he’d walked in. If his voice hadn’t done it, his scent would have. He didn’t know the second man, though. He took a moment to memorize him. "Riley Finn?" Spike’s hair was loose and
curling and he wore a blue button-down shirt that had somehow appeared where his black tee ought to have been. His coat, M’shub goo miraculously removed while he slept, was in his room. So were his boots. He made his way across the polished wood floor and over to the soldiers in his stocking feet.

He extended his hand to Riley, enjoying the larger man’s discomfort. "Lo, Finn. What’re you doing here? Thought you worked at the university...this an ROTC thing, then? Payin’ for college?" He volunteered the cover story, hoping the man would grab it, while reaching out for Buffy’s mind.

Riley had no choice. He shook Spike’s hand, still trying to scan the room behind him. "Something like that. Will, right? Buffy’s friend—the singer." Willy raised one eyebrow. The second soldier searched the room methodically, shining a Maglite under all the tables and behind the bar.

"S been some time," Spike said, rolling his eyes. "’M not doin’ much of that, these days. ’S how Buffy an’ I got acquainted. Played in a band together." He delivered the line straight-faced at Willy, who nodded gravely. When he started to wonder if he could convince Sunnydale-at-large that this band had once actually existed, he felt Buffy’s laughter.

On her way. She was on her way to him and she wanted him to stall. "We were all blokes ’cept Buffy," he elaborated, spinning the story in his head. "Needed her. Not bad lookin’, any of us, but nothin’ special. No visual hook, see? Saw her dancin’ at that kiddie club—The Bronze. God, that was hot. She was just a bit of a thing, but magnetic, yeah? An’ the chit’s got an understandin’ of rhythm. Never played drums before. Picked it right up."

He talked for close to twenty minutes, inventing detail after vivid detail about this band that had never existed. Midway through a description of a fictional fist fight in the mosh pit at one of their imaginary concerts, he felt Buffy’s presence nearby.

"Hey, guys!" Buffy swayed in through the alley door, arms piled high with shopping bags. "Could one of you guys help me set some of this stuff down?" Riley started toward her, but Spike got there first.

"Thought you said you were going to school. Didn’t think you were bringin’ half a department store back." He stacked the bags on a table, and then turned to take her in his arms. The minute he touched her, the closed circuit of the claim made a kind of joyous ache ricochet between them. He kissed her until he felt her struggle for air. "Missed you," he whispered. "Missed you, missed you, missed you." God, he hadn’t even known he’d wanted this.

"Missed you, too. Got you some stuff...." She glanced over his shoulder, seeming to notice Riley for the first time. Spike got an image of a tall, brown-haired woman in body armor as well as a vague impression of a black helicopter. It was followed, mysteriously, by the haunted and haunting eyes of a female vampire so starved she was skeletal. "Riley? What are you doing here?" The big man appeared to be rooted in place. His mouth hung open and he stared at the Slayer and her vampire with obvious envy. Spike might have snarled at him, but Buffy’s internal response to the soldier was icy despite her warm smile. "And what are you wearing? If this is the new fall look, I’ve been reading the wrong magazines."

"Oh, right," Spike said, turning toward Riley without letting go of Buffy. Touching her soothed his poor, beleaguered demon. When he was holding her, he begrudged the presence of all the other men in the room just a little bit less. "ROTC here’s spent the afternoon chasing somethin’ that got loose. Any sign of your missin’ beastie, soldier?"

"Uh," Riley said, "um, no. Looks like we lost it. We should, uh...." He shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. Spike could hear the little demon moving slowly through the crawl space over the
ceiling. Willy must have false walls and panels through the whole place. "We should get back to our search. Sorry to interrupt.... Good to see both of you, Buffy, Will. Glad to meet you, ah...." He cocked his head at the bartender.

"Oh," Buffy laughed before rattling off a polysyllabic monstrosity of a name that Spike couldn’t repeat without assistance. It did have an ‘ill’ sound in it, although the double ‘L’ was rolled at the tip of the tongue. It sounded like it could be a cognate of the name ‘William’ in whatever obscure language it was that Willy spoke. "Since I’m not a masochist, I call him Will—or Willy, if I want to piss him off."

Finn laughed nervously and said his goodbyes. He and the other soldier fled the bar.

"Now that was interestin’." Spike listened carefully to the conversation of the retreating men. "Soldiers are a touch discomfited, right now. Cover’s all blown. Critter’s escaped. They don’t know what they’re gonna tell bossman—Walsh is his name." Those weren’t the only things they were upset about. The big one—Riley—was being curt with the other soldier. Apparently, he’d been told Buffy was single, was planning on asking her out. Spike didn’t mention that bit. Best to let sleeping dogs lie. "Your little friend okay, Willy?" There was no longer any movement overhead. "He get away?"

"He’s gone. Went out through the vents. What the hell is going on here, folks? Why are soldiers busting into my bar?" He looked back and forth between the two of them, his arms folded across his chest. "Gotta say, I don’t like it."

"Lady," Buffy said to blank looks from both men. "Walsh is bosslady. Her team calls her ‘mother’ which is totally creepy. She’s the head of that Initiative thing I told you about, Spike, and she’s got a little project of her own going on the side. We gotta move on that problem soon, but we’ve got other stuff to deal with, first. Do you think they suspected anything was up, here?"

He shook his head. "Nah. Pretty sure they figure they ducked into the wrong doorway and got delayed long enough to lose their critter." He was more than pretty sure. They’d convinced themselves of it as they walked away from the building.

"Good. We don’t need them scoping out Willy’s."

"I could not agree more. We definitely do not need them scoping out Willy’s," Willy said. "What Initiative thing is this? And is it me or does trouble always follow you around?"

"I don’t wanna give you details about this, Will." She squeezed Willy’s hand affectionately and didn’t let go. Spike stared darkly at the place where they touched. "You’re not a fighter, and you look human, so your best bet is to keep your head down. Don’t attract their attention." He realized he was growling when he became aware that Buffy was looking at him and Willy was looking at the back door. "And yeah," she continued after he quieted. "Trouble does seem to follow me around, but I’ll get him dinner and he’ll relax a little.

"In the meantime," she said, "let’s talk about Halloween."
Ethan awoke to the ringing of his telephone.

He scooped it up and snarled into the receiver, “I will flay the skin from your flesh and soak you in salt water.”

“I beg your pardon?” The voice was smooth and melodic, its received pronunciation note perfect, and its tone confused. It was not Dandelion. “I’m trying to reach Ethan Rayne. Have I dialed the wrong number?”

“No...no. Terribly sorry.” He squinted at the clock. It read ‘10:15 PM’ in glowing red digits two inches high. “This is Rayne. Working nights these days, I’m afraid. I’ll be coherent shortly. How can I help you?”

“Mister Rayne, this is Chad Abbott, calling from the office of Brian Robson of the Watchers’ Council. I’d like to extend a job offer.” Ethan swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up straight.

“That’s Doctor Rayne, Mister Abbott. How is Robbie these days?” With Council minions, it wouldn’t do to let them have the upper hand. You had to establish dominance at the outset.

“Perplexed.” There was steel in Abbott’s voice, but he let the play pass. “It seems someone asked him a question to which he did not have an answer.”

“And you think I do?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps you have an...associate...who does. Our friends can be an invaluable resource, don’t you agree? At any rate, Doctor Rayne, I’ve been given carte blanche to hire consultants for a research project and you come highly recommended.”

“Forgive me, please, if I doubt that. Do you know who I am, Mister Abbott?”

“You are Ethan Rayne. You’ve earned advanced degrees in Metaphysics and Esotericism, with subspecialties in Demonology and the myths and rituals of Ancient Rome. Although you received your occult training at Brittlefield, a traditionally Hermetic institution, you remain a disciple of Janus, the god of doorways, and a devotee of Chaos, as well as an initiate of Eyghon. In short, Doctor Rayne, you are a sorcerer.” Abbott paused, like he was turning a page. “You are the illegitimate son of Baron—.”

“That’s quite enough. Thank you. I rescind my skepticism. So what is this project that calls for the services of a sorcerer?”

“Doctor Robson has undertaken research to discover the origin of the slayer line.”

Ethan exhaled slowly to steady his voice. “That seems somewhat far afield for me. Isn’t there someone closer to the Slayer who might have that information more readily available?”

“Please do not patronize me.” It was the first break in Abbott’s calm. “According to Doctor Giles’ journals, during the Sunnydale Eyghon incident, you chose for Eyghon to enter the Slayer. You understood enough about her nature to know she’d be able to fight the possession—as Angelus eventually did in her stead.”
“Who’s to say I didn’t just want her to die?” Abbott made no response, but there was a sound, a repetitive click click click, like a pen being tapped on a notepad. Ethan sighed. “Very well. Perhaps I may be able to help you with that.”

Abbott gave him an address. “A fax will arrive there with all pertinent research to date. In addition, there will be a contract, stating our terms. Please sign it and return it. I’ll be in touch.”

The line went dead.
Establishing a routine - Spike

Spike passed the next week in a sort of fugue. Before that fateful daylight fight, his life had been blood-soaked and sensual, dedicated to the care of his mad, wild princess. For over a hundred years, Drusilla had been his entire reason for being. Then Buffy broke his world open in a flash of green light and everything was utterly changed. Now he existed within the terms of their alliance and the bond of their claim, untethered from his past. He settled into this new routine as though the previous century had never taken place.

It was easy, really. Every morning, around eleven, Buffy headed off to class, and Spike went out to the bar to keep Willy company. The two of them nattered and gossiped while Spike drank and Willy put the bar back together, gluing broken chair backs and scrubbing blood off the floors. He found himself admiring the man. Running a business that catered to Sunnydale’s demon crowd was an intricate political exercise, at best. At worst, it was a good way to get eaten. Cagey ol’ Willy’d done right well for himself.

Every evening after dinner, he and Buffy would patrol before heading back to their little room behind the bar. Mostly, they staked the incessant flood of fledglings that seemed to arise in Sunnydale. After a couple of nights, he started to wish he could find and stake the idiot who was siring them all. Bloody inconsiderate, that was. Not only did it attract a lot of attention from the locals—not to mention the Slayer—but it increased competition for food. And what was the point of making a fledge you were just going to dump?

It was this train of thought that led him to add a trip to Sean’s apartment to his afternoon agenda. Someone had sired the boy and left him to find his own way. More specifically, someone from the ancient, aristocratic vampiric bloodline known as The Order of Aurelius had sired Sean Walden and abandoned him. It made his demon howl in outrage. He was family, for fuck’s sake. It just wasn’t how things were done.

So on a bright Saturday afternoon, after Willy retreated to do some accounting and Buffy left for her weekend classes, Spike rang Sean’s doorbell. When he answered, Spike presented him with a sixpack of some decent local microbrew, and was invited in.

"Oh, my god! Thank you!" Sean said, smiling so hard his eyes almost disappeared. "Come in, Spike; come in. I totally didn’t expect to see you again." He shook his head. "Huh. Glad to be wrong. What can I do for you, today?"

Spike had come intending to do something for Sean, but when he was faced with the question, he couldn’t figure out exactly what that might be. He couldn’t be the boy’s sire, could he? Hadn’t the time for that passed? Sean had already set his life up, and it was, truthfully, a life that Spike envied a little. He wasn’t Angelus, either, to step in and dominate. He couldn’t declare himself god just because he was older and stronger. So he decided to give the fledge everything else his sire ought to have given him, instead. What the boy really needed was information: tradition; history; lore.

"So, Sean," he asked gravely, "what do you know about vampires?"
"Aristocracy?" the boy mused. "Like royalty?" Spike nodded. "And you think I’m part of this—what—royal family? Like you?" They’d been talking about the ins and outs of vampire culture for a couple of hours, already, and Sean took most of it in stride. He’d only gotten stuck when the story concerned him personally.

He shrugged. "I never made too much of it, myself. You don’t choose your family."

"Huh." Sean leaned back into the plush cushions of the kitten gray couch and let his eyes rest, unfocused, on the television screen. There was some kind of slasher movie playing. Spike didn’t recognize the film, but it was remarkably realistic. All the blood made him hungry. "I suppose I knew I had to belong somewhere. I guess I just didn’t expect...how can you even tell?"

"You smell like family. Can’t place your sire, though. Don’t know who had the bad manners to...."

"Ditch me? You know, when you first told me that wasn’t normal, I was hurt. I felt rejected. Not gonna lie. But after careful consideration, I’ve decided not to complain about it. Waking up all alone in the film department basement was bad, but waking up in a coffin? Talk about lasting trauma. I mean, wow...how does someone ever get over something like that?" Sean shuddered. "Are there vampire therapists?"

"Not that I’ve ever...." This boy was weird.

"Look, kid, do you remember anything at all about what you were doing before you rose? Where you were? Who you were with?"

"Well...I remember going out...." That sounded an awful lot like hedging. "Went to...a club...danced for a while...had a few drinks..."

"Ah huh. You pick up a girl? Take her away to someplace dark an’ private?"

"A girl?" Sean flashed him a puckish grin, dragging his gaze suggestively down Spike’s body. "Absolutely not. There were no girls at all." He extended a hand to squeeze Spike’s bicep firmly. "Not a single one."

Spike smirked. Kid would’ve sent Angelus into a flaming righteous rage, probably gotten himself bound and gagged for his trouble. He might have to introduce the two of them, just for the entertainment value. He could even justify it. They were family, after all. "Right, then. You left with someone. Got a description? Maybe a name?" He ignored the hand on his arm.

"I...ah...didn’t get a name, no." Sean couldn’t quite brazen that confession out, but he was trying. His wet-lipped leer only wavered a little. Spike let own his smile grow broader. "He was really big. Like...monolithic big, I mean. And powerful. One of his arms...." He dropped his hand to pat Spike’s thigh. "About that big, right? Seriously! And his voice...." The boy shivered. "I don’t usually follow strange men out into dark alleys. I know it’s a good way to get...well...but wow. When he talked, it made my chest vibrate."

Oh, bloody hell. Wasn’t hard to identify the subject of that description. The brawny behemoth with the contrabass rumble could only be Heinrich’s butt-boy, Luke. So Luke must’ve made himself a playmate some time before the Slayer dusted him. Since he wasn’t waiting there when Sean rose, it had to have been right before the Slayer dusted him. Only thing that didn’t make sense was Sean waking up by himself, above ground. Aurelian tradition was very specific on these things, and Luke was very big on tradition. Sean should have woken up in a wooden box, even if there was nobody
left to greet him. "You went out into the alley with the bloke an’ don’ remember anythin’ else ‘til you woke up alone in the basement?"

"Yeah, that’s pretty much it.” Sean’s mouth twitched. "Pretty much."

"Spare me the specifics. How’d you wake up? Where were you? What were you wearing?” Maybe Luke was interrupted before he got a chance to bury the boy.

"That’s the weird thing. Except for the gap in my mental calendar, there was no trauma. I didn’t know, at first, that there was anything wrong. I woke up on the folding cot in the media building basement, tucked in like I was all safe and sound instead of...well...dead, I guess. There were fresh sheets. I was clean and dry, my hair was combed, and I was wearing pajamas I’d never seen before.” He patted the couch cushion. "Gray flannel. I’ve still got them. They were the...um...inspiration for the decor...here. I guess I wanted to keep some kind of...connection."

"First normal thing I’ve heard you say, boy." That was, without question, the gentlest rising he’d ever heard described outside of legend. Almost nothing Sean had told him was normal—certainly not what you’d expect from Luke the Combat Monster. He couldn’t imagine that Heinrich had approved the boy’s siring, either. So Luke had snuck away alone and broken all the rules to sire a boy that he...what? Planned on keeping secret from his entire order? Was there a kept woman scenario going on? "Normal to want that connection to your sire. Vampire normal. Don’ expect you’ve seen a lot of vampire normal.

"Your sire’s name was Luke, by the way. Least, that’s the description you gave, though the m.o. is....” Spike blew out one long breath, shaking his head. "Slayer dusted him several years back, prob’ly after you were sired an’ before you rose. Got no solid explanation for the way.... You’re sure you hadn’t met him before that night?” If there had been any prior relationship, he might assume the boy had been laid out comfortably as a romantic gesture. It was the kind of thing that only happened in those old gypsy love stories: A human paramour is so deeply smitten with his undead mistress that he agrees to be turned so the couple can live happily ever after for the rest of eternity.

"Swear it. I would have remembered him.” Sean tried for his leer again and missed, looked like an insecure little boy. "So...I’m an orphan and we...how are we related?"

"Distantly. Your grandsire is my great-grandsire. Heinrich. Slayer killed him, too."

"Buffy? That Slayer? Your little blond girlfriend with the mean right hook?"

"That would be the one."

"Well, then...she’s sort of a menace, isn’t she?"
My dreams, they aren't as empty as my conscience seems to be - Giles

“...I have hours only lonely. My love is vengeance....”

He was just beginning to get it right. His fingers, calloused from pen and sword, were starting to remember how to move across the strings. His voice, stiff from disuse, was beginning to limber. It felt good. He would have let the call go to the machine if it hadn’t rung in the wrong key. Reluctantly, he propped the guitar against the back of the sofa and picked up the phone.

“This is Giles.”

“Giles. Good to hear your voice when I’m awake. Robson, here.”

“Oh, very good.” He pulled a notepad and a pen from his desk drawer. “Have you found anything for me?”

“Not as such. I have, in fact, found a whole heaping lot of nothing, which is almost an answer to your question. There is nothing in the records to indicate that your slayer is anything other than human. I have not yet found the origin of the line, so there could, of course, be something I’m missing. I still have feelers out for that piece of the puzzle. My assistant... Do you remember Chad Abbot? Old Callum’s boy?”

Giles murmured something in the affirmative. He remembered Chad as a boy of eleven. It made him feel old.

“Well, he’s grown into a top notch researcher with contacts in all sorts of nefarious places. Reminds me a little of you as a young man, now that I think of it.” Robson chuckled. “He’s running down a lead I’ve asked him not to mention in Travers’ hearing. I’ll let you know if he finds anything useful.”

“Thank you. Just...” He sighed and ran his fingertips through his hair, trying to get at the knots in his scalp. “Thank you. That puts my mind at ease.”

“I am happy to help, but...may I ask what prompted your inquiry? It seems like an odd thing to be concerned about this late in your association with your slayer.”

“It was something Buffy said. I’d be happy to talk more about it, but not over the phone. Perhaps we can catch up at the symposium?”

“Oh, thank god. You are coming. I saw you on the schedule, but...well, there’s talk. I never know how much of it is true. We run in tight circles, you and I, and there is gossip.”

“There always is, isn’t there?” Giles laughed sharply. “But contrary to anything you might have heard, I have not gone rogue. Nor am I sleeping with my slayer. I am still here, on the Hellmouth, doing everything I did while I worked for the Council except draw a salary.”

“I am so sorry, Giles—Rupert. Please believe me. I didn’t mean to imply either of those things. At worst, I thought you might have washed your hands of the lot of us, and I bloody well wouldn’t blame you.”

Giles didn’t answer. He appreciated the statement of support, but he hadn’t enough grace left in him to accept that apology.

“Well,” Robson continued after a pause that went on just a hair too long, “we’ll talk more at the
symposium. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Yes,” Giles said, swallowing a childish retort. Robson was one of his oldest and best friends. He had stood in solidarity with Giles against the majority of the Council’s governing board, put his own reputation and livelihood at risk to do so. Robson did not deserve his ire. “I am, as well. I’ll see you there.”

He set the phone down and picked his guitar up again, worked his way back into the melody, and let the music take him somewhere the Council couldn't go.

“...and I blame you...no one bites back as hard...on their anger....”
On Friday afternoon, Spike went to Sean’s semi-annual Movies-I-Made-Fest with a Clement demon Buffy had introduced him to one night on patrol. Sean’s movies were heavy on the vividly depicted bloodshed, and they were part way through the third one before Spike realized that most of the blood was not just realistic but decidedly real. Unfortunately, he didn’t have time to find out more about it because Buffy arrived to take him to dinner at Giles’ flat.

He hadn’t seen the Watcher since the evening of the truth spell, which meant he hadn’t seen him since before the claim. As far as he knew, Buffy hadn’t been to visit the man, either. He didn’t know for sure whether Giles was aware of the situation, but it was a pretty fair bet that it would be the topic of the evening’s dinner conversation.

Buffy wore a close-fitting apricot-colored sweater dress with a deep vee neckline and a plunging back. She’d pulled her hair up off her neck so that a top-knot of wavy tendrils cascaded down to frame her face. An intricate gold lattice-work necklace served to draw the eye directly to the marks on her throat. Spike would lay odds that she hadn’t yet said a word to the Watcher about the claim. That whole outfit was a deliberate confrontation.

"Oh, wow...." Sean rose when Buffy walked in. He took her hand and twirled her around before dipping her backward in an elegant arch. "You look fantastic, Buffy! That’s a gorgeous color on you. What’s the occasion?"

"Having dinner with my Watcher," she said, smiling at the room at large. In addition to Sean and Spike, there was one other vampire, the Clement demon, and the little gray guy who’d run through Willy’s to escape the Initiative soldiers. Willy himself had been too busy to attend. "Thanks for letting him go early, guys. This evening is way crucial." Everyone nodded and smiled except Mark, the vampire. He tried to sink into the couch cushions and disappear.

"Let me know how it goes, ‘kay Buffy?" the Clement said, giving her a double thumbs-up with his clawed, wrinkle-skinned hands. "I’m rootin’ for you!"

Spike was glad he’d dressed up for the evening. Although his black slacks and silk shirt weren’t as striking as his Slayer’s rose-gold getup, at least he wouldn’t look too scruffy by comparison. He could feel Buffy trying to send reassurance over the claim link, but it kept getting swamped by waves of her own nervousness, so it wasn’t helping him much. The closer they got to the Watcher’s flat, the harder the muscles in his jaw clenched. He figured that his teeth would crack by the time they got there.

"You ready?" she asked as they pulled into Giles’ driveway.

"Not even a little," he said, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her against his chest. "An’ I can’t see as how that’s gonna change any time soon. Might as well face the music, then, right?" They walked to the Watcher’s door holding hands.

Dinner was a vegetarian lasagna with garlic bread, which were both still in the oven. Buffy had assured Giles ahead of time that he would not need to provide anything special for Spike, but the implications of that apparently caused him some concern. He insisted it wouldn’t be any trouble at all so, despite their protests, there was beef blood heated to body temperature waiting for Spike when he arrived.

"Ta, Rupert." He sat at the breakfast bar sipping the blood and watching the Watcher and his Slayer
set the table. There was a sea change in progress. The man understood intellectually that Buffy was not the girl she appeared to be, but it was clear he hadn’t completely come to terms with it.

"So we have a little thing to take care of, tomorrow night, at a Halloween Party on campus. Shouldn’t be too tricky, but you never know, with these things. We’ll see."

"We ought to research it, devise a viable strategy...."

"Nah. I got this, Giles. Spike will be there with me, too, so I have backup. If we can just ride herd on Willow, keep hold of Spike, and avoid angry bears, we’ll be gold until mid-December. Mostly."

"Angry bears?" Giles’ bit the words off at the ends. "I really don’t see how you can be quite this cavalier about the management of the Hellmouth, Buffy. Are you training? Keeping in shape? You certainly haven’t come to me for...."

"Huh, yeah." She was struggling with the napkins, trying to fold them into pretty little triangles. "No, see—there isn’t actually anybody human on the face of this planet who could give me trouble, unless they had a sniper rifle or a rocket launcher or something. Not as if training could help me with that. If we’re talking about vampires—a master like Spike or Angel could maybe hurt me before he dusted. If a couple of them teamed up, they might be able to take me down. I dunno." She lay the last folded linen napkin neatly down next to a dinner plate and examined it carefully. "Does that look right to you?"

"Yes, Buffy. It looks fine. Have a seat." Giles tried to serve the lasagna, but his hands wouldn’t cooperate. Spike took the spatula from him. "I do apologize. I’m afraid I’m having some trouble...what do you need me to...what purpose I.... How can I possibly help you?"

Well, then. Watcher was feeling useless. Stupid git. Girl had nightmares over losing him, and he had the cast-iron bollocks to feel unnecessary. Spike poured a glass of wine and handed it to the man. "Settle down, Rupert. Your girl still needs you."

"I fail to see...." Giles started, but Spike cut him off.

"Do you seriously expect me to believe you’ve been able to train her up to this point?" He gave the Watcher his best you-must-be-an-idiot look. "Imagine it’s been years since your physical training was useful. An’ you’ve got your trained Scoobies doin’ most of the research, yeah? Given all that, why do you s’pose she’s here with you on a Friday night, dressed to the nines, ‘stead of out with her friends havin’ college-age fun?"

Spike served the lasagna and garlic bread, poured wine for Buffy and himself, and waited for Giles to answer. He could feel Buffy smiling through the link. "Well, I suppose she must have wanted...."

"I think what Mr. Perceptive was trying to say, in his own snarky way, is that I want to be here, Giles. I am out of my...time and place, I guess. This isn’t where I belong, anymore. I’m not who I was. I’ve lived through too much. I need to have people I relate to around me so I can start to be part of this world again. Xander and Willow are great; they’re just...."

"Children," Giles finished very softly. Buffy tapped a fingertip to her nose. "I see. So," he said, moving away briskly from that personal topic and pinning them both with a very business-like stare, "tell me how this claim thing works."
The Halloween party at Lowell House was a bust.

Which was probably just as well. With all the papers he had to grade in the morning, an early night was a good idea. So instead of pine, Riley geared up and headed out on patrol.

He took Graham with him, and left Forrest home to flirt with all two of the girls who’d shown up to the party. That was probably just as well, too. There’d been something off about him for days.

He’d been abrupt with the rest of the squad, and just shy of insubordinate with Riley. It wasn’t that he didn’t follow orders. He did, but he inserted a second’s delay between hearing them and complying, like he wanted to make it clear he was doing it this time, this once, and only out of the goodness of his heart.

Some subtle, niggling something in the way the guy looked at him had changed, too. It was almost—but not quite—contempt. It made him uneasy.

It might have started when he’d asked Forrest about the Slayer.

“Ooh,” he’d said in the kind of hollow, supposed-to-be-spooky voice you’d hear on Saturday morning cartoons. “The Slayer.” He even made scare quotes with his fingers.

“Yeah. The Slayer. What have you heard about her?”

“Her? Man, are you buying what the hostiles are selling? Thought you were smarter than that.”

“Just answer the question, soldier.”

“Fine. She’s the boogey boogety that has the hostiles shaking in their boots, the scary story they tell their little hostile kiddies to get them to go to bed on time.

“She looks like a girl, right? Nothing special or different. She could be anyone anywhere, just to up the paranoia. It’s a classic urban legend—and not even a very good one.

“I mean, why would something like that even exist? A girl, one girl, strong, fast, superior in every way, whose sole purpose is to hunt down these...things...these animals and kill them? Why?”

“You don’t think she exists?”

“I don’t,” Forrest said, “and if she does? She’s just another hostile.”

Riley had let the conversation drop.

Patrolling for hostiles on Halloween night was tricky, he decided. Some of those costumes were a little too realistic for his tastes, and he had to resort to using his scanner. It was not the best solution.

“You getting anything?” Graham asked.

He shook his head. “There was something for a second, but it went out of range fast.”

“Haven’t seen any vampires.”

“I noticed that, too. It’s weird.” It was really weird. Vampires were hard to catch—fast and slippery
—but they were always around. They never went a whole night without seeing one.

They were just about ready to bag it and head home when Riley’s scanner went off. “Got something?” Graham peered over his shoulder. “I don’t...huh. Wonder what that is.”

“Let’s find out,” Riley said, and followed the proximity indicator around the corner and into an alley just a few blocks off campus. There was a noise, a foot shifting in gravel, and something took off running. Without so much as a glance between them, they went after it.

They almost lost it several times. It headed into a residential neighborhood and started using evasive maneuvers. It ducked behind trash cans and went over fences, dodged through backyards and slipped between cars. Thank god most of the little kids had gone home already. He wouldn’t scare a troop of toddlers with his stealth gear.

The big kids were another matter.

Forrest was right about that part, at least. Sunnydale pulled out all the stops for Halloween. There were people everywhere, all of them about the right size to be his hostile, and most of them in costume. There was a lot of drunken revelry and horseplay. It was damned difficult to work around.

Two young men in Scream costumes tossed a bulging pillowcase back and forth between them while a third, dressed as Freddy Krueger, tried to catch it before they did. On the final toss, Freddy took a run at it, leapt in the air, and caught it against his chest. As he arced, unprotected, toward the blacktop, the sack burst open, scattering gallons of candy across the street in front of Riley. Riley jumped, mid-stride, to avoid tripping on it, and came down on top of Graham, who hadn’t jumped in time. The two of them rolled to a stop in a tangle of limbs, while the scanner bounced twice and went dark.

No time no time. Riley scooped up the scanner and sprinted in the direction the hostile had gone, restarting the device as he ran. It powered up without a problem, and they were off on the chase again.

When they finally caught up to it, in a quiet neighborhood, on a very quiet street, it was fumbling with the knob of a door set in the basement level of a huge old house. The scanner flashed red. “Hey,” Riley said, and the thing spun around. He pointed his Maglite at it.

It was shaped like a person, but bright blue spikes extended from its bright green face, making it look like some kind of humanoid sea anemone. It blinked scarlet eyes in the flashlight beam.

“You scared the hell out of me,” it said in clear, unaccented English. “What do you want?”

Riley lowered his light and frowned down at his scanner. He hated relying on Initiative tech. Sure, it was cutting edge, but that meant it was buggy. Experimental. You never knew when a prototype was going to malfunction or fizzle completely. Like now, when it led him directly to some guy in a Halloween costume.

“We’re sorry to have disturbed you, sir,” Graham said. “We had reports of vandalism in the neighborhood.”

“Sure. Sure. No problem.” He turned back around to the door, which opened to reveal a party in progress.

He’d gotten inside and closed the door part way behind him when Riley, on impulse, asked, “Do you know anything about the Slayer?”
The guy stiffened, but he didn’t turn around. “I know she leaves me and my kind alone,” he said, and he closed the door.
The Date - Spike

Xander wore a tuxedo. He cleaned up better than Spike would have thought, if he’d ever given the matter any consideration. The pup was growing up. Could even turn a head or two, if he tried.

"Whatchya got in that basket, little girl?" the boy leered, leaning in close to Buffy who was fetching as Little Red Riding Hood. Spike tucked into the shadows, trailing a few feet behind her, yellow eyes slicing through the darkness. Buffy knew he was there, but couldn’t see him. Xander hadn’t noticed him yet.


"Bond. James Bond," he said with a flourish. "Insurance, you know—in case we all turn into our costumes again, I’m going for cool secret agent guy."

"Hey, don’t diss the soldier costume." Buffy giggled at him and patted his shoulder. She was nothing short of adorable. "Came in handy. ‘Sides, hate to break it to you, but you’ll probably end up cool head waiter guy."

"As long as I’m cool and wield some kind of power." At that moment, little ginger-haired Willow arrived wearing a suit of honest-to-god chain mail. With her was a young man, short but powerfully built, who smelled like...Willow’s boyfriend was a werewolf? Spike tripped over a crack in the sidewalk, barely preventing himself from measuring his full length on the concrete.

Willow was talking. "I’m Joan of Arc. I figured we had a lot in common, seeing as how I was almost burned at the stake. Plus she had that close relationship with God."

"And you are?" Xander directed the question to the werewolf at Willow’s side. The wolf opened his shirt to expose a hi-my-name-is tag labeled ‘God’. "Of course," Xander said. Spike chuckled softly and the wolf’s head snapped up, his nose twitching. Their eyes met through the darkness and Spike drew back a few feet. "Wish I’d thought of that before I put my deposit down," Xander mused. "I could’ve been God."

"Blasphemer," the wolf said, his eyes still scanning the shadows. The group began walking, chattering idly amongst themselves. Spike followed. A pair of commandos darted out of the trees directly in front of the group, nearly colliding with them.

A wall of fear from Buffy almost physically knocked him back. "Like your outfits," she quipped, but her voice shook. "Very stealthy." Thankfully, the soldiers didn’t hang around. In just a second or two, they were off into the woods again.

"Those the commando guys you’ve been seeing, Buff?" Willow asked, "Or maybe those were just costumes...."

"If those were costumes," the wolf said, "they were pretty authentic. Scary...."

"Yeah," Xander said, "Scary...oh, yeah. I invited Anya to join us, but she’s having some trouble finding a scary costume, so she’s going to meet us there."

"Perfect," Buffy said, reaching up to ruffle Xander’s hair. "Glad she decided to come. Now everybody’s got a date."

"Whoa—hey!" Willow stopped walking suddenly and turned on the Slayer, folding her arms across
her chest. In the chain mail, the effect was charming. "I’m the best friend, here! Shouldn’t I already have heard about this date if there was someone who was all date-having? I’m feeling sort of out-of-the-loopy."

"Yeah. Can I just say, ‘Me too! Me too!’? ‘Cause this is the first I’ve heard about it.” Xander fell into the same arms-folded pose as Willow. It was considerably less charming. Buffy’s eyes were on the wolf, though, rather than her friends.

"You knew he was there, didn’t you, Oz?" Ah. The wolf’s name was Oz. Oz was on the list of protected people. Oz nodded slowly. He didn’t turn to glare at Buffy and he didn’t fold his arms. He stayed in a relaxed, alert stance watching Spike. "You wanna come out now, Big Bad?" Buffy called. She was smiling but he could still feel some nervousness left over from the sudden appearance of the soldiers and there was some added anxiety about her friends’ reaction to him.

He slid so quietly out into the light that only Oz and Buffy were aware of his arrival.

Buffy had chosen his costume carefully. He was in demon face, under his makeup, vampire eyes and brow ridges contributing to the effect. She’d dyed his hair dark and fuzzed it out so that it was a mess of curls. Large, furry wolf ears and a small snout extension were attached to his head. Large, furry wolf feet with claws covered his boots, and his hands were covered by furry wolf gloves with long, curved nails. The crowning piece, though, was the cleverly constructed wolf tail attached to the waistband of his jeans. It was made of jointed pieces, like those wooden toy snakes, so it moved when he did, as though it was a living thing. He’d been so delighted with the tail that he’d left his duster home in favor of a short studded leather jacket.

She set her hand on his lower back, ushering him into the group. Willow and Xander blinked at him without recognition. Oz extended his hand. "You’re the Big Bad Wolf?" the young man asked.

"One among many, it seems." Oz didn’t react to that so Spike shook his hand. "Name’s Spike. How are you?"

"Can’t complain. I’m Oz," he answered. "I’ve heard about you."

"Is that the ‘Bwa ha ha ha! At last we meet!’ sort of ‘heard about’ or the ‘We should have coffee, sometime,’ kind?" Buffy quipped.

Wolfboy smiled.
Behind the curtain - Ethan

Ethan poured salt along the baseboards of the hotel room and continued the line across the doorway, so that he was entirely surrounded by a salt barrier.

And then, as if the cleaning staff would not resent him enough for that, he drew a human sized rectangle in red chalk on the wall next to the bathroom door, and edged it with hundreds of tiny, carefully drawn magical symbols.

Oh, yes. There would certainly be a charge for damages.

But it couldn’t be helped. He had too many balls in the air, his attention scattered amongst the elusive Moon Vine, “White walls, white walls,” the Unearthed Eternal, whatever that might be, and the origin of the slayer line. He would need his sanctum if he hoped to get anything done.

When he’d gone to Kinko’s, the week previous, to pick up the fax from Robson, the clerk smacked a box down on the counter in front of him. “Your fax,” he said, and Ethan opened it to find a stack of papers a good six inches thick. “Are you people planning to do this every day? ‘Cause it ties the machine up for hours. We can’t get anything else through.”

“Er...no. Not to my knowledge.” The employment contract was the top sheet. He loved contracting for the Council. There were always so many zeroes. And it didn’t have an end date listed. He signed the paper and passed it back to the clerk. “Please fax this to the number listed on the top.” He flipped through the pages in the box. The hundred or so immediately beneath the contract were a list of names—names of slayers, to be precise. Thousands of them. “Someone else received a fax like this? From the same number?”

“Yeah. Yesterday.”

“I don’t suppose you’d be able to tell me who that was?”

“That’s against policy, sir.” Ethan slid a twenty across the counter. The man eyed it warily for a moment before snatching it and stuffing it into the pocket of his jeans. “Rupert Giles.”

So.

He didn’t know if that meant he was competing with Rupert on this project, or working for him on the sly. Either way, he was going to need his sanctum.

When he finished the symbols, he fastened brackets into the wall above the rectangle. Then he retrieved a very large, old fashioned map case. It was made of black walnut, inlaid with silver, and stained with his own blood. Gently, reverently, he pulled out a rod, of the same bloodsoaked wood, around which was wrapped a curtain.

The curtain was hand woven in one piece, an elaborate, irregular design. It had been his mother’s, and his grandmother’s before that. He did not know how old it was, but it pulsed with the magic of his ancestors.

He uncoiled it until it hung from the rod in his hands, and laid the ends of the rod into the brackets. Although he pulled his fingers back as quickly as he could, it still felt like he’d grabbed the wire of an electric fence. His legs buckled and he crumpled to the floor.

“Kon či kerel butji, godo te na xal,” he whispered, and dragged himself to his hands and knees. He
brushed the curtain aside and crawled into his sanctum.

To the rest of the world, it looked like Ethan spent his life in a series of cheap hotel rooms. He had few possessions—his passport, his toothbrush, his razor, an extra pair of socks, two pairs of briefs, slacks, and a t-shirt—and he kept them in a travel case small enough to carry on when he flew. He did not check luggage. He also had his map case, but almost nobody noticed that. It had a way of being...unobtrusive.

Ethan actually lived in his sanctum.

It wasn’t a world in its own right, but a little piece of this one, squeezed off like a bit of balloon wrapped with a rubber band: an auxiliary bubble. It was about a half mile square, and it contained a stone tower, seven stories high, which had no exit—unless you counted the roof.

This floor was living quarters.

The air in the room was cool, but a fire crackled in the great stone fireplace, and dinner waited for him on the hearth. He stumbled to it and ate, watching the storm rage across the perpetual night outside the tower. Then he soaked for an hour in a bath so hot it scalded.

When he was clean and dry, he dressed in deep red ritual robes, pulled his hood up against the weather, and headed for the roof.

The circle sprang to life at his touch, a silver shimmer level with the floor. He called his directions, secured his perimeter, and then he summoned the demon.

“Alu, hear me!” He screamed, and the wind screamed back, hurling half frozen rain into his face with bruising force, but he stood and the light of the circle rose.

“Alu, heed me!” Lightning struck and there was no pause before thunder overwhelmed his words, but he stood and the light of the circle rose further.

“Alu, I command you. Come to me now!” The tower shook and the sky darkened. Ethan trembled, but still he stood and the light of the circle rose to a dome above his head.

When it subsided, he was no longer alone. A patch of living darkness regarded him with star-flecked eyes. “Why have you summoned me?” The words came from the air, the sky. They fell out of the night, voiceless and without origin. He heard them anyway.

“I seek the answer to a question.”

“I could scrape you clean and leave a husk.”

“You cannot.” He stood straighter. “You are bound. I have bound you.”

“I could crush the life from you, drown you in your dreams.”

“No, demon. You cannot.” He flicked his wrist, and the light from the circle flared. Alu drew itself up and roared. “You are bound. I have bound you. What is the origin of the Slayer line?”

“Trivial question. You waste my time.” It stalked closer to him, looming, threatening. He took one step toward it, and stared into its eyes.

“What is the origin of the Slayer line?” The thing snarled, swiped a clawed hand toward him, just inside the circle. Ethan’s gaze did not waver.
“A human concern, mage. Beneath me.”

Ethan raised his hands to the sky. The circle flared, again, and shifted red. The demon shrieked.

“What is the origin of the Slayer line?” Ethan’s voice thundered, echoed in the stones of the tower he had built, block by block, with his own hands, its mortar mixed with his blood. Out in the real world, he was no match for this demon, but this was his world. This was his sanctum. It had no power, here.

“What have I to do with the children of Rabisu?” Alu wailed.

“Rabisu’s children...vampires?”

“Skulkers in the darkness....”

“The Slayer is one of the children of Rabisu? Like vampires?” He lunged forward, toe touching but not crossing the line of the circle. “Answer me, demon!”


“Human purpose, but not a human soul? A demon spirit?”

“Weak as any child of Rabisu.” It seethed contempt.

“What’s the difference between a vampire and a slayer, then?”

“They are lifeless, sourceless. Her source is the Well. She wraps herself in the skin of the world.”
Spike and Oz walked side by side in front of the lagging Scoobies while Willow and Xander grilled Buffy. For her part, she accepted it with a degree of patience that demonstrated conclusively that she was someone entirely different than she had been a short while ago.

"But Buffy," Xander said, "I would have thought you’d learned your lesson with Angel. Remember that? One happy and the soul goes bye bye."

"Not a risk," Buffy said. "Spike doesn’t have a soul."

Xander recoiled a little. "You know that’s not a point in his favor, right?"

"Eeyeah...Buff. I gotta go with Xander on this one. I get that he’s attractive, in a kind of...menacing...way, but...are you sure you’re safe?"

"Even if you’re safe, Buffy, are we safe?" Xander cut right to the heart of the matter. "‘Cause I don’t think I’ll be happy with that guy unless he’s wearing a muzzle."

"I’m sure. Absolutely, completely, a hundred and ten percent sure." Buffy sighed. "Look, guys. He wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t really, really sure I could trust him."

The arguments continued, but Spike didn’t hear them anymore. She’d just told her friends she trusted him, and she’d done it while he was listening. She’d done it in front of him. She meant for him to hear. He breathed hard and blinked back tears, trying not to smear his makeup.

"Bet that felt good," Oz observed.

"You have no idea," Spike said, shaking his head. "Feel like I should be waking up any minute now. This the place?" He stopped in front of a multi-story frat house. There was a rubber welcome mat in front of the door. It was adorned with a drooling cartoon ghoul and it read, "Hell Come."

"How’d you guess?" The wolf grinned. "Let the horrors begin."

They made their way tentatively through the door. The place was dead quiet except for one of those ‘scary noises’ recordings you could find in the stores around Halloween. The corners were draped in cobwebs, which cast eerie, flickering shadows in the firelight. A lit candelabra hung from the ceiling Spike ducked the first animal bone mobile, but Xander caught it with his face. "Ew...yuck!" he said, stilling the clacking bones with his hands. "The joint’s not jumpin’. Where is everybody?"

Oz nodded at a sign that read, ‘Stairs out! Detour.’ "Follow the signs," he said.

It was exactly what you’d expect a fraternity haunted house to be. There were plastic skeletons with toy swords, rubber rats and spiders, and spooky sounds coming out of corner mounted speakers. The only authentic part was the cobwebs. He was almost convinced the evening would be a bust, regardless of what Buffy said she remembered. Five minutes in, however, it started to get real.

The first thing everyone noticed was a tarantula on Willow’s shoulder. Xander drew her attention to it and she shrieked. It was a better scream than anything coming out of the speakers. She spun around several times, flailing her arms and gasping, before she managed to dislodge the spider. It scuttled away. "Is it gone?" Willow panted. "Are there more? Is it off?"
"It’s gone." Oz reassured her, totally unshaken. Spike thought he might get to like that kid. He was good under pressure.

"'Kay," Buffy said, taking Spike’s hand firmly. "I don’t think I’m really into the haunted house with real spooky fauna. Let’s go find the party part of this party. What do you say?"

They walked down the hallway huddled close together, until Spike stopped them. He knelt near a dark stain on the carpet, touched it with his fingertips. "Uh...Slayer?" he said. "Think we may have a problem."

"What is it?" Xander pushed forward. "What did Deadboy find?"

"That would be Big Bad, if you please, Mr. Bond. And what I found is blood." He raised his fingers to his lips to confirm the find by taste. "Real blood. It’s human..."

"Okay, ew," Xander said, swallowing hard. "Actual creeps have been given. Bravo, frat boys..."

Buffy’s head was cocked to one side. "Shh. Do you hear that? Sounds like squeaking."

"It’s these rented shoes," Xander tried to joke. "Patent leather. I asked the guy to break them in for me...."

"No," Willow said. "I hear it, too. Something else. Something like...." She looked up at the ceiling, eyes wide. Everyone else followed her gaze. The entire ceiling was hung with bats. After one long moment of silence, all the bats descended upon them at once. The group swatted at them, screaming. One of the bats flew into Buffy’s hair. She grabbed it and threw it, hard, to the ground where it lay still as the rest of the bats flew off down the hallway.

Oz leaned over and picked up the downed bat while Willow protested, "Oz, don’t. It might be—"

"Rubber," Oz said. "It’s rubber."

"Alright," Buffy said. "I’m done. It is time to get the hell out of here. Willow, I need you to keep hold of Xander and Oz, no matter what. Seriously," she continued when Willow did not immediately comply. "Get one of them in each hand and don’t let go."

"Okey dokey," Willow said. "What are you gonna do? Are you gonna hold on to Spike?" Her tone indicated what she thought of that plan.

"Nope," Buffy said. "He’s going to hang onto you." Buffy pulled the sash off her dress and knotted one end of it to Willow’s scabbard. She tied the other end to Spike’s belt. "Okay, good. That leaves your hands free. Don’t let them out of your sight. I need them to be safe." She pressed a kiss against Spike’s lips, ignoring the gargling noise Xander made. "Got your ax?"

"My...weapon...is at your disposal, m’lady." He waggled his eyebrows at her and bowed deeply; she giggled, sent him a rush of warmth and worry. "Keep the link open?"

"I will," she whispered. "No fear. I’ll keep you as close as I can."

They moved through the big house as a group, virtually inseparable.

Between Spike and Buffy, they deflected most of the creepy crawlies that came their way. Buffy was slightly wounded by a skeleton with a dagger, but Spike scattered its pieces with his ax. They hit only one serious obstacle before they reached the place Oz called "The Goat Room" which had an obviously mystical symbol painted in crimson in the center of the floor. It was a pack of zombies.
The things crawled up out of the ground, moldering wounds oozing blood and pus. Some were missing eyes, some limbs, and one lacked its entire lower jaw so that its tongue writhed loose from its throat like a slug. Partly rotting entrails dragged behind another one in a nauseating mockery of a bridal train. Filthy hands with gore encrusted nails clutched at their ankles, at their clothes, trying to pull them down. Blackened teeth gouged into their flesh, leaving trails of foul-smelling spittle. It was horrific.

If Spike had been asked what bothered him most about them, he would have said it was the sounds they made. They screamed. They wailed. They sobbed. He could hear the broken damnation in their voices, and it made him tremble. They were beings of monstrous, loathsome evil, born for the fires of Hell. Like him, they would someday be called to judgment for their sins and they would be damned. They knew it, and there was absolutely no way to change it. They stared down the barrel of eternal torment with full awareness.

He dropped to his knees among them, hobbled by his own despair. He couldn’t go on. He didn’t deserve to go on. If he hadn’t been tied to sweet Willow, the group could go on without him, make their way back into the light. If it weren’t for him, they might be okay. If they were hurt, if they were killed, the blame would be his. He had to set them free. He reached up to untie the knot that bound him to Willow. The sash was smooth and the knot was tied so tight that he couldn’t get his fingertips into it. Someone pulled at his hands, plucked at his fingers, tried to tug them loose from the fabric. The next second, everything went black.

When he came to, Buffy was stomping on a very small, albeit gruesome looking, demon, and Giles stood next to her brandishing a chainsaw. A pretty young woman in a pale pink bunny costume had joined the group. She watched Buffy dispatch the little demon with a dispassionate satisfaction he’d never before seen in anyone human. He lay on the floor, untied from Willow. He felt dizzy, light headed, and a little queasy. "Lookee there, Watcher," he croaked. "Told you she needed you."
They’d had enough excitement for one evening, so they went back to Giles’ flat. Giles rummaged about in the kitchen cupboards for a few moments and returned with a truly obscene amount of candy in hand.

“Some quality treats here, Giles,” Oz said as he took the bowls and retreated to the pile of Scoobies in the living room.

"Please finish them," Giles said.

Spike chuckled. "Over-shop a little, did you?’ he asked, popping a handful of candy corn into his mouth. "Sales get to you?"

"I have never spent Halloween at home." The Watcher slouched down in front of the couch next to Spike, set drinks down for both of them. "I had no idea how many of the little beasts were going to come to my door demanding treats. I feared for my safety should I run short. Besides, I figured the locusts," he gestured to the room at large, "would take care of any excess."

As if on cue, Buffy said, “Uhm, this is much better. There is no problem that cannot be solved with chocolate.”

"To the locusts," Spike murmured, and raised his glass to Giles.

"To the locusts," Giles replied, smiling with the lines around his eyes.

There was a nascent peace between the two of them for which Spike was crushingly grateful. Like Buffy, he had been thrust out of time and place, set loose to find his way in a world suddenly unfamiliar. It didn’t matter that Buffy had actually fallen through a crack in reality while Spike’s fall was only metaphorical. They had both fallen, picked themselves up, and brushed the dirt from their knees, all the while trying to pretend that no damage had been done. Giles was the only other being aware of their wounds. That's why they submitted themselves to his endless questions, his crass assumptions, and his biased judgments. They needed him.

He and Buffy had gone to the Watcher’s house the previous evening for dinner to allow the man to interrogate them at length about their relationship. It was a meet-the-folks scenario for a star-crossed coupling that would make Maria and Tony queasy. "So," he’d said, staring them down as though they were wayward teenagers rather than accomplished killers, "tell me how this claim thing works."

"Wow...Giles," Buffy said. "Don’t you know more about that than we do? I know you’ve got a whole book on it, somewhere. I...uh...borrowed it when I...uh...when I was seeing...uh...Angel." She cast an apologetic glance sidelong at Spike, who snarled just a little when his sire’s name was mentioned. "For what it’s worth, I was only sixteen and completely lacked a clue. If I had it to do over...."

"Point taken, love," Spike said, laying his hand over hers. Her dreams were filled with what had happened before she got her second chance. He woke her out of a nightmare at least once a night, stroked her hair and soothed her back to fitful sleep. His dreams were bloody and brutal, violent as only the dreams of a vampire could be. She remembered them in the morning, but they never disturbed her rest.

"I do, as a matter of fact, have a book on claims, Buffy. I have a whole slew of books on claims, but
not a one of them was written from a first hand account. They are secondhand accounts filled with rumor, speculation and, I suspect, more than a few flights of fancy. Care to flesh out my knowledge?"

"Right, then," Spike said. As a general rule, he was nervous about giving Giles too much information on the ins and outs of vampire rites and rituals. Although Giles had technically cut ties with the Watchers’ Council, he was sure that if anything got to be too much for the man to handle, he’d be on the phone to them before his heart beat twice. He didn’t think the Council could do all that much damage with this one, though. "What do you want to know first?"

"Hmm...." Giles mused, swirling the wine in his glass. "Let’s start with the basics. Leaving out details that are too...intimate...please tell me: How is the claim completed?"

"It’s incredibly ancient, unbelievably powerful blood magic, demonic in origin and completely irreversible." Buffy shrugged. "It’s not complex."

"I see," said Giles, who clearly didn’t. Funny that a trained Watcher wouldn’t understand this principle.

"Not to put too fine a point on it," Spike put in, "but Slayer’s right. The older and stronger the rite is, the simpler it has to be. Most of the magic in a claim already exists. It’s just part of...." He laid a hand on his own chest.

Giles shook his head, "Part of what, exactly? Part of you?"

"Part of being a vampire," Buffy explained. "Claim works like this: taking blood; asserting a claim; accepting a claim. Mating claim does all of that twice, so it’s mutual. We draw blood. He says, ‘Mine!’ I agree. I say, ‘Mine!’ He agrees. Done. As long as we both shall live."

"And that’s all there is to it? It’s really that simple?" Giles had pulled one of his ubiquitous yellow legal pads from some undisclosed location and was jotting notes again.

"Well, yeah," Buffy said. "It’s that simple because it’s not really that simple. It just hijacks magicks that are inherent to being a vampire. When you get right down to it, we re-sired each other; we hijacked the sire bond." Spike felt her tense up. He knew which question the Watcher would ask next, too. He squeezed her hand.

"Wouldn’t think that would work if one partner was human, then," Giles said, jotting notes down rapidly in his tiny, perfect handwriting. Watcher was left handed, Spike noted, like him. "There’s no inherent vampire magic to draw from."

"Wouldn’t," he answered without explaining, and then he waited.

Giles wrote for a moment more and then raised his eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

"Said it wouldn’t work if one partner was human. No vampire magic to draw from." Spike took a big bite of his lasagna deliberately.

"You’re human, Buffy," Giles insisted, trying to get her to meet his eyes. She wouldn’t. "I researched it after you were last here. There is nothing in the records to indicate that you are anything other than what you appear to be. You were born human, to human parents...."

"I was," she said quietly. "I was born human, but then the Slayer before me died, triggering one of those incredibly ancient, unbelievably powerful blood rites, and I stopped being exactly human."
"You can’t be...well, you’re certainly not a vampire. You breathe; your heart beats; you eat...food." He eyed Spike’s empty plate.

"Obvious much? Of course I’m not a vampire, Giles. I’m a slayer." She rolled her eyes. "Slayers kill vampires. The reason we don’t usually get too cozy with the undead? We’re on opposite sides: life and death; good and evil; Heaven and Hell. You know the drill. You taught it to me.

"But the kind of demon essence that makes a Slayer and the kind that makes a vampire? So similar it’s not even funny. A very famous vampire once called me ‘kindred’. I was uber-freaked at the time, let me tell you, but he wasn’t wrong." Spike raised his eyebrows. "Dracula. Total dick, by the way. Thought he was all that and a bag of cookies.

"Anyway, the claim, which hijacks the vampire sire bond, works with me because my Slayer essence has the same kind of built-in magic. Got that?" She tapped his notebook until he nodded. "Good. Make it a footnote. You’ll never need it again. It’s irrelevant when there’s just one slayer with one watcher who doesn't let her have a conversation with a vampire. Eighteen hundred slayers all in one place?" She shivered. "They’re demons, Giles."

Giles set his pen down on the table and spent a moment just looking at her. "I cannot begin to imagine what you must have been through."

"I can," Spike said. "She has nightmares."

Giles flipped the pages in his notebook very suddenly. "You share dreams?" Well, that got his attention.

"Oh, yeah," they breathed in unison.

Giles wrote furiously. "One of those things I assumed would prove to be myth. It seems like it could become...awkward...eavesdropping on one another’s dreams."

"Privacy?" Buffy blushed. "Thing of the past."

"Dreams, daydreams, emotional states...can’t hear her thoughts in words, usually, but she can hear mine," Spike explained.

"I think that’s just ‘cause I don’t think in words," Buffy said. "I send...ideas...concepts...general understandings of...usually of physical things." Spike nodded.

"Fascinating. You bring different preferred modes of communication to the bond? Does this occur both while you’re conscious and while you’re unconscious?" They nodded. "That is quite remarkable. And this bond is permanent?" They nodded again. "So you will function, essentially, as one...being...in two bodies for the rest of your lives?"

"'Bout the size of it, Rupert." Spike gathered up the dishes and took them to the kitchen just for a break from the questioning. He was familiar with all the myth and legend surrounding claims. A lot of it was contradictory or totally nonsensical. He’d researched it a few years after Angelus left their family, when he’d had Drusilla to himself for a while, in the hope that he could convince her to let him claim her. She mocked him mercilessly when he asked, said she wouldn’t be claimed by anyone save Angelus. He never brought it up again. It was still a painful memory.

To delay his entry back into the conversation, he slowly sliced and plated the chocolate cake Giles had set aside for dessert, topping each piece with a scoop of vanilla ice cream and cleaning the kitchen up afterwards. As he walked back to the table carrying cake plates, he heard Buffy say, "No, I think that’s a messed up rumor about a real thing. Ever played that telephone game? Being claimed
by a vampire won’t make someone immortal: The only people who can claim and be claimed are already immortal."

He set the plates down on the table. "We can mark mortals. It’s sort of like a claim. Lot weaker, though. We take blood and make the assertion of...uh...ownership." The Watcher’s face was stony, but held no threat. He slid his chair a little closer to Buffy’s, anyway, just in case. "They can neither assert nor accept. S’pose you’d call it an unacknowledged nonreciproc al claim if it were between vampires, but it’s not. Those’re blood cows, Rupert. Thralls. Claim is a marriage."

"Yeah," Buffy said. "That’s more like writing your name on your lunch before you put it in the office refrigerator."

Giles stared at her, openmouthed. Spike sympathized. He couldn’t quite believe she’d said that, either. Slayer’d gotten downright ghoulish, of late. "Right," the Watcher finally said, breaking the silence that had stretched out just a little too long. "Not the same at all." He flipped back a page on his yellow pad and made a note in the margin. "I suppose the burning question is why the two of you, in particular, chose to do this. It seems rather...sudden...don’t you think?"

"Hey—not sudden for me," Buffy said. "Completely not sudden. So not sudden it’s...what’s the opposite of sudden?" She scrunched her eyes up tightly and wrinkled her nose. It made her seem very young, like she lacked substance or simply wasn’t taking the question seriously. That was not the case. She was thinking of his death. No pictures, but he recognized the tenor of her thoughts. "Trust me. I’ve had a world-class brood on about this for a long, long time." That was the dream where she watched, helpless, while he caught fire from the inside and brought a rock cavern down on his head. It was the worst of her nightmares. When she woke up from it, he always had to tell her where she was.

"It was faster than that, for me," he said, stroking Buffy’s hair, "since it’s only been a couple of years, ‘though ‘m not sure that’s what you’d call sudden in the strictest sense of the word."

"Ah...so you’re telling me you’ve been...enamored...with my Slayer for years and I haven’t noticed?"

"Got no explanation for that, Rupes." He chuckled as the Watcher spluttered. "‘F it’s any consolation, I was pretty deep in denial, myself. Dru had to break it to me. Was none too gentle about it, neither." Buffy watched him intently, and she’d clamped down on her reactions, so he couldn’t read her without looking. "Knew I was attracted to her. Knew I admired her—she’s a worthy opponent. Be honored to die at her hand. Wanted to rip the Great Forehead’s soddin’ face off for the things he said about her."

"But that kind of infatuation—that’s not enough to consent to the eternal bond of the claim, is it?"

"Oi, Rupert." Watcher couldn’t see what was right in front of him. "Weren’t you listening? D’you miss the part where she gave up her hero’s reward," he couldn’t say ‘Heaven’ without choking, “to come back here to save my miserable hide?” His throat went tight. "You really think I can’t be moved by something so..." He reached into the pocket of his duster, which was draped over the back of his chair, and withdrew his journal. Flipping it open to a marked page, he read, "...beautiful, uplifting, world-changing, and redemptive?"

"I would do anything, withstand anything, to be even a fraction of the man she thinks I already am."
He hadn’t thought much of it when Buffy took the pictures. She’d badgered him into a crisp, navy blue dress shirt, smoothed his hair with that fabulous cream that killed the fluff and spared the curls, and sat him on a stool in front of a plain white wall. Then she talked to him: teased him; asked him questions; told him stories. She told him she loved him.

While she talked, she took dozens of pictures. She didn’t explain why, and he didn’t ask. Like so many of the things she did, it seemed to be driven by something beyond this reality—by some bright grief that hadn’t yet been born.

So he was caught off guard when he dragged himself out to the taproom on Monday morning, after Buffy headed off to class, and Willy set a large padded envelope on the bar next to his drink.

"What’s this, then?" It was several inches thick and quite heavy.

"Came for you this morning." Willy raised his eyebrows. "By courier. You weren’t expecting anything?"

"Nothin’ I recall, no. Say where it was from?" There was nothing on the manila envelope.

"Not a word. Made me sign for it, though." Willy shuddered, rubbing at his wrist. "I can’t tell you how much I hate demon couriers. They always want you to sign with those stupid blood pens that shoot a needle out, pow, right into the vein. Those things hurt, you know?"

"Ah...yeah." Spike picked the package up and turned it over in his hands a couple of times before gripping the flap in his fingers. "Well, here goes nothin’," he said, and ripped it open.

When he dumped out the contents of the envelope, it was as though he had suddenly come to life. It contained a mountain of identification for one William Henry Pratt, who was, as indicated by his paperwork, a citizen of the United Kingdom and twenty-seven years old.

According to his birth certificate, he was born in London in 1972 and, if his school transcripts, report cards, and medical records were to be believed, he grew up there, too. He was rarely sick, as a child, but was cut deeply above one eye in an altercation with another boy when he was fourteen years old. The two of them had been sparring during a martial arts class when the disagreement began. There were records of other conflicts, too, but nothing else with injuries that required medical attention.

Will Pratt was a moody, precocious young man who took offense easily and had no qualms about expressing himself in a physical way. He entered Cambridge at the startling age of sixteen and earned his doctorate by the time he was twenty-two—in literature. College was a better environment for Will and he excelled there. A voluminous academic resume, complete with a list of publications in obscure literary journals as well as awards for excellence, contained one entire page of personal and professional references. Despite his wholehearted welcome in academia, he opted to travel, rather than teach, when he finished school, to which a passport stamped with five years of travel history testified.

Since he’d left school, he’d published a few pieces of poetry, an essay here or there, but nothing significant. It didn’t matter much. When his parents died, shortly before he graduated, he’d inherited enough family money that he would never really need to work. That was the explanation for the seven-figure balance in one of the bankbooks that came in the envelope. The other three held smaller but still significant sums. Should his financial security ever waver, the included work visa, recently approved, would allow him to take a job in Sunnydale, all legal i’s and t’s dotted and crossed.
A black leather wallet contained about two hundred dollars in cash as well as school identification cards, credit cards, membership cards for professional organizations and clubs, and two driver’s licenses: one for the UK and one for California. It was when he was looking through the cards that Spike noticed the pictures. Every piece of identification that required a picture on it had a different picture of him, with a different facial expression and a different shirt. The shirts were all solid colors, he noted with approval. No bleedin’ prints for Spike.

At the very bottom of the stack was a handful of photos wrapped in a tattered eleven-by-seventeen poster. The poster used an edgy, old-typewriter font over what would have been a plain white background if you didn’t count the vivid red spatters. It advertised the May 16th performance of a band called Thrall. The photos were snapshots of the performance.

They were perfect. There were no signs of photo manipulation, no awkwardly stuck-on pieces or too-clean edges. The lighting on the faces was seamless with the rest of the shot. Whoever had made these was a professional, as good as...well, as good as whoever made all his identification.

In the pictures, Spike sang lead. He was shirtless, wearing black jeans, his Docs, and a studded leather collar. His platinum hair was slicked straight back, his nails painted matte black, and his eyes lined in the heavy kohl that lent them a predatory intensity. He held the microphone like he wanted to taste it.

The guitarist and bass player were more generic: California rocker boys whose tans were too even and whose teeth were too straight. Children of privilege. Both were slim and would have been nice looking if it weren’t for the shaved heads and facial piercings, both wore shredded jeans and wife beaters, and both looked like they’d eventually outgrow the club scene and become actuaries or chiropractors.

The best part, though, was Buffy. She sat behind the drum kit wearing a close-fitting, low-cut, black tank top and fingerless gloves. A plain black stocking cap covered the top of her straight blond hair. Her black-rimmed eyes were haunted and unfathomable. In her hands, the drumsticks looked like weapons.

"Huh," Willy said, looking over his shoulder. "Thought you were making up that whole band thing."
Try on my world. - Buffy

When her mother handed her the cashier’s check, the first thing she did was trip over the coffee table and measure her whole length face first on the living room floor. The second thing she did was call a lawyer.

Not just any lawyer, of course, but an apocalypse-in-a-tailored-suit Wolf, Ram, and, Hart lackey whose soul probably didn’t belong to him anymore. It wasn’t that she wanted to deal with the skeezy demon law firm. It was just that nobody else had the resources to help her.

She made it through the phone tree and, eventually, to a lawyer named Stubbs. He sounded young and a little too enthusiastic, but he listened attentively to the list of things she wanted to do, interjecting at intervals with questions and clarifications. She could hear the scrape of a ball point pen on paper. It reminded her of Giles. “So, do you think you can do it?” she asked.

“Faster than Frank N. Furter,” Stubbs said. “Just bring that roll of film and a check. We’ll take care of everything else. And Miss Summers?”

“Yes?”

“It’s a real pleasure doing business with you.”

When the call ended, Buffy slumped on the couch staring at the check. Her mother pressed a cup of cocoa into her hands and sat down beside her. “I know,” she said.

“I didn’t expect....”

“I paid off the mortgage this morning.” Joyce Summers sipped her own cocoa. “And the car.”

“That’s...I need to go to L.A.”

“I need a new pair of pumps. I’m thinking Prada.” Joyce nodded slowly. “Or Gucci.”

“Hmm. Tough choice,” Buffy said.

“Or maybe both. And a matching purse.”

“Coordination is key. Betcha could find those in L.A.”

“Betcha I could. What do you say we play hooky and make a day of it? Tomorrow. Meet the lawyer, get lunch...go shopping.”

“Ooh! Throw in a pedicure, and I’m there.”

The trip to L.A. was more fun than anything Buffy had done with her mother since before the divorce, since before the move to Sunnydale—since before she was called. They talked about shoes, clothes, and sushi, but not dating, not school, and certainly not work. They sang along to oldies on the radio. They stopped twice for coffee, and both of them got whipped cream.

But Buffy didn’t cry. Not once.

Not even in the waiting room when her mom snapped her book closed and asked, “Honey, is everything alright?”
“I guess...I guess I’m a little shell shocked.” *Because you died, you’re already dead, and I grieved for you.* She forced a smile, scrambled for a plausible lie. “It’s a lot of money.”

“Oh...ho, yes. It is a *whole* lot of money, and we’re just beginning. I felt almost guilty taking a commission.”

“Don’t, Mom. He was going to leave it. He doesn’t really need money.” There’d been a time when she hadn’t needed money, either. There hadn’t been enough of the world left for money to matter. She almost missed it. Clothes, classes, paperwork, bank accounts—it all came at her like a swarm of gnats, the sort of thing someone else would take care of for her, if she hadn’t been dropped through a crack in the world.

“How does he live? Wait—.” Joyce Summers gripped the arm of her chair a little tighter. “Don’t tell me that.”

“Good call.”

The office door opened and her new lawyer jogged out, all broad grin and unshakable confidence. “Miss Summers? Jason Stubbs. An honor to meet you!” He was in his thirties, thin and balding, with a fringe of carrot colored hair around his skull and freckles across his nose. He seemed to know what he was doing. The meeting was painless except for the price tag.

“I think your father uses this firm,” her mother said as they climbed back into the car. “So...what Mr. Stubbs is doing for Spike...it’s not legal, is it?”

“Not even a little,” Buffy said, “but it’s the only way he can get this money, and I need him to have it.”

“You need him to have it.” Her mother shook her head. “That makes it sound like part of...oh, I don’t know...some kind of *strategy.*”

“Yeah.” Buffy took a deep breath. “That’s what it sounds like.”

“The last time you brought Spike to the house, you told me you had to stop the world from ending.” *You can’t just drop something like this on me and pretend it’s nothing!*

“It’s what I do.” *Well, I don’t accept that!*

“I know.” She put the car in gear. “Sushi?” *You walk out of this house, don’t even think about coming back.*

“Yeah, sure—Mom, we can’t just drop this. I have to do—.”

“I know.” Her smile was very sad. “Buffy, *I know.* I like Spike. I do. And I don’t mind if he comes to visit. But the two of you together means something big is happening, right?”

“Well, yeah...”

“And there’s all that treasure, and a meeting with a lawyer, and...if I’m not mistaken, you’re inventing an identity for Spike?”

She sighed. “Yeah.”

“I’m trying to figure out...well, is the world ending? Imminently, I mean?”

“Oh. Oh no. It’s not.” Buffy laughed in relief. “We have some lead time on this one, and a chance to
make a dent in the craziness that is Sunnydale.”

“Oh, thank god.” Her mom pulled the car into the parking lot of the sushi place. “And you have it all under control? You don’t need anything from me?”

“New shoes?”

“Without a mortgage? Not a problem.”

Buffy’s new shoes were Gucci, her mother’s were Prada, and her lawyer was as good as his word. It may have taken Dr. Furter seven days to make a man, but Mr. Stubbs did it in three.
"Never been in here before," Spike commented as they walked, hand in hand, into the snug little wood-paneled pub. It was within walking distance of the university. Despite the late hour and the fact that it was a week night, the place was crawling with twenty-somethings. It had a college town, meat market atmosphere that would have made it an excellent hunting ground, under other circumstances. He wondered if this was where Sean met Luke.

"Yeah...me either...as far as they know," Buffy smirked. "They have good fish and chips, though. And look! Xander." She led him to the bar and selected stools right in front of the dark haired young man. "Hey, Xan. What's up?"

Xander smiled at her cheerfully until he noticed that Spike was at her side. Then the smile dissolved and he fastened a venomous glare on Spike. "Hey, Buff. See you brought your...whatever he is." Spike flashed Xander a menace-tinged sneer and slipped his arm around Buffy’s waist. The two of them were going to have to work out their differences soon. Right now, only his need to stay in Buffy’s good graces kept the sniveling little moron alive.

"Yuppity yup!" Buffy pretended not to see the impending confrontation between the two of them. "My guy is newly flush and asked me to dinner. I got to pick the restaurant. So it’s not five star. It has you, doesn’t it? I’ve missed you so much, Xander. You haven’t been hangin’ with us much, lately, ‘cause you’ve been so busy with Anya," she singsonged the name.

Xander opened his mouth to protest but Buffy shushed him. "Oh, no worries, Xander. I get it. I’m happy for you—for both of you. You’re totally perfect together."

"Is that some kind of crack about the ex-demon thing?" Xander didn’t seem to be able to take Buffy’s well-wishes at face value. "‘Cause I’m tryin’ to turn over a new leaf, here. I want to go out with girls who don’t turn into giant bugs or life-sucking mummies."

Spike had heard Anya’s story. She’d sat down next to him, during the chocolate frenzy at Giles’ flat, and spilled the whole convoluted tale in a show of non-human solidarity. Anya was a vengeance demon who had been deprived of her power center and stranded in Sunnydale, locked into her mortal form. That didn’t make her human, exactly, but the ballots were still out on what she was.

Whatever she was, though, she was totally taken with Xander. She was also way out of the boy’s league. He’d probably never get another chance with someone of her caliber. The snide asides about her former state and the trouble she had fitting in were contemptible. He needed to shut his lousy mouth and treat the girl right.

So caught up in his musings about Xander’s unworthiness, Spike was unaware he’d been staring until the boy said, "And what’s your problem, Deadboy?"

"Huh? Oh, Anya. You’re a lucky bloke. You should be good to her. Girl like that’ll have plenty of suitors ‘f you don’t make her happy."

Xander’s eyes blazed. He clenched his fists around the bar towel he’d been wiping glasses with and snarled at Spike. "You keep your filthy, undead eyes off her or I’ll—."

Spike leaned in close and whispered, "Or you’ll what?" Buffy laid a gentle hand on his cheek. The aggression drained out of him. He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek against her fingers, turned his face to kiss her palm. He was hers.
"Xander," she said very seriously, "if you hurt Spike, I won’t interfere when he hurts you back. This is your one and only warning."

"What?" Xander practically spat the word. "Do you even hear yourself? You’re picking that over me? That thing? That monster? What is wrong with you?" He smashed his fist down on the bar in front of them. He’d been drinking. That much was clear. Even if the watery eyes and exaggerated enunciation hadn’t given it away, Spike could smell it on him. "Wait," Xander continued, reaching out to lift Buffy’s hair off her neck, exposing the claim marks. "That wasn’t there before! He bit you!"

Whoa, boy. Spike waved a waiter over and ordered fish and chips for both of them. This was going to be an interesting conversation. "Xander," she said, "could you keep it down? Yes, he bit me, but it’s not—."

"It’s a thrall, isn’t it? He’s controlling you! That’s why you’ve been so...." Xander trailed off, shaking his head. "First thing, we’ve got to tell Giles. Giles will figure out how to fix it. You are dust, Spike."

Buffy’s face crumpled. She looked so woebegone he thought his heart would break. This had to be an Othertime thing, to undo her like that. It was only when she was troubled by something from that other life that he became aware of the years she’d lived and the battles she’d endured. He put his arms around her, pulled her onto his lap, and held her fiercely. "Don’t be a git, boy. Watcher knows," he growled.

"You’re lying," Xander said, "cause that’s what evil things do. They lie. If Giles knew she was under your thrall, you wouldn’t be here to annoy me." That was when Buffy started crying. He kissed her, trying to soothe her through the link. It wasn’t working.

"First of all, ’s not a thrall. Thrall’s like using magic. You need a knack to start and then you practice, yeah? If you don’t have the gift, you can still manage a basic charm here or there, but it’s work to make it happen. I lack the knack." Really, the Scooby Friends should already know this. He’d have to have a word with Rupert about their abominable lack of education. "Think I wouldn’t’ve thralled you lot way back if I could’ve?"

"Oh...kay. That...makes some sense, I guess." Spike thought it was less about what he’d said than about what Buffy was doing. She was draped across Spike’s lap, face tucked into his neck, clinging to him. She looked so small. "You know, except for the part where you bit her. So...why’d you bite her? More importantly, why’d she let you?"

"Wasn’t so much that she let me. Was that she asked me to." Let him chew on that for a second.

"Whooa whoa whoa! You wanna run that by me again, Fangface?" Spike shrugged. Xander turned on Buffy, "Buffster...splainy? Please?" The boy’s hostility was fading in the wake of his confusion.

"I asked him to," Buffy sighed softly, turning her head just enough to peer out at him with one eye. "He didn’t hurt me. He won’t hurt me. We’re together, Xander. I’ve...been through a lot and I need you to be okay with this." Xander started to object, but Buffy cut him off, emotionally volatile as only Othertime issues could make her. "He is mine."

Spike waited until she stopped breathing hard, stroked her hair and kissed her forehead until her pulse returned to normal. "Yours," he said, soothing through the link. "Always yours. You mine?"

"Yours," she said, "forever and ever. Never gonna be without you."
"Wait...I’ve heard about this. This is some kind of weird vampire mating ritual thing, isn’t it?"
Xander squeaked, his eyes huge. "So you’re...what? Mated for life?"

"Well, yeah," Spike said, turning his head so that the two little white semi-circles adorning his neck could be clearly seen.

"Oh, my god—Tim! Hey Tim!" Xander called the waiter’s name. "I’m gonna get these two settled at the booth in the corner and then I’m gonna take a break. Back in fifteen." He grabbed Buffy and Spike’s plates from under the heat lamp and set them on a tray. Then he poured a diet coke for Buffy and started to pour some beer for Spike.

It was a local brew called "Black Frost" and Buffy reacted immediately. "Wait! No!" she cried. "Don’t give Spike...uh...pick a different kind. Please...just humor me."

"Okey dokey." Xander looked at her like she was crazy but obligingly chose a different kind of beer.

Once they were all settled in at the (very dark and private) booth in the corner, Xander slid into the seat across from them. "So spill. Is this why Spike’s been so...not dangerous...lately?"

"Oi! ‘M still dangerous! Just switched sides, is all."

Buffy caught her breath in a sharp little gasp. "Did you? Switch sides, I mean." He nodded once, slowly, and she pulsed her approval through the link. He practically preened in its warmth. "God, I was so dumb," she whispered. "I could have had this before."

"Got it now." He kissed her, let the circuit of the claim magnify their heat. In a few seconds, they were both panting.

"See, now, this!" Xander waggled his finger. "This right here has me wigged. Not just...that...which is...ugh...but all of... You had this whole conversation and I only heard a little bit of it. Is that ‘cause you’re mated?" He struggled to get the last word out. "And while we’re on the subject, why am I only hearing about this now?"

Buffy came out of the kiss but left her forehead pressed against Spike’s, waiting until Xander’s rant died down. "You’re only the second human we’ve told," Buffy said. "Giles was first. Even my mom doesn’t know yet. It’s still pretty hush hush."

"Second human? You’ve been telling demons?"

Spike rolled his eyes. "Don’t be stupid. Demons don’t need to be told."

"Fair enough," he said, blinking rapidly. "So...how long has...have you...been...together?"

"Twelve days," Buffy said, counting it out once on her fingers and then counting it out again, as though she thought she’d gotten it wrong the first time. "Seems way longer than that, but I guess it’s really only been twelve days."

"Still, twelve days is twelve days," Xander said, "which is a long time to keep all of us in the dark. Why doesn’t everybody know, already? Why the wait?"

Buffy didn’t answer right away, so Spike put in, "Gotta admit, Slayer. Got no call to press the issue, but I’ve been wonderin’ that myself. What’s keepin’ you?"

"I was waiting until your paperwork came through." Why would she need his paperwork? ID cards, diplomas, resumes, passports—that stuff only mattered in the human world. The claim wasn’t part of
it. It belonged exclusively to the demon world. She’d only need him to have his paperwork if she wanted to do something that involved human law and...oh. Oh, god.

"So Giles understands what it means. Willow and Xander do, too. My mom would accept it but she wouldn’t really get it. I couldn’t tell my dad or my Aunt Arlene or...." Or anybody who didn’t know about demons. She wanted a way to explain him to her family. She wanted him in her world.
"Spike...will you?"

"Yes." He practically hissed the word. Then he was kissing her again, angry boy be damned, and nothing else mattered. He knew he’d started crying, right there with Xander watching, and he didn’t care.

For his part, Xander was trying to follow the conversation and failing. "Okay...so first, what the hell just happened? Second, what paperwork? And third," he made helpless, flailing gestures in the air, "what the hell just happened?"

"The lady," Spike whispered between kisses, "just proposed." He pulled his wallet from his pocket and dropped it onto the table between them. "This paperwork."

"Whoa," Xander said, rifling the wallet. "This is all you. You’re...it’s like you’re a real person. You really gonna buy dinner?"

Buffy started giggling first.
Spike’s arms wrapped around her waist, held her with bruising strength, while something else tried to pull her away from him. When it couldn’t wrest her from his arms, it bored through her flesh and pulled at her bones until they came away from each other at the ends. She couldn’t see what it was. First, it separated the tiny bones in the top of her feet, taking one toe at a time, splitting skin from muscle, gouging through tendon and ligament. Then it moved up her legs, pulled at the big muscles of her thighs until they were left hanging from her knees like deflated inner tubes. It crawled higher.

It splayed her ribs away, twisted tendrils into her ribcage from the bottom to the top, and snapped the bones in the middle. It tore at the golden cat that lived in her chest, and the cat’s claws tore, in turn, at her beating heart. Her blood trickled down her belly to pool on the floor at her feet.

She fought back, kicked and flailed, pummeled her attacker with the edges of her hands, with her elbows, tore at it with her teeth. Every tendril she severed fell away without a sound, and another took its place.

She drew her arms around the furry body, screamed until the sound turned into the yowl of a cat, and woke to Spike yelling her name.

“What...what?”

“You have a cat in your chest.”

She sat up. He passed her a glass of water. “I guess so.”

“What was that about?” He pulled the comforter up over her shoulders.

She shook her head. “I’m not sure. It felt like....”

“It felt like an attack.” His eyes were wide, white showing all the way around the blue. “Don’t know what it was. Had to hang on. It was gonna take you.”

When it couldn’t take her from him whole, it tried to take her a piece at a time. Her body ached. “Yeah. That was a magical attack.”

“The shields—Willy’s right proud of the shielding on this room. How’d it get to you?”

“Someone stronger punched a hole and reached in.” The tendrils. She hadn’t grappled with that whole power, then; just the bits that could wiggle through. “I feel sick.”

He swung her into his arms and strode into the bathroom. Then he set her on her feet in the tub and turned the water on. Where the water was about three inches deep, he poured in a capful of bubble bath. She settled down into the bath and leaned back. Without warning, he punched the wall with shattering force.

In an ordinary room, that would have mangled the drywall—and maybe the wiring behind it—but this room was prepared for him. His fist cracked. “That’s reinforced,” she said.

He nodded, cradling his hand against his chest. “Don’ know where to take you that’s safer than here.”

“I don’t think there is anywhere safer.” She took his broken hand and opened it gently under the
warm water. “We knew we had enemies—your enemies, my enemies, probably our enemies, too. Bound to be someone unhappy with both of us.”

“I suppose a—.” They were interrupted by a knock at the door. Spike didn’t even have time to turn all the way around before it opened, and Willy stepped in. He pushed the door shut and strode across the room to the bathroom.

“Excuse the interruption,” he said, closing that door behind him, too, “but what the hell is going on in here?” He carried a glowing, opalescent ball in one hand, and the other fist was clenched—as was his jaw. If he’d had fur, it would have been standing on end. He didn’t appear to notice that they were naked.

“An attack. Someone got through your wards,” she said.

“Got that.” He gestured with the ball. “Who was it?”

“Don’ know,” Spike said. She shook her head.

“You two are trouble. Finish your bath.” He tossed Spike a key. “Go to my rooms. I’ll fix this in the morning.”

“Where are you going to sleep?” Buffy asked.

“I’m not.” Willy stalked from the room.

Willy—once known as Avilliarmigal Gevas, the eldest son of a jewel merchant from the Cibolan coast—sold the last golden link to his real home in nineteen forty-seven, when he realized it would be more than half a century until the gates opened again for his return. With the proceeds of that sale, he bought the bar that would eventually become The Alibi Room. It was his, it was all he had left, and someone had invaded it.

Buffy would not willingly stand between him and their attacker.
“I tried. Something stopped me.” Willow propped her chin on her hand and stared sadly into her root beer. “I got nothing.”

“You were blocked?” The bartender leaned toward her, pounder glass and cloth still in his hands.

“No. Like...something was already there and it wanted me to leave. I still have a headache.”

“You aren’t planning to try again, are you?” a brunette—leggy, pretty—asked with a scowl. “You shouldn’t try again.”

“Then how’re we supposed to find out?” The bartender wasn’t even pretending to work, anymore. Riley cleared his throat.

“You could ask.” The young man next to Willow nodded at Riley. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Riley said, and the other three turned worried eyes on him. Willow blinked.

“Oh, hi, Riley!” The worry lines dissolved into a smile like springtime. It transformed Willow’s unremarkable girl-next-door face into something breathtaking. He’d had a crush on her for about five minutes, at the beginning of the term, until he found out she had a boyfriend. The ginger-haired guy with the too-steady gaze? He had to be the boyfriend. “And it’s Graham, right? I’ve seen you around.”

Graham nodded and shook her hand. Willow pointed at her friends, one at a time. “This is Oz—my boyfriend.” That smile again, touched with self-conscious pride. “This is Anya.” The leggy brunette. “And this is Xander.”

“Her boyfriend,” the bartender said, nodding at Anya. Boyfriends all around. They all had boyfriends, as far as Riley could tell, every last girl in Sunnydale.

“So...what brings you here, Riley?”

He flashed her his best aw-shucks Iowa grin and said, “Graham and I are working on a project and we’ve run into a snag. We were gonna sit down and hash it out. Over a couple of beers.”

“Don’t let us stop you,” the bartender—Xander—said.

“We won’t.” Graham didn’t try very hard to look like a civilian. He stood at parade rest. “If you pour us a pitcher of beer, we’ll be on our way.”

Xander’s eyes widened. “Oh!” He spun around, poured the pitcher, and slid it across the bar. “On the house, man. Sorry about that.”

Riley nodded at the circle of faces. “Good to meet you all. Willow? See you tomorrow in class.”

“I don’t think you’re obvious enough,” Riley said as they walked back to their table. “Maybe you could salute, next time.”

“Now you know obvious?” Graham snickered. “The scanner wasn’t broken.”

“It had to be. The guy talked.” Riley set the pitcher on the table and jammed himself into the booth. He hated those things. They were always just a little bit too small.
“Spend some more time in the blocks. A lot of them talk.”

Riley sighed. Graham’s pet theory, and the reason they were here instead of back at Lowell house, where they might be overheard by the other Initiative soldiers, was that some of the hostiles were sentient.

He didn’t like the theory. Not even a little bit. If it were true, it would throw the whole project into chaos. It would damage the reason for the Initiative’s existence.

The problem was that Graham was careful and smart. He didn’t overreach or jump to conclusions. The problem was that he’d started documenting the things the hostiles said. He had it all down in black and white, clear as day and more damning. The problem was that he was probably right.

A bigger problem was that he’d mentioned it to Forrest.

Forrest toed the Initiative line. Professor Walsh’s line. In his view, the hostiles were animals, monsters—things. They weren’t sentient. They weren’t people. They didn’t need or deserve the kind of rights Graham was on the verge of petitioning for. Graham had drawn his line in the sand, and Forrest...well. Forrest was unhappy. So was Graham. It was Riley’s job to fix it.

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Just keep him off me.” Graham rolled his glass between the palms of his hands and stared at his reflection in the table top. “I’d prefer to get court martialed on my own schedule, instead of his.”

He might, too. What a waste. He was a good soldier with an exemplary career. He had a brilliant future ahead of him. “You want me to go to Walsh?”

“No!” The word was too loud, and people from tables around them turned to look. “No,” Graham repeated more quietly. “Absolutely not. She’s...I think she’s the problem.” Riley was pretty sure he was right about that, too. Damn.

He sighed. “Alright. I’ll do my best, but keep your head down. Don’t give him extra opportunities.”

“Yes sir. Will do.” Graham took one deep breath and let it out slowly. “And Riley? Thanks.”
Fourteen demons, two lower beings, and a wraith—not to mention the doorway—in just seventy-two hours. He hadn’t expended that much magical energy in so short a time since...well, probably since the old days. Probably since Eyghon. He was thin enough to see through.

His magic burned hot, burned him up from the inside, squandered flesh and calories in eruptions of kinetic force that winnowed him to bone. He supposed he should be grateful. Fifty would arrive and depart without dropping baggage at his waistline.

But what good was it if it netted him nothing? Well, almost nothing. He’d confirmed what he knew of Slayer origins, so there would be a paycheck for his troubles. Still, if a Moon Vine existed, it was well and truly hidden. Not a soul in Sunnydale fit the description.

The door opened, and Ethan uncurled, pushed the wine-colored sheets to his hips, and sat up. “Eat.” Lstascht hefted a wooden tray onto his lap. She was small, even for one of her kind, and it dwarfed her.

“Yes, Mother.” Ethan lifted the lid from the ceramic dish. It was…porridge? Perhaps, but it didn’t smell like oats. The strawberries and cream, on the other hand, were perfectly recognizable. So was the strong black coffee. “Lstascht, my love, will you marry me?”

She blinked her inner eyelids once, very slowly—the equivalent of an eye roll—and swiveled disapproval with her ears. “Eat,” she said again.

The Hssthk had watched him build the tower. They’d crept through the saran wrap walls of his pocket plane, one at a time, and waited, slit-pupil eyes alight in the unformed darkness, until it began to take shape.

When it looked like he might survive despite the madness of his endeavor, they brought him things: food, bandages, balms and salve. When the tower was finished, they moved in and set about seeing to his needs. He was not quite arrogant enough to believe they were his servants. Much more probably, he was their pet.

He ate his breakfast and watched Lstascht putter about his bedroom, neatening and straightening as she went. Since she was so small—less than three feet tall with her ears relaxed—she stood on tip-toe, climbed furniture, and shimmied up drapes, puff duster clutched in jagged teeth. It was charming, in its way. Domestic. From a distance, in the dark, her people could be mistaken for human children.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

They were colored like calico cats, black and orange in scattered patches on white, although their skin was finely grained and hairless, with an iridescent glimmer where the light struck. They had faces like fennecs, huge mobile ears set low on triangular heads, and mouths full of decidedly inhuman teeth.

He’d never seen them feed—he hoped he never would—but he’d heard them. Screaming, hissing, a kind of feral caterwauling that set his teeth on edge, and the panicked wail of some great beast as it succumbed to their overwhelming numbers. Afterward, they’d climbed straight up the sides of the tower and poured back in through the windows, utterly unconcerned by the lack of a door.

When he finished his breakfast, she took the tray and left a stack of mail in its place. It was all
addressed to him at his sister’s flat in London.

He didn’t know what means the Hsshthk used to cross dimensions, and they seemed unable to explain it. His questions were always met with a puzzled stare, which was occasionally followed by a demonstration. Lstascht herself had tried to teach him, once. She’d taken a few steps, and turned back when she realized he wasn’t following. Then she’d shown him, in minute and exaggerated detail, how to walk, as though that were all he had to do.

Perhaps for them, it was. Perhaps they simply walked from one world to the next, as he would cross a street—the act of moving between realities as innate and unlearnable as moving through this one was for him. He was just grateful they were kind enough to bring his mail.

He flipped through the stack.

There were two checks, which were always welcome, but they would necessitate a trip to the real world. The Hsshthk had not yet begun to do his banking.

There was a card from a classmate at Brittlefield, who had sent him birthday and Christmas greetings every year since nineteen sixty-six. When he’d tried to dissuade her by explaining that he’d been raised Jewish, she’d simply added Hanukah to her list of Hallmarked holidays. He hadn’t the heart to mention Janus. He didn’t know where she’d find a card.

There was a ‘Last chance to buy your tickets at the discounted price!’ advertisement from the organizers of the Los Angeles Symposium on Mysticism and Ethnodemonology. He considered attending—not for the lectures, of course, which were presented mostly by academics who’d never had contact with an actual demon, but for the entertainment value: One bogle in the hotel bar, and there’d be hours of fun.

He perused the schedule idly. There was Brian Robson, of course, speaking on the Fae, as always, Harriet Doyle on the Ano-Movic, Gerald Thackeray leading the round table, and...Rupert. He dropped the letter in the wastebasket. He would not be attending.

The last envelope, made of weighty cream colored linen, contained a hand-lettered invitation to a series of auctions in Los Angeles. It was sponsored by Rath Diallo, a dealer in Pan-African art and artifacts who had provided Ethan with some of his most memorable toys. The series was entitled, “Unearthed,” and the blurb on the card began, “Buried beneath Sunnydale, California for a thousand years, this collection....” He didn’t need to read any more.

The next auction was in three weeks. He was going to L.A.
They decided to break their news to the Scoobies en masse.

Buffy invited everyone to her mother’s house and made dinner—Chicken Marengo, a delicately seasoned wild rice and spice cake for dessert. If anybody noticed she’d suddenly sprouted kitchen competence, nobody said so.

News of the claim—and the engagement—had traveled quickly through the group. Xander told Anya and Willow, and Willow told Oz. Unfortunately, nobody had mentioned it to either Giles or Joyce who were feeling, unsurprisingly, a little left out. "So, what?" Buffy raised an incredulous eyebrow. "You guys went all high school rumor mill on me and nobody told the grownups?" She glanced around at the circle of guilty faces. "Okay, fine. You and you and you and you? See me after class."

"So...you are...married?" Joyce plucked the words out of the back of her throat, a syllable at a time. "That’s what that means, right? In the...demon world? You got married?"

Spike hadn’t been this nervous since before he was turned. Nineteenth century British socialites had nothing on the Sunnydale crowd. Buffy endured the tension with more grace than he could muster. "Yeah, Mom. Except that there is no way to divorce and no cheating ‘cause we hear each other think, that’s pretty much it," she agreed with equanimity. "There’s also the ‘I hurt when he hurts. I cry when he cries.’ thing, but it’s more literal than love song."

"Ah," Joyce said, "I wasn’t aware you were dating, Buffy. I mean, I knew Spike had a crush on you, but I didn’t think you returned his feelings." Spike scrunched his eyes closed and sighed, clutching frustrated fists full of his own hair in either hand. Buffy snickered. He cracked one eye open to glare at her. Looking back and forth from one to the other, Joyce asked, "What have I missed?"

"As far as I can tell? Nothing. Nada. Zero. Zilch. Zippo. Or, as Spike would say, not a bleedin’ thing. So," Buffy said, making an exaggerated kissy-face with the word as she rubbed Spike’s shoulder, "when did you first notice that he had...feelings...for me?"

"Oh, I don’t know, honey." Joyce paused to think for a moment. "It was probably right after that girl, the other slayer, was killed. The two of you showed up here, acting secretive. You tried to feed me some baloney about being in a band. Despite that pathetic excuse for a cover story, Spike backed you up. That is not the act of a disinterested man." She shrugged and took a bite of her casserole. "Mmm. Buffy, this is delicious. Being on your own has been good for you."

"You’re not...upset...by any of this?" Giles asked her. Spike noted that the Watcher didn’t seem particularly upset either.

"Hmm. Well, obviously there are some things that concern me. They haven’t been together very long, and Buffy is only eighteen, and then there’s the age difference, which would give any mother pause." Spike’s and Buffy’s eyes met. The link opened between them for a second and he could feel her smothering a nervous giggle. Giles cleared his throat.

"And then there’s that part where he’s a vampire," Xander snarked.

"We couldn’t really be having this conversation if he wasn’t," Anya pointed out. "It’s a claim. That’s about vampires." She paused to consider that for a moment. "Except slayers can do it, too, apparently. I bet it’s never happened because there’s usually only one at a time." She beamed.
"You know, that’s low on my list of concerns," Joyce said, earning a startled look from Spike. She held up a hand, "If it were some other vampire, I might have a different reaction, but Spike has always been polite to me."

"Right nice of you, Mum," Spike murmured. He had no idea when he’d fallen in love with Buffy, but the start of his affection for Joyce Summers could be pinpointed precisely. It had sprung into being, fully formed, the moment she hit him in the back of the head with an ax.

"They look happy," Oz put in. He’d been watching Buffy and Spike without comment all evening long. It was the only thing he’d said.

"Besides," Willow said, "it’s a done deal, right? They couldn’t go back, now, even if they wanted to."

"Right," Anya said. "You can’t undo it. It’s powerful magic. If you kill one of them," she continued, looking straight at Xander, "the other one will probably die, too."

"But you’re okay with it, right, Mom?" Buffy asked quietly. That was the first real sign of nervousness she’d shown all evening.

"Oh yes, honey. Of course." She patted Buffy’s arm reassuringly, even as she caught Giles’ eye. Whatever misgivings Joyce might have, she’d share them with the Watcher, later, and offer her public support to her daughter. Spike loved the woman just a little bit more. "You’re happy together. He obviously cares for you. He’s nice looking, well-read, and polite, and I must admit," she said, smiling impishly at Spike, "knowing his bank balance doesn’t hurt, either."

She was teasing him. He smiled back. "Lookin’ out for your girl, Joyce, way a mother should. Wouldn’t expect anything less. You took your cut, yeah? If you need anything...well, I owe you. Can’t thank you enough for doing that."

"Oh, it’s no trouble at all. Honestly, sweetie, it’s been exciting. I had no idea how much my world overlapped with yours. I know people who can appraise and find buyers for demon-made artifacts. That’s mind-boggling."

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She paused to catch her breath. "I wish you’d been there for the bidding. It was wild. There were all these...well, demons. You should come, next time, both of you. We’ve sold the first four pieces. Another three go up for auction at the end of this month, and three more by Christmas."

"I want to come. Could I come, too?" Anya asked. "I haven’t been to an auction in decades."

"Of course, Anya." Joyce didn’t react, but she reappraised the girl. She was playing the ‘count the demons in the room’ game. It was trickier than it looked, especially with people like Oz and Anya in the mix. Oz was human, except for those three days a month. Anya was a demon, except that she was mortal, had no special abilities or immunities beyond those of an ordinary human girl. And then there was Willow, with her deep, dark Hellmouth-fueled magic, and Rupert, who’d spent his youth playing patty-cake with Eyghon. Really, Joyce and Xander were the only normal humans in the room.

"Actually," Buffy said very quietly, "I’ve always suspected Mom was a potential slayer who aged out of the window before she could be called, so it’s probably only Xander."

"Not even sure about him," Spike said. "Smell is a little off. Maybe something else in the bloodline, way back."

"Yeah," Buffy said. "Or just human wearing the very popular Eau de Hellmouth."
He shrugged. "Point."

"You two start whispering and I hear my name. Makes me edgy," Xander said, taking a bite of spice cake. His eyes rolled back in his head. "Oh. My. God. Buffy, you’ve been holding out on us. This is good."

"So," Buffy cleared her throat with as much authority as she could summon, "I want to talk about this wedding." The room fell silent. She had their attention. "Every bride wants her wedding to be the event of the century, the gala to end all galas. Because of who and what we are," she squeezed Spike’s hand, "this one really is gonna be the event of the century—maybe of the millennium—and, if we’re not careful, it could end up as the battle to end all battles. We have to deal with it like it’s an impending apocalypse. You know, if we don’t want it to become one." Six pairs of eyes were glued to Buffy’s face. Spike eyes were closed. He held her left hand in both of his, stroking it gently.

"Mom, Anya—I’d like you two to plan the wedding itself: food; decorations; flowers; music. We’ll have to find a venue that will seat everyone but isn’t...well, isn’t a church. It has to be vampire friendly. I need everybody else working on security. We’re going to invite friends and family—both families—so the crowd will be half human at best."

Spike chuckled without opening his eyes. "Like this crowd?"

"Quit it, you." She hesitated for just a second, looked around at her friends. "Actually, that comparison is not half bad," she said, ignoring the smug little noise he made in the back of his throat. "Look around the room. Think about what would happen if everybody here went off at once. Then imagine that there were eight hundred of us instead of eight."
He almost wished he hadn’t let her in.

He’d offered her a chair. She said she’d rather stand. He’d offered her tea. She said she wasn’t thirsty. He’d offered her a cucumber sandwich, and she said she wasn’t hungry, either. So she stood in the middle of his living room, arms folded across her chest, glaring. She looked very much like her daughter.

“I want you to do something about this,” she said. Her voice trembled.

“Mrs. Summers....”

“Don’t you ‘Mrs. Summers’ me, Rupert. It is way too late for that.” The hood of the squad car was warm, but she was warmer still, skin fine and smooth, soft as silk. He’d put his teeth into it. He’d left bruises.

He blinked away the memory and stuttered, “I’m sorry—Joyce.” He poured a second cup of tea and held it out to her. Perhaps out of reflex, perhaps just to make him stop offering, she took it, clutched the cup in her elegant fingers like the cold had gotten into her bones. “Joyce. Please sit.” She nodded, very slowly, and dropped to the sofa. Giles sat beside her.

He spent a moment breathing the steam that rose from his cup, rich and dark and nothing at all like California. “Whenever someone tells me I should do something about Buffy, I wonder who it is they think I am.”

“You’re her watcher! Can’t you make her—.”

“I’ve never once been able to make Buffy do anything, not even when she was a child.” He sipped his tea. “Is there some reason you suppose I’ll have more success now?”

“Did you know about it?” Joyce clinked her teacup onto the coffee table and rubbed her palms on the knees of her slacks.


“How long?” He was afraid to meet her gaze. He could feel it boring into the side of his head. “How long have you known?”

"About a week? A little less.”

“And you didn’t tell me? You didn’t stop her?”

“The claim was completed two weeks ago. They didn’t consult me first.” He set his own tea on the table and clasped his hands in front of him. “What should I have said? What could I have said to make this more palatable?” He turned to look back at her, met a stare more savage than suburban. “It’s not my place to tell you, in any case.”

“Buffy is only eighteen!” Joyce clenched her fists and tightened her shoulders. “She’s not old enough to make decisions that will affect the rest of her life!”

“Yes. Buffy is eighteen.” Giles reached out and took one of her hands, unwrapped the fist a finger at a time, and held it, gently, between his palms. “That means that she is an adult, legally entitled to
make decisions for herself, with or without our input.”

After a second spent in a kind of suspended animation, hovering mid-expression, Joyce’s shoulders slumped. “So we’re obsolete?”

Giles almost chuckled, an abrupt exhalation. “Wasn’t that always the goal?”

She smiled. It was small, and it was sad, but it was real. “Why does it always have to be a vampire?”

“I thought that was low on your list of concerns.”

“Only because my list is so long.” She tilted her head onto his shoulder, and he draped an arm across her back. It was familiar and reassuring, oddly familial. Outside their spell-induced quasi-adolescent lust, there was so little sexual chemistry that she might have been his sister. They’d gone to dinner, once, after Ethan’s candy interference, just to see. It had been awkward. “He doesn’t age. What are they going to do when she does?”

“I’m...Joyce, I’m not sure how to tell....” He stroked her hair, pressed his lips to her temple, and made a decision. “She’s not going to.” It was not the whole truth, but it was true enough.

Fury flashed across her face. “If you tell me slayers all die young, I’ll—.”

“They do, typically, but that’s not what I mean. Buffy and I have been researching slayers and their origin.” He made his voice as gentle as he could. “They were created with—.”

“Blood magic.” Her back stiffened, and he held her a little more tightly. “That’s what she told me. Like vampires.”

“Yes.” Until that moment, he’d have said that Buffy was wrong, whatever she might believe, whatever her future existence might have indicated. She was just a girl—with special gifts and a sacred duty, perhaps, but a girl, as human as anyone else. “Of demonic origin, and immortal.” He said the words out loud, and he believed them.

“That’s heavy,” she said, for a moment an echo of a wayward girl with chocolate in her pockets. “Is that what this is about? She dove into a relationship with the first attractive immortal man she—this conversation is unreal.” She laughed, high and uneasy. “This is not in the parenting handbooks.”

“Not the first—the second.” That was more time than he wanted to spend on the Angel fiasco. “I believe she’d been carrying a torch, and I know he had. She hadn’t pursued it for a number of reasons.”

“And this tipped her over into ‘Why not?’”

“That’s as good a description as any.” He hesitated for only a moment. “They’re remarkably well-suited.”

“Uh huh. So I shouldn’t stake him?” Her bottom lip curled outward, exposing her bottom teeth, and there she was: the quintessentially southern California matron, privileged, anxiety-ridden, and shallow. He snickered. She snorted. Then they were clinging to each other and laughing so hard it hurt.
“There it goes—straight through the goddamned quad!” Holmes’ voice squawked in Riley’s earpiece.

“On it,” Graham said, and moved to intercept the hostile. To Riley’s ears, he was as silent as he was invisible. The prototype stealth suit he wore absorbed light. It distributed his weight and minimized sound. Nothing human could have heard him coming.

But the hostile wasn’t human.

It raised its head like it was sniffing the air, and then it took off at a dead run. That wasn’t human either. “Holy hell!” Holmes shouted through the feedback. “Thing’s clockin’ forty!”

“Forty k? Gonna have to pick up the pace,” Riley laughed, jogging after Graham.

“Where are we—Canada? Forty fucking miles per hour!”

“I’m there,” Forrest said, and then his link went silent. By the time they caught up to him, he’d pinned the hostile against the side of a building with the gator stick. The grasping tongs wrapped around the hostile’s throat. It clutched at them, yowling like an angry cat, yellow eyes focused with feral intensity on Forrest. It couldn’t get enough leverage to push free. Its heels were off the ground.

“Thought these things were supposed to be mean,” Forrest said, laughing and lunging toward the thing like he was going to smack it in the face. He stopped with his fist millimeters from its nose. It startled and hissed, but it didn’t try to attack him. “Not much fight in this one.” Forrest shook the stick a little, side to side, and the hostile screamed again.

The gator stick was similar to something animal control would use to catch a cat or a raccoon. You squeezed the handle at one end to operate the tongs at the other end, and there was a pipe in the middle that enclosed the workings and kept the critter at a distance. The ones animal control used were two or three feet long and mechanical, usually made of PVC and rubber. This was four feet long, carbon fiber, and had a hydraulic assist. It was made for bigger beasts.

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“Forrest—ease up, man. You’re hurting it,” Graham said. Riley winced. That was not keeping his head down.

“This thing? It’s already dead. Doesn’t even need to breathe.” Forrest pivoted the stick and crouched, applying pressure upward into the thing’s throat and lifting its feet an inch or two further off the ground. It didn’t scream this time. Riley wasn’t sure it could.

“Bag it,” Riley said. “Forrest, stand down.” Reluctantly, with that dangerous moment of hesitation, Forrest stepped back and let the rest of the squad net the hostile and bind its hands and feet. It really didn’t put up much of a fight.

The thing was male, although it wasn’t clear how much that mattered to something that didn’t reproduce sexually, and small—five five or five six—with light brown hair cut short in back and longer on top, so that the lock in front flopped down over one of its eyes. It wore jeans and a UC Sunnydale sweatshirt that zipped up the front.

Something was off about that.

Usually, they came dressed in their Sunday best. They were reanimated corpses, after all. Since there
was a wait between infection and reanimation, they got buried wearing whatever outfit their loved ones chose for them—and sometimes those were doozies.

You saw vampires wearing tuxedos or taffeta, still caked in graveyard mud, sweater sets or tailored suits drizzled with the coagulated blood of their victims, or ugly button-down shirts that had to be the only thing a whole family could agree on, but you never saw them dressed like regular people.

Except for forehead, fangs, and weird yellow eyes, this could have been any of the students at UC Sunnydale on an ordinary day. It probably had been. It—he—was just a kid. Did that mean that one of those things was killing them and keeping them somewhere until they woke up? Did his family even know he was dead?

Riley felt sick. Sunnydale might be all kinds of messed up, but he didn’t have to be. He’d find the kid in the missing persons files and notify his family.

It was the least he could do.
The yelling had been going on for the better part of an hour.

They’d arrived in Los Angeles that morning around nine. They came in early to drop the DeSoto off at the auto shop Buffy picked. It was a rundown concrete building in an industrial section of town. There was no sign outside. A vague scent lingered in the air in the building’s vicinity. It reminded Spike of decaying leaves, black dirt made rich with the corpses of tiny animals, and mushrooms. The fine hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

They drove up to the building and waited until the garage door rolled up. Then they pulled the car into the shop and killed the engine. "We have to do this quickly. We’re gonna grab the bag from the back seat and leave without looking back, okay?" Buffy said. Spike nodded, feeling more and more uncomfortable with this situation by the moment. "Good. Let’s go." They got out of the car, leaving the doors unlocked and the keys in the ignition, and exited the garage through a regular door at the side of the building. By the time they got to the edge of the road, there was a cab waiting to take them to Angel’s office.

It was a nice office, well-lit and professional looking, with a couple of potted plants and a water cooler. There were a pair of comfortable chairs underneath the window, which was good because he’d been sitting in one for the last forty-five minutes.

In the next room, behind a closed office door, Buffy screamed accusations at Angel using words her mother probably didn’t know. He wasn’t actually able to piece the shape of the problem together from what she was saying, and the inside of her head wasn’t any more helpful. He flipped idly through an old National Geographic while Angel’s associates tried to keep watch both on him and the door.

He closed the magazine. "Hair looks nice, love."

"What?" the girl snapped. Cordelia. That was her name. Xander’s ex. She used to hang with Harmony when they were in high school. That was before she jumped ship and became one of Buffy’s white hats. It was funny how many people did that. It was funnier that he was one of them.

"The do is fetching. Waves frame your face." Alright. He may have switched allegiances, but that didn’t make him Angel. He could still have a bit of fun. He raised his eyebrows at the Irishman innocently. "Don’t you think?"

"I...uh, I...well, it’s..." Doyle stammered.

"You don’t like it?" He schooled his features into a mask of dismay. "I thought it was flattering. You think it’s unattractive?"

"Uh...ah, no. I mean...that is...I do...." No way the man could get this answer right. Right on cue, the girl turned a demon-worthy glare on her stuttering colleague.

"You are a picky one. Lookin’ for somethin’ brighter than that thousand watt smile?" He shook his head mournfully. "Ah, well. No accountin’ for taste, an’ some blokes ’re just never satisfied."

The noise from the other room ceased for just a moment and the door jerked open. "Spike," Buffy snapped, "quit messing with Doyle and help me. I keep trying to explain, but Angel isn’t getting...." She had tears on her face.
"I’m not surprised, love. You’ve flummoxed me and I know what you’re trying to say." He held his arms out and she came to him, snuggled down onto his lap. Angel glowered from the office door.

"I hate words," she sniffled, "and they hate me."

"Ah, they’re only mean to you ‘cause you mistreat them, pet." He stroked her hair. "You tryin’ to tell Great Sir Forehead the whole story, then?" She nodded. "You gettin’ your timelines all twisted? Hittin’ him with things he doesn’t remember?" She nodded again. "A’right. Let’s go tell a tale. Angel?"

"What?" The big man practically snarled the word.

"Got someplace a bit more comfortable, maybe more private? Stuff you may not wanna share with your coworkers. Or...you know what?" He pulled his wallet out of his jacket pocket and retrieved a credit card. He handed it to Doyle. "Take her shopping. Go to lunch. Should get you out of range for the worst of it. ‘S got a thousand dollar daily limit, yeah? Don’ let it sneak up on you." Cordelia’s eyes lit up and she licked her lips.

"Somebody gave you a credit card?" Angel scoffed, glaring. He snatched the card from Doyle. Spike waited, smirk firmly in place. "This is...you. Why is this you?" He retrieved his wallet again and handed Angel his California state driver’s license. "It’s you."

"It’s me. Let’s move on now, shall we?" He snatched the cards back, replaced the credit card in Doyle’s hands, whispering, "Take her someplace nice, yeah?"

"I don’t trust him. What are you after, Spike? Why are you—" Angel started.

"Angel," Cordelia said, "Let me say this as clearly as I can. He can have whatever ulterior motives he wants and it doesn’t matter to me. I. Do. Not. Care. We’re going before he changes his mind. Bye!" Cordelia took Doyle’s arm and ushered him quickly from the office.

Spike watched her walk away for a second, pressed his lips against Buffy’s cheek. "Just somethin’ about those Sunnydale girls." He sighed. "‘Spose I’m not allowed to turn her, either?" Buffy blinked at him once before dissolving into laughter. "There we go. You ready?" She nodded. "A’right. Angel? Where’re we doin’ this?"

"We could go downstairs...I guess." His personal space, that would be. He didn’t want to let Spike into his apartment. Tough. After that yelling match, he wasn’t about to leave Angel alone with Buffy anywhere, let alone in his soundproofed, underground bedroom.

"Got someplace soft an’ quiet there?" He curled one arm around Buffy. "Girl’s gonna need a little peace."

Angel seemed to get the message. "Got a couch."

"Good enough."

The basement apartment was classic Angelus, all grand arches and austere lines. It was an ostentatious space, designed to create an impression rather than give comfort, the emotional negative of Sean’s little studio.

Sean. There was an item on his checklist. Tell Angelus about Sean. And find a way to contact Sam. He was under orders to get the whole family together in Sunnydale for the wedding. Buffy had even made it clear to him that Drusilla was invited. Although he appreciated the thought, he just wasn’t sure how the Scoobies were going to keep her from eating her way through the friends of the bride.
Still, he’d invite her if they told him to.

He got Buffy settled on the couch. Then he busied himself making her comfortable. He found a
knit blanket on the end of Angel’s bed and tucked it around her. There was hot chocolate mix in
the kitchen. Spike pulled it out of the cupboard while the teakettle was heating and stared at it
blankly. "You have...cocoa..." he said.

"Cordy...usually keeps it in the office. She brought it down when she stayed the night." Angel said.

"Really?" That surprised him. It looked like the other guy had a throbbing crush on the girl. "You
an’ the cheerleader?" Snickering right over the top of Angel’s offended objections, he continued,
"Well, well, don’t you have a right little triangle goin’, down here. Might need to stay for a while an’
watch. Make popcorn." The teakettle screamed. Spike made tea for Angel and himself and mixed
chocolate for Buffy. "No marshmallows?" Angel took the cup of tea warily and shook his head.
"Guess we’ll just have to make do."

"What the hell is going on here, Spike?"

"Now that’s the question, innit? ‘S what we’re here to talk about." He handed Buffy the cocoa and
nestled in beside her. It pissed Angel off, and that made it better. "What have you got so far?"

"Nothing that made any sense. She said she was from the future, that she was dead and didn’t want
to go to Heaven because she’d already been there.” Angel hesitated. "I think she may also have said
you were getting married, but I’m less sure about that part."

"Mighta helped if you hadn’t started bellowin’ soon as the girl opened her mouth." Buffy glared out
at Angel, one eyed, from underneath the afghan. "Whoa ho! Looks like you’re lucky you’re still
standin’, Angelus. Did you get anything else from that conversation?"

"She said you claimed her," Angel sounded appalled, "and that Giles and Joyce were both okay with
it, which is not possible."

"Right, then." He ducked under the blanket and kissed Buffy’s earlobe. "Looks like you actually got
through to him, love. He heard more than I thought he would."

"He was listening?" She sounded very small.

"At least a little. Cocoa helping?" She nodded. "You wanna hear this, Angelus? You let me talk.
You can ask questions, but you hit anybody or start with the noise, and I’ll stop talking, whisk the
Slayer right out of here. Got that?" Angel opened his mouth like he was going to argue. Buffy leaned
forward to set a stake on the glass coffee table with an audible clack. Angel seemed to think better of
it and nodded instead.

When they finished, about an hour later, and all of Angel’s questions had been answered, a few new
things had come to light. The most interesting one was that Buffy held Angel responsible for the final
death of the Othertime Spike. She did try not to blame people for things they hadn’t done yet, of
course, but she wasn’t always successful. She had trouble even looking at Angel.

For his part, Angel had edged away from her by increments over the course of the story until he was
pacing back and forth on the other side of the room. His questions became more and more terse and
further apart until they eventually stopped. As the telling wound down, he asked Spike, "You’re not
telling me you believe all this?"

"Second time she’s told this story," Spike said placidly. "First was under Rupert’s truth spell." He let
a broad smile spread slowly across his face. "‘Sides, can hear the truth of it through the claim." He
could also hear the running emotional monologue in Buffy’s head. She was rapid-cycling through moods: Anger, fear, sadness, worry, and relief all jockeyed for first position, and the battle was fierce. There was nothing right about it.

"That is not a real claim," Angel scoffed, a hint of a growl in his voice. Spike could have sworn his eyes flashed yellow. "That is nothing like a real claim. Sooner or later, she’s gonna come to her senses and leave you and then that," he waved his hand at Buffy, "will fade. I can’t believe Giles is going along with this farce."

Spike got a fraction of a second more warning than Angel. He felt the motion in her mind coalesce into a directed, blazing rage. "Down!" he yelled. Angel hesitated. He’d just started to slide down the wall when Buffy made her move. With the same fluid velocity she’d used to incapacitate Spike during their fateful daylight fight, she scooped the stake from the table and embedded it in Angel’s shoulder, pinning him securely to the wood-paneling.

She stood for a second staring at Angel. Her face was unreadable. "Spike," she said with no expression in her voice, "I’m out of words. You tell him." There was no expression in her mind, either. She sat back down on the couch and began arranging the afghan around her shoulders. "Can I have some more chocolate?"

"Will do, pet. Mind if I take him down first?" She shrugged. "A’right, then." He crossed the room to Angel and yanked the stake from his shoulder. Angel flinched. "You are a stupid git. You got what you deserved." Spike went back into the kitchen and set the teakettle on to boil. Angel was right behind him.

"That was a killing blow!" Angel snarled. "She was trying to stake me!"

She wasn’t, actually. If she had been, he’d be dust. Stake was a good eight inches away from his heart, and he’d only moved two. "You’re surprised? Were you paying attention in there?"

"I don’t see...."

"Course you don’t. She told you an’ you still don’t." Spike’s laugh held no humor. "You never change, do you? Soul or no soul, you make your declarations an’ expect everyone to fall in line." He grasped Angel’s wounded shoulder and squeezed just a little. Angel gasped, but didn’t try to pull away. "She told you, Angelus, what she lived through and how she survived. You know how she died and how much she gave up to come back. She told you who she came back for." He choked the words out through the familiar tightening in his throat, blinked back tears. "She told you she came back for me, and you told her she’d ‘come to her senses’ an’ what? Fall into your bleedin’ arms?"

"I guess I didn’t...."

"Nah," Spike said. "You never do." He stripped the shredded fabric of Angel’s shirt away from the wound, washed the injury with warm water. "This is clean. Stake was polished. Should heal in no time. Shirt’s done for, though."

"Why are you going along with this, Spike? I get that something’s wrong with Buffy, but why are you perpetuating her...delusions?" He practically spat the word.

"Nothin’ wrong with Buffy, ‘cept maybe a tendency towards violence on impulse, an’ opinions vary on that. If you’re lookin’ for my ulterior motives, I’ll save you the trouble. Got none."

"I don’t believe that any more than I believe your claim story. You always have ulterior motives. It’s your nature."
He couldn’t prevent the smirk. "Angelus, give me your hand." He took Angel’s hand in his and laid the palm of it firmly on the double crescent claim marks on his own neck. He felt the electrical energy course in a completed circuit. It was blinding. From the next room, Buffy made a startled, strangled yelping sound. He sent his apologies over the link and moved Angel’s hand away.

"What the hell was that?" Angel rubbed his palm. Some of the stubborn anger in his face gave way to confusion.

"That would be the claim that doesn’t exist. Never seen one?" The big man shook his head.

"Not up close. Never got to touch. That’s...I don’t even know. Can I...can I touch it?" Spike nodded, tilted his head so the delicate scars were visible. Angel traced them with his fingertip. "They’re alive," he whispered, with the same wonder Spike felt the moment he understood. "How did you...I don’t...she’s human, Spike."

"‘Cording to her, that’s not exactly true." Anger crept back into his sire’s eyes. "Try this, Angelus. Reach out. Feel for family." Before Angel could say something obnoxious, he urged, "Just try it. Tell me who you find."

Angel closed his eyes. Spike felt him send out his call, felt the unmistakable siresense fill his mind. "Whatever you’re doing," Buffy yelled from the next room, "it’s creeping me out. Quit it!" Angel sucked in a desperate breath.

"Got your answer, yeah?" Spike chuckled.

"I felt her. She’s part of the...she feels like family. She feels like a...like a...." There was a note of panic in Angel’s voice.

"Like a vampire. Yeah. Set me back a pace, too." Spike shook his head. It set him back more than a pace. It upended his world like a snow globe. "Easy, there. She’s not. She’s the Slayer, same as always. Just...that means somethin’ different than we thought, yeah?"

"She’s a demon."

"‘S what she tells me."

"Slayers are demons."

"In one." He sympathized with Angel’s distress. "Demons so much like us a claim works. ‘Kindred’ is the word she used."

"Buffy is a demon."

"Yeah. We seem to be circlin’ ‘round, here. You a’right?"

"No." Well, points for honesty, anyway. "You’re mated? And you’re really getting married? All that stuff you told me...it was true?"

"What we’ve been sayin’."
The screaming teakettle interrupted their conversation. He made more tea and mixed hot chocolate. "Stay here," he said to Angel, and carried the cocoa in to the living room. Buffy had found a book, but she looked like she was almost asleep. That was her pattern. There was some big emotional blowout, followed by that blank space in her head. Then as soon as that went away, she dropped where she stood like a toddler.

"Spike," she whispered into her cocoa, "I'm sorry. I got so mad I didn't think. Tell him?"

"I will, love. Bastard’s okay, you know. He’s a tough old bloodsucker." She nodded slowly. "Drink up."

When he returned, Angel was sitting at the kitchen table brooding. "She says she’s sorry."

Angel grunted. "She seems...different. She always like this?"

"Nah. She’s been happy. You’re the first one she’s staked." He sighed. "Angel, she’s been livin’ in a war zone, fightin’ for her life. ‘Course she’s different."

"Why’d you claim her?" There was something indecipherable in Angel’s tone.

"That’s a bigger question than you know. Got a whole list of reasons. Mostly? ‘Cause she asked me to."

"She was mine," Angel whimpered. "Why would she do that?"

"No, Angel," Buffy said from the doorway. "I never really was. Are you gonna help us or not?"

"What is it you want me to do?" Ah, he felt for Angel. He really did. Bloke was heartbroken, working hard to keep it from showing. He knew that feeling.

"Come to my wedding and bring your family." It took a moment for those words to sink in. Spike could barely grasp what she was saying and he’d heard it before. She wanted their family to attend the wedding. By that, she meant that she wanted the entire Order of Aurelius, headed by Angel, to publicly declare their approval of the match.

"Buffy," Angel said, "are you insane?"

"Hope that was a rhetorical question, but no. Just drawing a line in the sand." She sat down at the table with the two of them. "The politics of the Order of Aurelius have changed, Angel. You’re head of the family, and you have a soul. We’ve worked together off and on for years. Spike is with me, now." She smiled gently at him and ran her fingers through his curls. If Angel could have gone paler, he would have.

"Drusilla is a wild card, admittedly, but she’s yours, Angel. She’ll do whatever you want her to."

Angel looked down, couldn’t meet her eyes. For his part, Spike was surprised by how little he cared. The idea that Drusilla would never belong to him didn’t hurt anymore. Buffy was his. Forever. He took her hand.

"Sean is an innocent. You know, as vampires go. He’s never killed anybody. And Spike says there’s someone named Sam who’d fit right in with the rest of you. I want to find him. Are there any others?"
"There are...others...but there’s nobody else who would...."

"Totally okay. They’re still on the guest list. Call ‘em all. We’re gonna have the whole place so locked down magically that it won’t matter who’s in there. Nobody will get hurt at this event. What I’d like, Angel, is for you to assert your authority. Behave like a master vampire. Bring your entire order into alliance with me, and dust anybody who doesn’t fall in line."

Angel sat in stunned silence for a moment. "That’s...well...wow."

"Flies in the face of all we know about fighting evil; it’s never been done before; it’s revolutionary; blah de blah de blah. Right?" Angel nodded. "Great. So will you do it?"

Spike watched a thousand reactions flit across his sire’s ordinarily inexpressive face. Angel sorted through them, one by one, before settling on determination. "I will."

Buffy gave Angel a smile bright enough to make Spike jealous, and moved into a discussion about Aurelian formal dress. She wanted them all there: Angelus and Drusilla as king and queen; William the Bloody as crown prince; the rest of the Order lined up like some mythical vampire court. This was to be a first order political spectacle. After the third or fourth time Angel asked Buffy if Joyce knew what she was doing, Spike snapped, "Slayer’s mum is plannin’ the party, Angel." He needed to get out of there. He needed to get out of there now before he pinned Angel to the wall with a stake through his other shoulder.

"I’ll be fine if you go upstairs," Buffy said. "You’ll hear if there’s a problem. Promise I won’t dust him." She leaned toward him and tilted her face up, putting her full lower lip in reach of his teeth. He kissed her with everything he had, pouring his relief and love and gratitude for her into the contact. "I love you, too," she said.

He went upstairs and found Cordelia and Doyle in the office trying to be quiet while arguing about whether they should go downstairs to check on Angel. They didn’t hear him come up. "Shoppin’ trip go a’right?" he said and smirked when they jumped.

"Yeah. Thank you! It was great," Cordelia said. She actually seemed to mean that. "Is Angel...are they alright?"

"They’re fine. Talkin’ tuxedos when I left. You’ll prob’ly need some more hot chocolate. Think she’s gone through most of it." He pointed at a stack of boxes and bags sitting just inside the door. "Show me what you got?"

So he and Doyle sat in the chairs under the window while Cordelia modeled all her new outfits for them. Counting lunch, she’d spent every last penny available on Spike’s card plus fifty dollars she’d wheedled out of Doyle. "Girl is stunning," Spike said quietly to Doyle while Cordelia was in the bathroom changing. "An’ she likes you. Fess up ‘bout the demon thing an’ ask her out."

Cordelia came out of the bathroom in a sleekly fitted deep red sheath dress with a dramatic scoop neckline. "That one," he said, standing and taking her hand to twirl her completely around, "is my favorite. Hey, Mick. Whaddya think?" Doyle made an inarticulate choking noise. Spike leaned in toward Cordelia’s ear and whispered, "See the look on his face?"

Cordelia’s eyes narrowed with comprehension. She grabbed Spike by the arm, dragged him into the bathroom with her, and shut the door, leaving a stunned Doyle alone in the office lobby. "You! I see what you’re doing here! I don’t know why you’re doing it...at all...but...you’re playing matchmaker!" She punched him in the shoulder.
"Not sayin’ a word."

"You are so busted! That’s why you gave us your card. You set us up to spend the day together!"

"D’you have fun?"

"Well, duh! I haven’t gone shopping like that since before Daddy got arrested. I had a blast.” Her dimples deepened and it made her look even sweeter. "So why’d you do that, really?"

"Needed to get rid of you, din’t I? Had the money. Figured if it gave the bloke a chance, ‘s a bonus.” Spike shrugged. "Sides, I like girls in pretty dresses."

"Well, that’s...did I just lock myself in the bathroom with a vampire?” Cordelia asked.

Spike flashed her a fanged grin and said, "Was wond’rin’ when you’d notice that." Her fingers fumbled on the doorknob. "Please. Angel would take me apart ‘f I hurt you, an’ that’s provided Buffy din’t get to me first.” He put a hand on her shoulder, opened the door, and ushered her into the lobby. "So where you plannin’ to wear that? Got no call for it at the office."

"I hadn’t thought of that,” she said, taking the cue smoothly, eyes wide with pretend shock. "Doyle —next Friday you need to take me someplace where I can wear this dress, okay?"

"Uh, sure," Doyle said. "I know just the spot. Pick you up at your place around seven?"

"Perfect!” she said, with a toothy smile at Spike. "Hey, what’s taking them so long down there?"

The three of them trooped downstairs. "Angel? Buffy?” Cordelia said as she stepped into the apartment. "Is everybody alright down here? Nobody’s dead or dusty?"

Angel and Buffy were still sitting at the kitchen table, but now Angel had a sketch pad. There were a half dozen or so pages pulled out of it, and on each of them was a slightly different version of the symbol of the Order of Aurelius. Buffy was singling out different bits on each drawing. "I like this curve, here, but not the stars. I like these stars better...” Angel was contentedly creating a new drawing of the symbol, incorporating the pieces she’d selected. "Wow, I’m beginning to get how the whole bridezilla thing happens,” Buffy said, laughing. "There’s so much to be done, and I’m already obsessing on the shape of the stars."

Spike stepped up behind her and put his arms around her waist. "You havin’ this embroidered on a banner or somethin’, pet?” Buffy nodded. "Agree with you, then. Stars have to be plump or they won’t look like stars once you get ‘em on fabric.” He examined all the drawings, looked carefully at the one Angel was working on. "Got yourself a gift, Liam. Glad you’re doin’ somethin’ useful with it."

"Bridezilla?” Cordelia said. "Embroidery? Wait...what’s going on?"

"They’re getting married,” Angel said without looking up from his drawing.

"Can they do that?” She cocked her head, considering. "Well, I suppose if he has a credit card...."

"You wanna be a bridesmaid, Cordy?” Buffy snuggled back into Spike’s chest. "Dresses are gonna be gold satin. Others so far are Willow and...do you remember Anya?"

"Anya...she was new our senior year, right? Went to the prom with Xander?”

"Mmmhmm,” Buffy said.
"Ooh! She’s pretty! Gold dresses, you said?"

"Gold with cream details—just like mine but with the colors reversed. Floor length...." Angel pulled a page out of the back of his sketch book and passed it over to Cordelia. "Yeah. Like that."

"Those are gorgeous! I’m in." Cordelia said. "Do we get to keep the swords?"

Swords? Spike exchanged a worried look with Doyle and then took the paper out of Cordelia’s hands. The two men bent their heads together over the drawing while the ladies discussed the upcoming festivities. A very cross-like short sword was, indeed, part of the bridal costume. It hung in an ornate sheath from a delicate sword-belt slung diagonally across the hip of the gown, which pulled the fabric of the skirt in even closer to the body. The bodice was form fitting all the way down to mid hip, with a very deep square neckline and layered bell sleeves set almost off the shoulder. The satin top layer of the sleeve ended at the wrist bone while the lace under-layer fell over the hand to the base of the fingers. The skirt itself was ankle length, flaring out gradually from mid hip to hem, with a slight train. It was open in the front and had a lace underskirt that brushed the floor.

There were a lot of interesting elements to this gown. The cross-sword was one. The fantasy warrior-princess look was another. The thing that drew Spike’s attention, though, was what wasn’t there. There was absolutely no detailing of any kind in the vicinity of the neck. There was, instead, a great, obvious expanse of bare and vulnerable flesh. He’d bet anything there would be no necklace on the bride or bridesmaids. The only neck adornment the bride would be wearing were the bridegroom’s claim marks.

Doyle looked back and forth between the drawing and Cordelia. He whistled once, appreciatively.

"’Bout sums it up, lad. ‘M startin’ to look forward to this." Spike set the drawing down on the table. "Hey, Angel—what’re we wearing?" Angel passed another drawing over. "Oh."

Close-fitting trousers tucked into knee length boots were topped by a wide belt with a square silver buckle that echoed the neckline of the gowns. A firmly constructed vest was buttoned closed over a collarless shirt worn open at the neck. Broad sleeves tucked into narrow gloves with long cuffs called to mind a highwayman or privateer...or vampire: definitely the villain of the piece. The ensemble was topped by a half-circle cape that hung to mid-thigh. It was pulled back off one shoulder in an accordion fold and held in place across the chest by a chain connected to two silver medallions.

"Most of this will be black, of course. Boots, gloves, belt, and vest are leather. Other black things are summer-weight wool. The shirt is a pearl gray silk and the inside of the cape is a multi-shade gray silk paisley." Two things came to Spike’s mind upon viewing the sketch. One was that his claim scar, while not quite as exposed as Buffy’s, would be clearly visible. The other was that the bridegroom and groomsmen carried no weapons. Buffy stretched up over the back of her chair and pulled him down to kiss her. "Someone really smart once told me that a slayer should always reach for her weapon ‘cause a vampire already has his."
The call woke him out of a dead sleep.

“Giles? It’s Angel.” He reached for his glasses and fumbled, knocking them to the floor. He muttered something rude under his breath and squinted at the glowing green numerals on his digital alarm clock.

“Bloody—Angel, it’s two thirty in the morning.” Buffy’s vampires were going to have to learn some manners. This was the second night in a row he’d been up late.

“Oh. Uh. Sorry.” There was a long pause, but no explanation was forthcoming. His jaw tightened.

“Can I help you with something?”

“Buffy came here, today. With Spike.” He waited. “They were together.”

Giles let out an irritated huff and pulled a pillow over his head. When he was sure he wouldn’t scream into the phone, he said, “I’m tired. It’s late. Please state your question explicitly so that I can answer it and go back to sleep. I am not a vampire.”

“Are they really...that is...are they....”

He abandoned the notion of a good night’s rest and sat up, flipped the switch on the lamp, and located his glasses under the edge of the bed. Then he swallowed a few mouthfuls of water and retrieved pen and paper from the bedside table drawer. “Alright. What has she told you?”

“Well, she told me about the claim, which is...real.” Angel said the words like they choked him. “I can feel her. In the line, I mean. Does the Council...did you...know she was...was a....”

“A demon. I didn’t. I do now. I have no idea what the Council knows.” He began jotting notes. If nothing else, he could gather information about vampires and slayers unknown to anyone else in the world. God knows, there had to be some benefit to this mess. “You can feel her in the line? What does that mean?”

“My siresense. I can feel her like she’s a....” Angel gulped. “I can’t even say it.”

Giles said it for him. “Like she’s a vampire.”

“Yeah. Is that normal?”

Joyce had asked that question the previous evening.

“No, this is uncharted territory, I’m afraid.” He still held her, limp from laughter, in his arms. “We have traveled some distance from normal.”

“Rupert...what is she?” She upended her worry and spilled out the words, breathless and ashamed. “I want to believe she’s still my little girl, but...is she? Is she the same person?”

“I don’t have an answer for you.”

“I remember when she was called—or I think I do. She was always headstrong and...oh...physical, I guess. Competitive. Skating and, later on, cheerleading were her outlets. That’s what kept her from putting holes in the house.” She smiled, shaking her head. “I wish that was an exaggeration. When
she was nine, she jumped on her bed until the floorboards cracked.”

Giles chuckled. “I did similar things, when I was a child.”

“Me too.” She squeezed his hand. “That’s why Hank blamed me when she changed. It was...a nightmare. She started staying out late, getting in fights, cutting class, and she was defiant when we tried to rein her in. The only person who had any influence at all with her was her cheerleading coach.”

“Her cheerleading coach?” An odd selection for a role model, perhaps, but no odder than he was.

“Buffy recited everything she said like it was gospel. It was ‘Miss Andrea said’ this and ‘Miss Andrea said’ that. She even started to dress like her.”

“Well, at least there was an adult she looked up to.”

Joyce rolled her eyes. “The woman was awful. The things she said? They were—well, the kinds of things coaches have always told cheerleaders. ‘Don’t stand out!’ or ‘Nobody cares how you feel. What’s important is how you look!’ or ‘Show some booty! They won’t notice you messed up!’”

He shook his head. “That’s appalling.” American schools and cheerleading. He didn’t understand how it was allowed to continue.

“And then she set fire to the school gym.” Joyce pressed her lips into a thin white line. She shook him off and stood. “I’ll make more tea.”

Giles followed her to the kitchen. “That must have been...difficult.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? You’d think, ‘Oh, things can’t possibly get any worse than this. It has to be better from here on out.’ That’s what I thought until she started talking about vampires.” He rinsed his new ceramic teapot and passed it to her.

“I had an aunt—my mother’s oldest sister—who saw demons. It started when she was fifteen, just like Buffy.” She refilled the electric kettle and turned it on. “Of course, that was in the thirties. Nobody talked about mental illness, back then.” She shook the loose tea into the strainer and set it into the top of the teapot. “She had the kind of screaming nightmares that woke the whole neighborhood, but they kept her at home until the first suicide attempt.” The kettle clicked off and Joyce poured boiling water into the teapot. “When they sent her away to a hospital, she lasted less than a month. The second attempt was successful.”

She stood, head bowed, with her fingers around the teapot. He couldn’t think of anything to say.

“When that happened to Buffy—the personality changes, the violence, the vampires—I was afraid she’d...” She shook her head. “When Hank suggested an inpatient program, I signed the paperwork. No hesitation.”

“You...you had Buffy committed?” Her face crumpled.

“She wasn’t my little girl, anymore!” She forced the words out. “I didn’t know her.”

“Joyce...”

“No. I know. I figured it out. Vampires, demons, monsters—all real. Buffy’s not crazy.” From the sound of it, Joyce’s aunt may not have been, either. It was difficult to track slayers from rogue families. They often died before the Council could locate them. “She’s the slayer. It took time, but I
got used to her being the slayer. Now....” She shook her head. “I don’t know her again.”

“Giles—Giles?” Angel prodded, and he blinked. He’d almost drifted back to sleep.

“Buffy’s gone off-script. ‘Normal’ is a meaningless term.”
Territorial Predators - Spike

They got to their hotel room late. Once Angel was on board with the idea of an alliance between the Order and the Slayer, he became a lot more useful. He finished a number of detailed sketches before they left: the costume for the bride and her maids; the costume for the groom and his men; the design of their wedding rings; the symbol of the Order of Aurelius; the symbol of the Slayer’s Order.

That last one was unfamiliar to Spike, although Buffy hadn’t seemed to be making it up. She’d seemed, rather, to be describing it from memory. It was a stylized crescent moon, its edges sharpened so that it looked like an old-fashioned scythe. It seemed appropriate, somehow. "That symbol, the Slayer symbol," he asked hesitantly once he was lying, limp and sated, next to her in bed that evening, "was that the standard for your Slayer Army?" It was always a little chancy, bringing up something from the Othertime. He couldn’t yet predict her reaction to any given event.

"Yeah," she said quietly. "In the beginning, when there was only one, before it dissolved into factions. We all had so much hope, then, even though the world was coming apart at the seams. We were united, you know? Us against the Hellmouths. Actually thought we could win."

"You were happy, then?"

"I was. It didn’t last very long. We turned on each other pretty quickly, almost wiped the line out. Only thing that kept that last handful of us alive was learning vampire lore." That was the very last thing he had expected her to say. He wasn’t even sure he understood what she meant.

"How do you figure?"

"Slayers are territorial predators. There’s only ever supposed to be one at a time. Lots of animals are like that. They have a range and there’s only one per range. If another one comes in, they fight to the death and the winner keeps the range. Easy peasy." She smiled, and the smile was so sad his heart ached. "It’s why we kill vampires. You’re so much like us that we see you as competition for territory and fight you to the death on instinct." She snuggled into his chest. "Unless we’re trying to mate with you. Turns out that’s a pretty common reaction, too. The one good thing to come out of all that? Finding out it wasn’t just me."

Huh. Until the moment she said that, he’d have been willing to bet money that his involvement with Buffy was unique. How common was it? It didn’t matter. If even a small percentage of that Slayer army selected vampires as mates—well, he would love to have been a fly on the wall at that meeting of the Watchers’ Council. "So you were saying something about vampire lore...."

"Oh, yeah. Vampires are territorial predators, too, but they’re not solitary like Slayers. They run in small packs or families that are held together by rigid hierarchies and traditions." There was a description of his early days if he’d ever heard one. When he was a fledgling and didn’t know how to survive on his own, he’d found it reassuring even while he rebelled against it. It gave him a way to make sense of his brand new, intensely sensorial existence. It was particularly useful for things like bloodlust and siresense that had no human equivalent.

"The sire has both absolute authority and absolute responsibility." Spike struggled with his sire’s authority every minute for the first couple of decades of his unlife, until he was abruptly set adrift, lost and alone in the world, and then he missed him terribly. Angelus’ greatest sin, of all those he had committed, was abandoning his family, and his reputation still suffered for it a century later. Killing them all would have raised less objection amongst their kind.
"Deference is owed to the master of a clan or order, and to the master of a geographical area. You never attack them except under specific conditions. Challenges for power are handled in certain prescribed ways." She stroked his cheek with her the back of her hand. "It seems way over the top when you explain it to humans, but it makes sense in context. It’s a suite of behaviors evolved over time to prevent territorial predators who don’t naturally live in groups from killing each other."

"You rehearsed that speech much?" he teased. It was all true. She wasn’t wrong about anything. It was just that she sounded like she was reading it from cue cards.

"You might say." She rolled her eyes at him, stuck out her tongue, but her emotional state was somber. "Told you it was vampire lore that saved us. Since I was the template Willow used when we activated the other Slayers, it was like I’d sired all eighteen hundred of them. I felt...responsible...for them, especially since I was the only person who had any control over them. They were...strong-willed. Nobody else could get through to them. When all those girls died during the Slayer Wars, it almost destroyed me. They killed each other, Spike. Sometimes, they literally ripped each other apart." Her eyes were haunted. He’d listened in on some of those dreams, seen some of those fights. They were bloody. Vampires had nothing on those angry little girls.

"I was desperate. We were facing extinction. Since I knew how Slayers were originally made, and that we were...related to...vampires, I started by researching vampire traditions. ‘Cause what else could I do? At first, it felt like I was grasping at straws, but the more I read, the more sure I was that it would work.

"I got everybody who was still alive together. I gave my speech. Then I divided them up into groups. The Council wanted to call them cells, so that became the official term, but we never used it. We called them packs. The pack alphas were the girls who fought the Turok-Han with me when Sunnydale fell. There were nine left. Each of them had nine or ten betas.

"Then we learned to live by vampire laws, and everything got better."

"Nobody raised any objections?" He had trouble picturing a Council that didn’t object to its Slayers being handled this way. "Not the Watchers? Not the other Slayers?"

She shrugged. "Everybody else was as desperate as me, I guess. But also—it worked. Like, right away. I was pack alpha to the Sunnydale alumni, each alum was alpha to her pack, and everyone knew where they fit. Conflicts ceased almost immediately. No wiggle, no wheedle, no whine." That made sense. A fledge was always happier with a firm sire. They needed to know their limits. "It was only after everyone fell in line that we started to think about why the Watcher assigned to the active Slayer traditionally has absolute authority over her. Before that, we thought it was a gender thing."

"It’s a sire thing," he whispered. No wonder the Watchers could send their aggressive little warrior girls to their deaths, over and over, without fear of rebellion. It was years before a fledgling could shuck off the imprinting and challenge his sire.

"Yeah. It had to be. The Council forgot everything else. They forgot where we came from, they forgot how we were created, they even forgot the source of our power, but they remembered that brand new slayers need to be told exactly what to do."

"Prob’ly would’ve lost that, too, ‘f they didn’t need it every time a girl got called. Strength and power, speed, aggression, extra senses—come all at once when a slayer’s called?" She nodded. "Yeah. ‘S how it happens with us. All of a sudden, you feel like a bleedin’ god, like you could conquer the world an’ nothin’ on earth could stop you. Fledgling megalomania. Sire’s job to remind you you’re still killable. Watcher’s job, too, I gather."
She took a moment to ponder that, her slender body curled warm and alive against his cool flesh. He could hear her heart beating, feel the blood thrumming beneath the surface of her skin. Her pulse was slow and strong and her scent held no fear. She was light and life and heat, an avatar of everything he had relinquished more than a century ago. She was nothing at all like him.

Except.

His demon had recognized their kinship the moment he’d seen her, had wanted to kill her for it—or kiss her. The closer he got to her, the more obvious it was, until Drusilla pushed him away. When she’d come to him, in that flash of green light, he was surprised. He had not expected that his recognition would ever be returned. Now, as she lay safe in his arms, soft blankets holding them snugly together, he felt the turmoil in her mind give way to the quiet of sleep, and he had no surprise left at all. He was home.
Sunshine, Moonvine - Spike

The next morning, bright and early, Buffy took his poor beleaguered credit card, kissed him goodbye, and left, leaving written instructions for him to pick the car up at three. He was to enter the building through the same door from which they’d left, get into the driver’s seat and start the car. The garage door would open, and he would pull out of the garage and leave the property without looking back. Same drill as last time. If he should inadvertently see someone, he should not let his gaze rest there. He should absolutely not, under any circumstances, make eye contact with anyone.

Spike didn’t know how other people felt about leaving their car with a mechanic, but it always made him anxious. He preferred to do the work himself. One of the reasons he was so attached to the DeSoto was that it dated from a time before the computerization of automobiles. All he needed to fix it was a good wrench and a repair manual. This trip to the auto mechanic, with its strange stipulations and taboos, was nerve wracking. He wished he’d woken up later. It was only eleven, which gave him four whole hours to stew.

He decided to kill some time by packing up their things for the trip back to Sunnydale. He started with his, since he’d brought less along, and then he moved on to hers. The cosmetics she’d left scattered around the bathroom took the longest. Once everything was back in their bags and the bags were sitting next to the door, ready to be carried out to the trunk of the car, Spike checked the clock. Now he only had three hours and forty-five minutes to wait. He sat on the edge of the bed and bounced his knee.

When there were three hours and forty-two minutes remaining, he decided he couldn’t take it anymore. He stuffed the room key in his pocket, threw on his duster, and strode out the door in the general direction of Angel’s office.

It was the only place he could think of. Although he was intimately familiar with the Los Angeles that existed once the sun went down, this daylight world was new to him. After dark, he could find a thousand and one depraved diversions to fill his time. The sordid basements and back alleys of the City of Angels hid debaucheries so sensational they would make Caligula blush, and those were the places where everybody knew his name.

Right now, there were cafés and coffee shops, flower stands and open air markets. There were panhandlers and pickpockets and street performers—although he had some difficulty telling which was which. It seemed that the categories were not mutually exclusive.

He stopped to listen to a grimy purple-haired guitarist belt out an angsty breakup song in a voice like crushed concrete. The calloused fingers of her left hand moved with practiced certainty over the neck of the guitar, faltering only slightly when they encountered the missing second string. It lent an aching hesitation to the music. He’d never heard anything so exquisitely broken. He listened through three more songs and then dropped a handful of ones into her guitar case.

At a coffee stand nestled amid a flock of tiny tin-finished tables, he bought a cup of something sweet and frothy with whipped cream and caramel on top. The word ‘coffee’ was in the name of it, but he couldn’t taste any in the drink itself, which he decided was just as well. He sat at one of the tables and pulled out his journal book.

As he jotted down observations and impressions from his walk so far, he realized his writing was not smudged. The deep blue ink lay in clean, smooth lines on the page, dry before his left hand could slide across it. He flipped through the book. It was all like that. ‘Ballpoint, fine tip, and quick drying.’ That’s what she’d said. That was his list. She’d recited it as she selected the pen he’d have chosen for
himself, the only kind that wouldn’t smudge when he wrote.

He tipped his chair back onto two legs, propped his feet up on the edge of the table, and closed his eyes, smiling into the sunshine. He was a sentimental man, and many things brought tears to his eyes, but this was the very first time he’d cried over a ballpoint pen.

He knew the girl was there the moment she arrived, but he let her watch him without looking at her. She stood just out of his reach, not afraid of him, exactly, but wary, like an animal. "You’re not from around here," she said, her speaking voice as broken as the one she raised in song.

He sighed, wiped his cheeks dry with the back of his sleeve, and cracked his eyes open to meet hers. "No, love. Can’t say as I am. Are you?"

"Not really from anywhere. Here’s where I am right now, and right now I have coffee and a scone, thanks to you, which makes this the best day all week. You mind if I sit down?" She gestured at the chair across from him uncertainly. She looked ready to bolt. "If you don’t want to be bothered, I’ll go...."

"’S a’right. Sit." He dropped his feet to the ground, set his chair back on all four feet. She hesitated. "Really. Please join me."

She set her drink down on the table next to the white paper bag that held the scone, slid her guitar case in next to her chair, and sat down. Her feet were bare, dirty and burned from the hot blacktop. A pair of battered fatigues several sizes too large, cut off a couple of inches above the ankle, hung low on her hips, leaving an expanse of ivory skin between the waistband and the tie of a pale green halter top. Her dyed-purple hair stuck straight out from her head in every direction. It was about six inches long with an inch and a half of pale blond root showing. She was much too slim. He had no way to guess her age.

"You write?" She tapped the spine of his journal, which lay open, face-down, on the table.


She made a gesture that was halfway between a nod and a shrug. "Whatever’s in my head. Poems. Essays. Political rants. Most of the songs I sing. Some of those are even pretty good, I guess. Not that they’re making me rich and famous or anything. I never write the really interesting things down, anymore."

"Why’s that?" There had been a point when he stopped writing down the really interesting things, too. It was when his interests became things that didn’t translate well to English. It was hard to describe flavors of fear in words. At the time, he didn’t feel like he was losing anything.

"’Cause I don’t want to remember them." She sipped at her coffee in contented silence for a few minutes. “Look over there,” she said, pointing at a low brick wall. “There’s something interesting.”

He looked. “I don’t see....”

“City plants,” she said. “Not very much lives here, but there are a few things sturdy enough to grow. Dandelions, thistles, and that little pretty. At the base of the wall, do you see it? The green vine with the white flowers—they’re closed right now, but they’ll open later into delicate little trumpets. Moon vine. It’s night blooming.”

He hadn’t seen it before, but now that he knew what he was looking for, he saw it: A sprawling mass of green curlicues climbing the wall, insinuating tendrils into the little gaps between bricks.
“My grandmother loved it,” she said. “Not very many flowers bloom at night. Evening primroses, four o’clocks...there are a handful of others...but nothing grows quite as lush as moon vine. So Grandma risked the wrath of the neighbors to plant the stuff. She let it climb up her porch.”

There was something hypnotic about the way the girl spoke. It reminded Spike, unaccountably, of Drusilla when she was in the grip of her visions. Their voices were different. Drusilla’s sweet soprano was wondering, almost child-like, while this girl’s shattered alto was world-weary and defeated, but he got the same sense that she was staring directly at something he could only glimpse out of the corner of his eye.

“It’s a dangerous thing to do, you know. Now, my grandma had hers under control, but it will overrun everything, if you let it. You have to do your due diligence and lop off any vine that even looks like it’s going someplace you don’t want it. There’s another name for moon vine,” she said. “They also call it bindweed.”

She gestured at the wall again. “If someone doesn’t dig that plant out, it’ll take the wall down. When my grandmother died, nobody touched her garden for three whole months. By the time someone got there to clean the property up for sale, the moon vine had pulled the porch completely off the front of the house.”

While she was talking, he’d gotten very, very still. When she stopped talking, it left a tangible, ominous silence between them. As he had so often with Drusilla, he didn’t bother trying to sort out the meaning of the words, but concentrated on making certain he’d heard them correctly. “So I’m to remember that the night blooming moon vine, though lovely, is destructive by nature, and needs to be kept under careful control—if not destroyed—lest it take my house down?”

The girl smiled at him. “Exactly so,” she said, before picking up her guitar and walking away. He wrote the words down in his journal.
Wrestling shoes. Biking shoes. Climbing shoes. Dance shoes—swing, tap, and ballet. Even some honest-to-Holland wooden shoes, with their pitter pitter patter clip clop clop. But no martial arts shoes. She’d been to four stores, already, and nada.

Well, almost. There were martial arts shoes galore, but they were either in men’s sizes—giant, dudely tabi boots in commando black—or they were in kids’ styles, with contrasting stitching and bright ecru rubber soles that continued up over the toes. There was always some eye catching logo emblazoned on the side of them, too, screaming ‘Look at me! Look at me! I’m a ninja!’

Somebody clearly didn’t understand what those things were for.

This store was no different. The guy at the counter shook his head, and examined her size six tootsies with a critical eye. “You might have to have them made. Have you tried Dash?” He pulled a business card from a drawer and handed it to her. It said “Dash’s Custom Footwear.” The store was just a few blocks away.

“I’ll give it a shot. Thanks.”

As she neared the address on the card, she thought she saw a cat slink around the corner of the building. That had happened several times during her shoequest, but each time she’d tried to follow it, she ended up lost—turned around in a city that was no longer familiar to her—and empty handed. Catless. She was half tempted to think she was hallucinating. Her grasp on reality was tenuous, even from her own perspective, timelines layered over timelines, possibilities entwined. Besides, her cat had never run from her, never done anything but watch her like a morsel it was too full to eat. It had the upper hand in all their conversations.

That was another thing: If it was her cat, it was weirdly quiet.

So, without hoping too hard, she jogged onto a paved walkway between buildings—too narrow to be an alley—and pulled herself up short. The creature lying on its side on the concrete had to be her cat. Or what was left of it. It breathed in labored little puffs and it looked...battered. Pale pink flesh showed where tawny fur was stripped away, and some of the cuts oozed red.

Slowly, painfully, it hauled itself to its feet and staggered toward her. Its head hung, defeated, below its shoulder blades.

Poor kitty.

“Do you need help?” She knelt next to it and put out her hand. It was a lot bigger than a house cat; their eyes were level. It said nothing, but pressed its delicate chin into her palm. It was trembling, and very warm. “You’re hurt. Was it...it was when I was attacked.” It raised pleading eyes, yellow as the eyes of a vampire, jaws parted to reveal canines like awl tips, but it still said nothing. “God, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to do.” It pushed her down on the hot sand and sprawled across her lap.
“I guess that answers that question.” She tucked her legs under her and petted the cat. Its fur was course and very sleek. It mewed like a kitten as she stroked it, ears to tail tip, and rolled over to let her at its belly. “Gotta say, I didn’t figure you for the lap cat type.” With every pass of her fingers over its powerful body, its wounds became paler and less defined, and she felt stronger. “You’re kind of big for a lap—for this lap, at least. You’re what? Four feet long?” Easily. She continued stroking until all that remained were white lines parting its fur, and then even those were gone.

So was her exhaustion, the ache in her shoulders, and the stress of the previous day.

The sun warmed her face, made her close her eyes. She tilted her head up to meet it and happy tears trailed down her temples into her hair. The desert wind whipped them dry almost as soon as they fell, left a salt crunch at her hairline, but they kept coming, and she couldn’t find their source. She breathed in the heat, let her mind go quiet, and listened.

Blue ink. Words. Silver edged paper so thin you could see through it if you held it up to the light. Pages and pages of ornamented script, elegant loops and curlicues from an earlier age. Beautiful. One page was filled entirely with a single word, her name, written over and over again, every pen stroke a prayer.

The tears may not have been hers when they started, but they were now. She gathered the cat into her arms, pressed her face against its fur, and sobbed.

“Do you need help?”

Buffy blinked, tried to let her eyes adjust to the shade. She sat cross-legged on the concrete path, back bowed, arms folded across her stomach, with tears on her face. “Can I call someone for you?”

The girl crouched in front of her and smoothed her hair back off her face. “Oh, my god. I know you. Hey, Sunnydale!”

“Yes! You’re that singer—from the Bronze!” She scrambled to her knees and took the girl’s hands. “I’m okay. Really. It...everything...just hit me.”

The girl’s forehead crinkled, finely arched eyebrows flattened over large, dark eyes. When they’d met, she’d worn elaborate makeup, wine dark and shimmery. Now that her rosewood skin was scrubbed clean, she looked younger and softer, but no less pretty. Good bones went a long way. “So...sitting in the middle of the sidewalk crying is a good thing?”

“Yeah.” Buffy laughed. There might have been a hysterical edge to it, and the girl drew back a little. “No. I don’t know. There’s so much to get done, and calling you was on my list of things to do today. Can I buy you lunch?” She wore a name tag. “Brandi?”

“Okay.” Brandi stood and tugged Buffy to her feet, and then she glanced at her watch. “I suppose so.”

“Let me rephrase that,” Buffy said, brandishing gold plastic. “Can I buy you lunch with my fiancé’s credit card?”

Brandi’s mouth formed a happy little ‘o’ shape. “Oh, no way! The Sweet Williams? Your sparring partner?” When Buffy nodded, she clapped her hands. “I never get to give happy readings! This is so cool!” Buffy followed her back around the corner until they stood in front of the door to Dash’s Custom Footwear. “I have about ten minutes before I can close for lunch. You wanna wait?”

“ Nope!” She pointed at the sign above the door. “I’m your last customer before lunch.”

“You need...shoes?” The pink drained from Brandi’s cheeks, and her whole body stiffened. “The
kind of shoes Dash makes?"

“Yup. Really special specialty shoes,” Buffy said. Brandi nodded, but skittered behind the counter like she wanted it between them. “Oh...okay. Huh. I need a low-rise soft leather tabi boot in a women’s size six. Black. No logo. No contrasting trim. Turns out everybody my size who beats people up for fun is a twelve year old boy.”

“Oh! Martial arts. Right.” She tilted her face heavenward, briefly, and then she smiled. “Good. Let’s get you measured, and then we’ll do the paperwork.” Buffy kicked her shoes off and slipped her feet into the most elaborate foot measurer she had ever seen. Instead of just one or two slidey things, it had dozens, like some sort of demonic torture device. Brandi took at least twenty measurements on each foot, and then wrote an invoice, which Buffy signed. “Buffy...Summers?”

“That’s my name. Don’t wear it out.” She printed the name beneath the signature line and flipped the page over to its blank back side.

“What are you going to use the shoes for?” She waited with her pen poised.

“I’ve been training for years, but I’m not certified to teach. I plan to change that. So if I’m gonna spend the next six months taking tests, I need me some fancy footwear.”

“Aha.” Brandi ran Spike’s card through a credit card machine—the kind that used brute force and carbon paper to imprint the numbers on the receipt, chonk chonk—and handed it back. Then she dropped the one copy into a steel lockbox with a slit in the top, and gave Buffy the other one. The whole tedious process made her miss her iPhone. A lot. “Gonna get a day job?”

“Sure am.” The best day job ever. She would find her girls—every last one of them—and train them. All eighteen hundred potentials would know who and what they were whether they were ever called or not. “Speaking of, does your band play weddings?”
“Giles—Giles?” Couldn’t the man answer a question directly? Just once?

“Buffy’s gone off-script. ‘Normal’ is a meaningless term.” Off-script? What did that even mean?
“Angel...has she told you...that is, do you know where she’s been?”

“Time travel. Slayer Army. Yeah.”

“Then you understand that Buffy herself knows more about what is and is not normal for slayers than you or I or even the Council ever could. Frankly, I’d suggest you ask her.”

“What about Spike?”

“I expect Spike knows a great deal about slayers, too.”

“That’s not what I—.”

“I know what you meant, Angel, and I have no answers for you. Spike has been well-behaved. *Doting*, where Buffy is concerned. He sets the table. He makes tea. He washes dishes, for god’s sake.”

“He was like that with Drusilla, too.” That didn’t mean it was safe to let him in your house. Not if you were human.

“You’re telling me he was always well-mannered and helpful?”

“And ruthless, bloodthirsty, and unstoppable. Giles, he’s dangerous!” Angel growled—actually growled, loud enough for human ears to hear. On the other end of the phone line, Giles made an impatient noise in the back of his throat. “But you know that.”

“I do.” This time he kept the growl below human hearing range. “Angel, has it occurred to you that Buffy might also be dangerous?”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his shoulder. It ached to the bone. “Does Joyce know?”

“Not of Buffy’s...changes, no. She is aware of the claim and the impending wedding. She’s planning it, as a matter of fact, and may call you for suggestions.”

“Oh.”

“Have you any other questions?”

“Uh...no.”

“Goodnight, Angel.” The line went dead.

Angel stared at the receiver in his hand for one long moment, and then he swept it, and everything else on the surface of his desk to the floor and stalked from the room into the night.

It was ridiculous, childish and ungracious, and he knew it. At least, part of him did. The other part wanted to beat them both into cowering submission, make them plead for their lives. It was his right. They were *his*.
He needed to kill something.

He circled his office building, hopping rooftop to rooftop in ever-widening arcs, looking for...something. Anything. There was no vampire activity, as far as he could tell, but he hadn’t really expected to find any. This was his territory, after all.

Most of the bars were closed and dark. Even the bartenders had gone home. But there was one still buzzing with action and noise. All the lights were on, and the door was open to the endless stream of people wandering in and out. Some of them were wrapped in blankets, and all of them looked lost.

Two squad cars idled on the street, driver’s side doors open like fins. A blond woman—a plain clothes cop—said something unintelligible even to Angel’s ears, and the calm-shattering electronic music stuttered to a stop, leaving a sound vacuum, which the party goers rushed to fill. “Quiet!” she snapped, and they were. Two uniformed officers led a man from the building. He was pot-bellied and balding, wearing a rumpled leisure suit. His head was bowed, and his wrists zip-tied behind his back, but he aimed a sly smile at the detective, who strode towards him, Buffy-like, purpose in every step.

Kate.

The guy strained at his bonds, leaning toward her with a leer that exposed a mouthful of tiny, pointed teeth, hundreds of them, all too close together, all too sharp.

Angel shimmied down the fire escape, dropped into the alley next to the bar, and jogged around the corner to intercept Kate. He put his hand on her shoulder and she spun, jammed an elbow into his gut, and knocked the air from his lungs. “Jesus’ mother, Angel! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Don’t touch him,” he said. Or tried to say. He didn’t have the breath to form words. “Don’t....”

She glared ice blue daggers like shards of glass. “I’ll deal with you in a minute. Just let me get this guy into the car.” She grabbed the man’s shoulder and wrestled him toward the squad car. By the time she had the car door open, he’d changed. He fluttered his eyelashes and shook a lock of Nordic blond hair out of his eyes.

“What the—.” Kate released the copy of herself and took two steps back, gaping. Into that moment of confusion, Angel threw a nut.

It was an ordinary nut, not even galvanized, about half an inch across, heavy for its size, black, and threaded, and it arced right into the false Kate’s forehead with a startling pop. The zip tie fluttered to the ground at the feet of something small and inky black, with a protruding nose and a mouthful of pointy teeth. It hissed and skittered under the squad car. Angel pushed his way through the crowd and jogged around the car, but it was gone.

“You told me not to touch him. That’s what you said.”

“Yeah.”

She nodded, mouth tight. “Skin contact hallucinogen. God damn it.” She turned back to her team. “Jerry! Get the EMTs. Evaluate everyone. Nobody leaves without a medical sign off.” At Angel, she said, “You didn’t touch anyone, did you? Except me, and that was before.”

“I didn’t. I...uh...I need to be gone.”

“Got it. Go. Thanks for trying.”
“Any time.” He walked around the corner of the building, jumped to the fire escape, and hand-over-hand up to the roof. When he glanced back down, he thought he saw a dark haired man, tall and slender, slouched against the alley wall, silent amidst the chaos, but when he looked again, no one was there.
He strolled into Angel’s office around one in the afternoon, having successfully filled half of his free
time with walking, talking, and the serene contemplation of a sunny Southern California day. The
Angel Investigations team had not yet returned from lunch. Angel himself was sitting alone in his
darkened office. He wasn’t reading or writing or eating or napping or any other reasonable thing. He
was just sitting. Alone. In the dark.

It was too much. He couldn’t help himself. He clomped into the room and flipped on all the lights.
"Oi, Liam, you bloody broodin’ poofter! What in hell are you doin’?"

Angel blinked at him as though he wasn’t entirely sure Spike was real. "Spike...how did you get
here?"

He hopped up onto the corner of Angel’s empty desk and leaned back on the heels of his hands,
swinging his feet so that his boots banged softly on the sides of the desk. "Walked."

"You walked...from...where?" He hadn’t seen Angel look quite this vampiric in a very long time—
pale skinned with vivid lips and angry, wild eyes. Even when they’d gotten that visit from The Real
Angelus™ a couple of years ago, he hadn’t looked so feral. Something was wrong.

"From the hotel. Tryin’ to familiarize myself with the city. Looks different in the daytime, yeah?" It
looked very different in the daytime. There were so many people out and about, for one thing, so
much activity. All the shops were open, transactions of every kind being completed. Life was
happening out there, so loud and bright it flooded his senses. The drum corps tattoo of the city’s
cumulative heartbeat made his bones vibrate so that it was almost like his own heart was beating. He
wanted the chance to grow accustomed to it.

"In the day...what?" Angel said, eyebrows lowered into a hard, straight line. "Spike, you aren’t
making any sense. What are you talking about?" He thumped his fist on his desktop.

"In the daytime," Spike said very slowly. "‘S what I said the first time, yeah? You have a habit of
decidin’ somethin’ doesn’t make sense just ‘cause you don’t want it to be true." He cocked his head
at Angel who was confused and, consequently, becoming angry. "I take it that in all the kerfuffle
about what’s goin’ on with Buffy, we neglected to mention my news?"

"I guess you must have." Angel’s eyes narrowed dangerously. His shoulders bunched under his shirt
as he put his weight on the arms of his chair, ready to propel himself forward. There might have been
a flicker of gold in his eyes. This would be a good time to be out of arm’s reach. "Why don’t you tell
me your news now, Spike?"

Spike hopped off the desk and stood up, arching his back and stretching his arms over his head,
moving a little closer to the open door in the process. He twisted his torso forcefully at the waist,
once in each direction, making his spine crack in a series of sharp popping noises. Then he took one
more full step towards the door before turning back to look at Angel.

"You ever heard of the Gem of Amara?" Spike asked, dropping his weight backward to the ball of
his left foot. That was the foot closest to the door, the foot on which he would need to pivot to sprint
out into the sunshine where Angel couldn’t reach him.

Angel shook his head impatiently. He didn’t relax. The bones in his face sharpened, the skin
stretched a little more tightly across them. "Yeah, Spike. Of course I have. It’s a myth—a fairy tale.
"Bedtime stories for vampires."

"Yeah, well—not so much, mate." Angel started up out of his chair. Spike sighed and held up his hand, taking one more step backward toward the door. He’d fight Angel if he had to, but he didn’t want to have to. "I’ll tell you about it ‘f you sit down an’ behave yourself. Try to take it from me, an’ I head back to the hotel, through that bright sunshine gives you so much trouble, an’ then Buffy gets to express her opinion on the matter, which she tends to do with pointy wooden objects. We understand each other?"

Angel settled back in his chair, placated for the moment. There was a real human awareness in his eyes for the first time since Spike had gotten here, today, so that was an improvement, but it was a temporary armistice at best. Angel hadn’t actually agreed to the terms, so he wasn’t about to relax his stance. "The Gem of Amara is real?" he asked.

Angel’s problem was that he lacked imagination. That’s why he could never effectively interpret Drusilla’s visions. He’d get the words and miss the metaphors. "Real as Du Lac’s Cross an’ the Ritual of Eligor." Spike smirked.

"Very funny," Angel snapped. "Where was it?"

"In the ‘Valley of the Sun’, just like the legends said. Where else would it be?" He shrugged. Words were good. If he could keep Angel thinking, the demon wouldn’t dominate. "In the catacombs beneath Sunnydale, of course, buried for a thousand years in a sealed stone tomb along with another half-ton of jewels an’ whatnot. Buffy calls it ‘the hoard.’"

Angel took a slow, deep breath, jaw slack. "That money," he breathed on the exhale. "That’s why you have all that money."

Spike nodded, relieved. Good. There was a person on the other side of that desk. The demon had retreated. "Yeah. It’s a lot of money, an’ more’s comin’, so I’m told. Pieces are bein’ sold at auction. Most of it doesn’t have any power. Precious metals, gemstones, art, an’ history, yeah? Some demon work. A few nice pieces in the bunch, but most of it—" He grimaced. "Not to my taste. Joyce is handling it. Lady has contacts."

"So...you dug up Sunnydale and found a tomb," Angel said. "In it, along with a boatload of gaudy old monstrosities, was a magical artifact so ancient and powerful it was believed to be a myth?"

Spike just looked at him.

"Well?" Angel demanded.

"Well, what?" Spike folded his arms across his chest, resisting the urge to kick Angel in the face. Now that he’d gotten Angel’s demon to back off, he was having trouble with his own. He decided to go the aggressive standoff route instead. "‘S what I jus’ said."

Angel stood up, trying to loom from across the room, and folded his own arms. He glared at Spike. Spike glared back.
“Sorry. Sorry. Sorry I’m late.” The girl bounded into the room looking not even a little bit sorry. She grinned. “I was at lunch—we have a gig! Eden, I mean. Me, Dock, Butter, and Brome.”

All three young shamans high-fived around the table. Both girls looked drawn and exhausted—although Blackberry wore it better than Thistle—but this news seemed to perk them up. “Where is it? What is it?” Dandelion asked.

“Do you remember the really hot couple from that club in Sunnydale? I told you about them. The dancers?” Blackberry practically bounced in her seat. “I gave her the Sweet Williams? Well, I ran into her, today, sobbing in an alley.”

“And that’s good news?” Thistle raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“Yes!” She smiled up at the waitress who’d appeared at her elbow, notepad in hand. Her face was scrubbed girl-next-door naked, and she looked as young as she sounded. Ethan felt ancient. The lines around his mouth grew deeper every time he looked at her. “Just coffee for me. Thanks.”

“Sobbing?” Dandelion held his mug up for a refill.

“Uh huh. She’s totally stressed about the wedding.” She clapped her hands like a child, and Ethan metamorphosed in his mind’s eye from ancient to something positively primordial. He averted his eyes, tried to keep the disdain out of his expression, and flipped the newspaper open. He’d had too little sleep to engage with...this.

“That’s great!” Thistle said.

“Right? I never get to give happy readings! It’s so cool that....”

He sipped his own coffee and tuned them out. The news was dreary—bank fraud, embezzlement, not even a vengeance-motivated shooting spree to liven things up. If the children kept talking for much longer, he’d be forced to work the crossword puzzle.

“At first, I was like, whoa—’cause she’s from Sunnydale, right? And she wanted shoes from Dash?” Blackberry shuddered.

“Those goddamned boots,” Dandelion said. “Nauseating. You sure he didn’t make those?”

“No. No, he bought them in a lot, sight unseen,” Blackberry said, “or I’d have kicked his pudgy purple nose in. Even he knows that’s too far. Anyway, it’s all mundane. She just has little feet. She’s little, which is funny, because she feels really big. Powerful, you know?”

Ethan flipped to the police reports page in the back, and scanned it to see if his little prank had made the news. Ah, there it was. “An L.A. nightclub is closed until further notice, after a brawl broke out in the early hours of the morning. Police dispersed the brawlers, but were unable to identify the instigator of the fight amidst contradictory accusations, wild assertions, and reports of vivid hallucinations. Detective Lockley of the L.A.P.D. confirmed that the cause of the brawl was an as-yet-unnamed skin contact hallucinogen. She states that the situation is under control, and the department is working to prevent further occurrences. Seventeen people were treated for minor injuries at UC Irvine and released this morning. Six were affected by the drug and remain at the hospital for observation, including Detective Lockley herself.”
Well. Well, well, well. Not too shabby for one little bogle that couldn’t do anything but taunt and make faces.

“No—he was outside.” Thistle shrugged, fingers spread. “I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“Like a demon?” Dandelion asked. “Not connected?”

“I can’t see them like you do, Jordan. He was...writing, when I found him. In a journal. He was beautiful.”

“And you didn’t get his name?” Dandelion—Jordan—grinned at the girl. “Thistle, do you have a crush?”

She shook her head, impatient. “It’s not like that. He was hurt. Everything hurt, but he wanted it anyway. And he kept looking around like...like it was the first time he’d ever seen daylight. Like this wasn’t his world.”

“Like a demon,” Dandelion said.

“Like he just got out of prison,” Blackberry said.

“Yeah,” Thistle said. “More like that. Anyway, then I gave him the next installment in the Moon Vine saga.”

“Wait—he’s part of that and you didn’t stop him? You didn’t get his name?” Dandelion smacked the palm of his hand on his knee. “We can’t keep doing this. Maybe you two can avoid mirrors, but I can’t not see what it’s doing to you.”

“I wasn’t supposed to,” Thistle said. “I was only supposed to warn him.”

“What was the warning?” Ethan asked.

“Paraphrased? The pretty moon vine that blooms at night is destructive. If you don’t clip it back or dig it out, it’ll pull your house down. Something like that.”

Prophets. Blast and damn them, every one. He swallowed the last of his coffee and waved the waitress over for more. “Cream, please, and sugar.” He poured the extras into his mug and stirred slowly. “So...if I’m understanding this...you met someone who will be directly affected by your Moon Vine, but instead of getting his vital statistics, you what? Told him to be careful and went on your merry way?”

“Well, yeah,” Thistle said. “That’s all I was supposed to do.”

Ethan counted silently down from ten. In four languages. Then he steepled his fingers beneath his chin and exhaled. “It’s your money.” He tried to remain philosophical about these things. “Do you, perhaps, recall what he looked like?”

Thistle shrugged. “He had kind eyes,” she said. “They were sad, and very blue.”
"Hey, Angel!" Cordelia yelled from the lobby. "We’re back! Guess who we found!" Spike seized the opportunity the interruption provided to break the standoff. He spun on his heel and practically ran from Angel’s office.

When he got to the lobby, he found Cordelia and Doyle escorting a laughing, sun-kissed Buffy into the room. Her arms were full of shopping bags. “We found her at that sushi place on the corner,” Doyle said. “You know the one with the conveyor belt? Stacks of little plates in different colors.”

“No kidding,” Cordelia said, grinning. “Slayer metabolism, I guess. If I ate like that, I’d be huge.”

“Hey—slaying is really hard work. I can eat anything I....” Buffy trailed off mid-sentence as Spike walked into the lobby. She dropped her shopping bags next to the office door and leapt into his arms, laying her head against his chest. “God, I’m so sorry, sweetie. So, so sorry. If it helps any, I don’t think he realizes he’s doing it.”

It had been a couple of weeks since Spike was surprised when Buffy commented on things that he’d only said inside his head, but everybody else was, apparently, still unnerved—judging by the looks on their faces, at least. It didn’t unnerve him. He felt known, accepted in a way that was entirely new to him. It was warm as sunlight on his skin.

He gathered her in against him, stroked her hair, and pressed his lips to the top of her head. “Got no concern with what he knows or doesn’t know,” he whispered. “I let it lie ‘cause you want me to.” Even as he said it, he knew it wasn’t true, and so did Buffy. Angel was his family as well as hers. Angel was his sire. Of course he wanted his approval. He’d just given up on getting it.

“We’ll talk to him,” she promised, leaning around Spike to fix Angel with a venomous stare. “There are things I am not going to put up with, this time, and he needs to be aware of that.”

“Is anybody else with me when I say, ’Huh?’” Cordelia asked.

“I think it’s the claim, Cordy,” Angel said. “I didn’t realize that....”

“That anything you say to one of us is said to both of us?” Buffy said flatly. “Now you know. Angel, didn’t you call Giles?”

“I did. He confirmed your story, but he didn’t mention that Spike had....”

“The Gem. Yes, he does.” She narrowed her eyes. “You’re gonna need to get over it.”

“Buffy, I can’t believe you’re being so naïve about this....” Angel started. Spike got no warning this time. He didn’t even see her move. One second she had her arms around him and the next she had Angel pinned to the wall, her hand around his throat.

Nobody said anything. Nobody moved, least of all Angel. Buffy held him there at shoulder height, her slender, powerful fingers pressed so deeply into his neck that he couldn’t draw breath to speak. Angel’s legs were bent backwards at an awkward angle, the tops of his feet resting on the floor. Buffy supported his entire weight one-handed.

She cocked her head to the side and the corners of her mouth lifted very, very slightly. Her mind was still and quiet, tranquil, but vibrating with a jubilant anticipation of violence. There was no lingering emotional attachment to Angel at all. He might as well have been a stranger.
Spike recognized that state of mind. That’s how he felt while he was hunting. That was the clarity he
got from running down some innocent being for the sole purpose of tasting its pain and terror. He
was suddenly afraid for his sire’s life.

When Buffy finally spoke, her voice was like velvet. “Twice, now, you have insinuated that my trust
in Spike is misplaced. Given that you understand how a mating claim works, you must know that in
questioning him, you are also questioning me.” Her smile broadened just a little. “Surely you don’t
intend for me to believe you find me untrustworthy.” She fluttered her eyelashes girlishly. “Do you?”

She dropped the big man and stepped back. “No joke, Angel. This will not happen again.” Angel
slumped back against the wall, rubbing at the rapidly blackening hand print across his Adam’s apple.
Cordelia stepped forward like she intended to go to him, but he shook his head sharply and she
stopped. Buffy continued speaking. “Right now, I am willing to forge an alliance between your
people and mine, leaving you in place as master of your order. I see a number of advantages to that
course of action, not the least of which is that it affords you the opportunity to atone for some of the
evil you have done in the world.”

Angel hadn’t said anything yet. Spike wasn’t entirely certain he could. Buffy may have crushed his
windpipe.

“As allies, we can and should discuss strategy. This...exhibition...we are planning will be a political
minefield, and your experience with the target community is invaluable.” She shook her head. “But
this cannot happen again, Angel. I will not allow you to second guess the decisions I make about my
own people.”

Angel straightened up and glared at her. “Spike is....” he croaked. Yeah, she’d definitely crushed
something.

“Mine,” she said. “He is mine. You want to pretend you’re motivated by some noble concern for my
well-being. You’re not. This is about power. You think I stole something from you, and you’re
trying to bully me into giving it back. But he’s not yours,” she sighed, “and neither am I. You were
the one who left. Remember?”

“Whoa, drama,” Cordelia said, “which is, you know, just like old times.” She scrunched her face up
and wrinkled her nose. “Funny, but I really didn’t miss old times. I’ve had enough Buffy-slash-
Angel drama to last my whole life. You gonna be okay, Angel?”

Angel nodded slowly without taking his eyes off Buffy. “Good. Come on, Doyle. Let’s
go...file...things,” Cordelia said.

“I’m...not really...comfortable...leaving him alone with her,” Doyle said, casting uneasy blue eyes in
Buffy’s direction.

“Oh, puhlease,” Cordelia said, pulling Doyle into Angel’s office by one arm. “If they were going to
kill each other, they would have done it by now. Besides, this is nothing compared to classic Buffy
and Angel. Nobody’s killed any fish.”
“Now! One two three now! One two three now! One two three now!”

The vampire, meek and small, screamed the words through fangs, yellow eyes blazing in the nighttime half-light of the blocks, and on every ‘now’ the three big hostiles across the hall from him slammed their bodies with splintering force against the plexiglass doors of their cells.

“One two three now!” The ragged words rumbled with undertones too low for human ears. Riley could feel them in his spine.

“One two three now!” He’d searched for the kid in missing persons, but he came up empty handed. Not local. Not national. He’d even checked with the other TAs to see if anyone fitting that description hadn’t shown up for class. Nothing.

“One two three now!” His clothes weren’t caked with grave dirt or drizzled with gore. He’d been clean when they found him. He was clean, now.

“One two three now!” Did that mean he hadn’t been buried? Did that mean he’d never fed? How long could they go without feeding? How long ago was he made?

“One two three now!” Could it be so recent nobody’d reported him missing yet? How long did it take for them to reanimate? Three days. Walsh said three days.

“One two three now!” How the hell did Walsh know it was three days?

This time, the ‘now’ was swallowed in the sound of three plexiglass cell doors cracking simultaneously. The three big hostiles roared. Riley spun and smacked the comm button. “Mayday! We have a containment failure. Repeat. There is a containment failure in progress!”

The vampire flattened himself—palms, forearms, and chest—against the door of his cell. “Again!” he screamed. “One two three now!” Below the catwalk where Riley stood, the doors to the blocks hissed open, and a squad of soldiers in body armor hustled in carrying tranquilizer guns. The vampire retreated to the back of his cell.

“Sentient,” Graham said, edging onto the catwalk next to him. “At least some of them.”

“Walsh doesn’t agree.” Riley didn’t meet the other man’s eyes.

“But?” Graham had that look, mouth firm, eyes steady and searching—like a zealot. Like a crusader. He knew without doubt or hesitation that he was right. Riley did, too.

“I’m starting to come around to the notion.” Graham broke into a grin. “What are you smiling about? We’re both gonna get court martialed.”

“Maybe,” Graham said. “Walk with me?”

They walked away from Lowell House for at least twenty minutes without speaking. They left the campus behind, passed through the cheap off-campus housing, and kept walking. Out in the cool California autumn, surrounded by the low-key buzz of small-town Sunnydale, it all started to seem absurd: The Initiative, with its top secret, cloak and dagger military mission and the massive,
underground bunker that housed it; hostile sub-terrestrials, whatever that actually meant, given the huge variety of things included in the designation; Walsh, whose men all called her Mother—and wasn’t that some unsettling Freudian imagery?

Their walk took them all the way to the docks. Graham leaned on a railing and looked out over the water. Riley rested his palms on the railing and waited. The boats, the wind, and the waves conspired to make the kind of constant, fuzzy white noise that truly messed with audio surveillance.

“Did some research,” Graham finally said, with no particular emphasis, like he was commenting on the weather. The words didn’t stick up out of their background, and he didn’t look away from the water. “Followed the funding all the way up. Found out who we work for.”

Riley’s stomach sank. “I’m guessing it’s not the U.S. Army.”

“Walsh is civilian.” He knew that. They all knew that. She ran R and D for a weapons contractor they didn’t have the clearance to know the name of. The Initiative was supposed to contain the threat that was Sunnydale, to which end Walsh and her geeks would provide them with extremely experimental high-tech tools. It was a win-win. “Reports to a guy named Ward.”

That was new information but hardly relevant. So far, Graham hadn’t said anything interesting.

“The Initiative isn’t Walsh’s only project.” Now, that was interesting. “There’s another thing. The 314 Project. It’s secret—more secret than the Initiative by several orders of magnitude. I couldn’t find out exactly what it entails, but I know one thing it doesn’t have.”

“What’s that?” Graham turned his bloodless face toward Riley for the first time during the conversation.

“Military oversight.”

Well, damn.
Spike helped Angel downstairs and got him settled on his bed, propped up against a stack of pillows, with a mug of microwave-warmed blood. “Man,” he said, looking over the bruising on Angel’s neck, “she is strong—and have you ever seen anybody move that fast?”

“No,” Angel rasped.

“She’s faster than me,” he said, with frank admiration.

“I figured that out.” Angel closed his eyes, leaned back against the pillows. “She doesn’t do this to anyone else?”

“Just you, so far as I can tell. Don’t know if it’s ‘cause you’re a vampire or just ‘cause you’re a prat.” He sat down on the bed next to Angel, reached out to pat his sire’s thigh. “You keep brassin’ her off.”

“It’s always over you,” Angel said with a touch of a whine in his damaged voice.

“We’re mated, Angelus. She’s inside my head. And vice versa.” He closed his eyes and extended his consciousness until he was seeing out of Buffy’s eyes. “Right now, she’s in your kitchen, replenishin’ your selection of teas. She bought it all when she was out—got more cocoa for you, too.” He opened his eyes and smiled. “Sweet of her.”

“You can see all that?” Angel’s face held a mixture of horror and fascination. It was the look people got when they drove past an accident on the highway. They couldn’t look away. Spike would have felt the same way about it before it happened to him. The idea was claustrophobia-inducing. The reality was something wholly different.

“And more. Like being in two places at once.” That was the gist of it, too. Rather than having Buffy stuffed into his mind with him, they were sharing the space of their two minds. They were, as Giles had put it, one being in two bodies.

Something must have shown on his face. Angel said, “You like it.”

“I love it.” No hesitations, reservations, or bones about it. He loved every minute of it with everything he had. “I love her.”

“You always wanted that.” Angel touched Spike’s cheek with the back of his hand, brushed a wayward curl back in place. “Eternal love, the whole fairy tale ending.” He sipped from the mug of blood contemplatively, let his fingers rest at the nape of Spike’s neck. “So did she, I guess. I’m...I’m sorry I...harassed you about....”

Angel was apologizing? Somewhere far away, a bunch of horny red guys were trying to keep their forked tails from tangling in their ski poles. He felt more alarmed by the apology than vindicated. A humbled sire violated the natural order of things. “‘Sokay, Angel,” he rushed to reassure him, leaning into his touch like a fledgling. He laid his head down on the big man’s shoulder. “‘Sokay, but you gotta move on, yeah? This thing comin’ up—it’s big. You got your own people to deal with.”

“I don’t know where to start. What do I do? Just put out a call?” He gestured helplessly with his mug. “Play Master of the Order and summon every single Aurelian vampire here to Los Angeles?”

“Sure. After you build your power base.” Buffy spoke from the doorway. “It’s not even like you’d
be playing. You are, in fact, Master of the Order. You can run it any way you want. How’re you doing?”

Angel answered hesitantly. Good. Over the last forty-eight pain-filled hours, he’d learned that Buffy could turn on him without warning, and he wasn’t eager to provoke her. “Blood’s helping. Still hard to talk, hard to swallow.”

“Hmm,” she said, and climbed onto the bed between Spike’s legs, tucking her slender body back against his chest. That left Spike pressed securely between his mate and his sire, about as contented as a vampire could get. As though the idea were his own, he passed his switchblade over to her, curled one arm around her waist. She sliced her palm and let the blood drip into the mug in Angel’s shaking hands. “Freely given,” she said. “Drink up. We have to go soon. Car’s almost ready.”

She lifted her bloodied palm to Spike who licked it clean while Angel watched with his jaw hanging slack. “Drink,” she said again. Angel was unsettled, but not stupid. He tipped the mug back and swallowed it all in one long draft. When he finished, he was in demon face and breathing hard.

“That’s...” Angel said, the sibilance caused by his protruding fangs pronounced. “What is...”

“I’m a really, really old Slayer. We are vampire-nip. Should fix you right up,” she said, her lips quirking. Oh, that would fix him up, alright. Probably make him so hard he couldn’t sit still, too. The gesture was an almost perfect balance of kindness and malice. “So...I’m gonna need you to be Angelus, if this is gonna work. Angelus with ethics, yeah, but still. Need you to be ruthless. From your order, you have Spike—you’ll probably want him as your second, unless you think that guy Sam would be a better choice. I don’t know. I haven’t met him.”

“I’m in, if you want me, Sire,” Spike said, using the title deliberately, “but we’ll need Sam no matter what. Drusilla could also be a possibility....”

Angel’s grip tightened around Spike’s shoulders, and he shook his head. “Nobody’s ever been able to keep her focused but you, Spike. If we’re going into a big fight, I need you with me, even if,” his gaze flicked briefly to Buffy, “you’re not mine, anymore. Who else do I have?”

“Well, in my generation, you have Penn,” Spike offered. “Sean Walden. You haven’t met him yet. Not much of a fighter, though we’re workin’ on it, but he’s a bright lad.”

Angel nodded. “Who’s his...did you...is he yours, Spike?”

“Nah. I didn’t sire him. I don’t do that. Too much responsibility,” Spike answered. Buffy snickered. “Shut it, you. What Slayer thinks is so funny—boy might as well be mine. His sire was dust before he rose. I’ve been...” He trailed off, not exactly certain how to describe the relationship. Sean’s sire should have taught him how to hunt. Spike wasn’t giving him that and didn’t intend to.

“Sean doesn’t hunt, and we’re not planning to show him how,” Buffy said. “Spike’s been teaching him about his family.”
“And how to get out of a choke hold,” Spike added. “Boy wasn’t turned to be a fighter, anyway.”

Neither, for that matter, was Spike, but it hadn’t stopped him.

“Oh?” Angel raised his eyebrows. “What was he made for, then?”


“That’s ridiculous. Luke was a traditionalist. Why would he....” As realization dawned, Angel stopped talking. “Oh.”

“Like I said, boy is bright. Sire dusted. Couldn’t fight. Still survived on his own for—how long is it, Buffy?”

“Remember The Harvest, Angel? Right about the time I met you? That’s when I killed Luke, so Sean had to have been sired, like, the night before.” Buffy wore an expression that Spike would never have associated with the Slayer prior to their battle in the sunshine. She looked compassionate, even sympathetic, like she regretted leaving Sean to wake up alone. “He was so sure he was gonna win that he made someone to settle down with.”

He felt little tendrils of grief begin to worm their way into her mind. “Hey, love. Don’t do that,” he said, before it could really take hold. “No worries. Our boy is better off this way. If he’d had his sire, he’d have been hunting ‘round Sunnydale, and the Slayer would have had to stake him.”

“You’re right,” she said. “I know you’re right, but....”

“This way, he’s got school, friends, a little apartment,” Spike soothed, “and a future in film.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose. “I still don’t know how I feel about that,” she said. “But he’s got a Rolodex a career politician could envy. He is seriously brilliant at schmoozing, Angel. He knows everyone in Sunnydale. So...definitely in the asset column.” Spike had been more than a little startled when he went to campus to pick Buffy up for dinner and found her watching with amusement as Willow and Sean argued about the symbolism in a scene from an old Bogart movie. Buffy had decided against telling Willow that Sean was a vampire. She didn’t want to ruin their fun. “I know! You should come for Thanksgiving. We’ll introduce you then.”

“Oh, alright,” Angel said. “I’ll do that. Do we have anyone else?”

“There’s Harmony,” Spike said, “and Brian. I don’t know how far you want to take this.”

“Wait—Harmony’s Aurelian?” Buffy asked. When Spike nodded, she said, “Has anyone told her that? ‘Cause that should totally be on her resume.”

“Drusilla sired Brian. Said she liked the way he talked. I didn’t much care about that but the lad’s a top-notch engineer. Harmony was sired by one of the many, many minions left over after the Anointed One had his day in the sun. She’s Aurelian, but it’s not much of a pedigree.”

“She’s gonna grow into someone of note,” Buffy pointed out. “She’s only eighteen, you know, and that’s counting her whole human life. Her father does corporate contract negotiations—makes a butt load of money—so she comes by her talent honestly. She’ll be impressive. You’ll see.”

“So you say,” Spike shrugged. “I’m good with it if Angel is.”

“Our list so far,” Angel said, “includes me, Spike, Sam, Sean, Brian, Harmony, and Drusilla. Those are the people I should approach before I send out a call?”
“That’s seven. Is that enough for a power-base?” Buffy asked him.

“Should be,” Angel said. “Who’ve you got?”

“You know most of my team, Angel. Some of them have...advanced...since you saw them last—like me. You know Willow, Xander, Giles, and Oz. Anya is new to the group. By the time the wedding rolls around, Oz will be gone and Tara will have arrived. Willow and Tara are witches. Giles is a sorcerer. Anya’s a vengeance demon. Xander’s the only normal human in the bunch.” Spike made a little noise of objection in the back of his throat. “Fine,” she continued, rolling her eyes. “Spike thinks Xander has some demon blood way back. Says he smells funny.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Angel said. “Where’s Oz going?”

“To get the wolf under control.” She didn’t elaborate and Angel didn’t ask. “We should also remember our allies. You have Doyle and Cordelia...maybe Wesley. I’ve got Willy. I need to recruit Riley...maybe Jonathan...not so sure about Andrew....” She sighed. “Angel, do you want your base of operations to be here or in Sunnydale?”

Angel didn’t say anything for a few long moments. Buffy was extending an olive branch, offering him the chance to come home. “I need to stay here,” he said finally. “My work is here.”

“That actually makes everything easier. Your focus should probably be on Harmony and Brian, who live in L.A. Spike and Sean are in Sunnydale, but they’re already recruited. Your wild cards are Sam and Drusilla, and your location makes no difference with them. Get hold of them both and then we’ll figure out where to put them.”

“But that’s for now, yeah?” Spike put in. “When you get the whole order together for the event itself, we’ll need to find someplace to keep them in Sunnydale.”

“How about the mansion on Crawford Street?” Buffy suggested. “You could even do it legally—buy the place, fix it up, have utilities and everything.” She giggled. “Give it underground access via a steel door with a deadbolt. Put a mailbox and a sign in the tunnels outside the door and it’ll be a regular Hellmouth Hotel.”
Get in the car and go home - Spike

They made it to the garage with mere seconds to spare. They walked into the darkened space, got into the car, and got it started just as the garage door rolled up. Spike wondered what would have happened if they’d been late, but all he got from Buffy’s mind about it was a kind of incoherent fear. He decided not to ask.

As they were pulling out, however, he spotted a pair of slit-pupiled yellow eyes glowing in the darkness. He couldn’t help himself. He shifted to game face to see the creature more clearly. He saw skin the white of a deep-water fish mottled with translucent orange blotches. Large ears extended, alert and mobile, from the sides of a neat, triangular head. The delicate face was dominated by a broad mouth filled with overlapping banks of razor-sharp fangs.

Beside him, Buffy stiffened. “Spike!” she hissed. “Look away! Look away right now!” He was too slow. The creature screamed, and it was a howl that set all the hairs on the back of his neck on end. He felt, rather than heard, the sound intensify as it moved toward the driver’s side of the car, directly toward him. He locked eyes with it. It came closer and closer, still howling, until it was right outside his window.

He could hear Buffy chanting some phrase over and over again in a cracked whisper. Without warning, she swore loudly and clamped her hands over his eyes, thrusting him abruptly into darkness. He fought back rising panic, struggled to trust that his mate knew what she was doing. It was difficult. Her thoughts were filled with desperation.

Whatever she was saying worked, though. The garage was suddenly silent, and Spike could no longer sense the thing. Slowly, slowly, Buffy relaxed, uncovered his eyes. “That,” she said breathlessly, “was close. Let’s leave, now. Okay?”

He pulled the DeSoto out of the garage and they drove back to the hotel in silence. While Buffy went inside to get the rest of their things and leave the keys with the front desk, he got a chance to look at the changes that had been made to his car.

The first thing he noticed was that the car had been completely detailed. The interior surfaces gleamed. There were new floor mats, and the tears in the upholstery had all been repaired. It was the same story on the outside. All the glass had been replaced. The new windows were tinted a very pale gray. The car was washed and waxed, polished to a shine. His baby hadn’t looked this good since she was new.

He got back into the car to wait for Buffy, popped open the glove box to pass the time. It, too, had been cleaned out. There was a half-sized accordion file inside it, filled with all the papers from the car that the detailer had deemed important enough to keep, along with title, registration, and proof of insurance. He raised his eyebrows. Those were new.

Buffy came out of the hotel carrying their luggage with incongruous ease. Her hair shone like spun gold in the sunlight. She slung the bags into the trunk of the car and slid into the front seat beside him. “Hey,” she said, smiling. “I called the garage and talked to them. We’re okay. Nobody’s mad in any lasting way. No blood vendetta will ensue.”

He sometimes wished she made jokes about this sort of thing. “That’s...good. What the hell was that?”

“Ah...they’re called something like ‘Hsshthk’ but don’t quote me on that. There are consonants I
can’t get my mouth around. They’re blood drinkers, like you, but they prefer the blood of carnivores. Keep an eye on your kitties.” She patted his hand. “Warrior race. Eye contact is a challenge for dominance.”

“Huh. And they do auto-detailing?”

“They do necrotempered glass,” she corrected. “They aren’t from this plane. They can’t handle the sun of their own world, let alone this one. They developed the glass so they could avoid catching fire. We’re lucky it just happens to work for vampires, too.” She reached across his body, took his hand in hers, and pulled the Gem of Amara from his finger. “See?”

“Yeah,” he stared out into the bright daylight through a thin sheet of glass. He was breathing in strangled little gasps. “I see. Can I have that back now?” He held his hand out for the ring. “Please?”

“Okay, silly. Here you go.” She handed it back. “But you’re perfectly safe.” He knew she believed that, but he wanted his ring back anyway. The glass would take some getting used to.

On the trip back to Sunnydale, she sat snuggled in next to him, with her hand on the inside of his thigh. She’d bought a whole collection of CDs, which she played on the brand new CD player that the Hsshthk had installed in the DeSoto. He hadn’t noticed that change on his first inspection.

The music consisted of a selection of songs from all over the world, spanning several hundred years, in a dozen different languages. She sang along happily—and mostly on key. If he had ever given such a thing a thought, he would not have imagined it to be the sort of music Buffy would choose. Of course, he had no way to sort out everything that had happened to her in the Othertime, the time that wouldn’t now be. It was possible the music she loved had not yet been recorded.

“The changes to my car—they were a nice surprise,” he said, during an instrumental lull. “She looks good.”

“Yup!” she said, popping that ‘p’ adamantly. “First step was fixing up the sexy classic au-to-mo-bile. Got a lot of other changes planned, too. Changing everything. Gotta get the mansion, next.”

“You really gonna do that?” He hadn’t been sure she was serious. From what was going on inside her head at the time, she hadn’t been sure she was serious.

“Been thinkin’ about it. It’s a good location, kind of out of the way. Has lots of space, which we’ll need when the whole Order is in town. It’s very...Angel-like...grand and...um....” She bit her lower lip.

“Pretentious?” he finished for her.

“I was trying to come up with a less insulting word,” she said, sticking her tongue out at him, “but you get what I mean. The place suits him. He’ll look right, there. He’s gonna need that.”

“That he will,” Spike said. “He’ll need every advantage he can get. Whole endeavor’s just this side of impossible, yeah?”

She clicked the music off. “That’s why I need you to help him. I want Angelus to come sweeping in, all arrogance and assumption. I want him to tell everyone what will be and make it stick through sheer force of personality, but he’s gonna have a hard time with it. He’s almost forgotten how to be a vampire.”

“You did some remindin’, this trip. You know near as much about it as I do.”
“Doesn’t matter what I know. I’m not a vampire. Establishing dominance—I can do that.” She waved it away as unimportant. “I had to do that, had to show him he wasn’t allowed to override you.”

“Why’s that, then?” He had figured out that her reasons were always at least one layer more complex than they first appeared, although he’d bet money she wasn’t faking the possessive fury that pinned Angel to the wall twice over the course of the weekend.

“You’ve always known how to be just what you are, Spike, no matter which side you’re on. I want you to teach him.”
“You sure you don’t want something—oh, I don’t know—airier, maybe? Little more natural light?” Stubbs was nothing if not professional. No crack appeared in his jovial façade, even though something in him shrank away from his surroundings, and his smile didn’t make it all the way up to his eyes. “For this money, I could set you up in a luxury penthouse overlooking....”

“It’s exactly what I need.”

It was a windowless basement studio in one of Los Angeles’ seedier neighborhoods. A grand total of one hundred twenty square feet, it came equipped with a kitchenette and a three quarter bath, crumbling plaster and water stains. It had all the charm of a prison cell.

He would have bought the building if it had been for sale.

“Whatever you say.” Stubbs’ clients were human, by and large, and he specialized in those areas where the ordinary human world intersected with other worlds less mundane. He was the representative of choice for hedge wizards and half-demons, and Ethan was a touch too much monster for him. “The phone will be working by end of business today.” Stubbs slid a manila folder across the countertop with the tip of one finger. Ethan flipped it open, signed both copies of the lease, and pushed it back. “The proceeds from the sale of your...acquisitions...will be available by the end of the week.”

“That will do nicely. Thank you.” Ethan extended his hand to conclude their transaction and had the satisfaction of watching Stubbs flinch just a little as their palms touched. “One more thing—just out of curiosity? I’m looking for someone.”

“I am not my father, Doctor Rayne. With few exceptions,” Stubbs inclined his head toward Ethan, “I don’t have his contacts.”

“I do, and they got me nowhere.” Ethan fluttered his fingertips. “Perhaps the answer is in your circle rather than mine.”

Stubbs pulled a notepad from the breast pocket of his blazer. “I’ll do my best. Who am I looking for?”

“The Moon Vine.”

“It’s a title?”

“An identification.”

Stubbs scribbled the information down. “Do I want to know why you’re trying to find this person?”

“The Moon Vine—gender and name unknown—is a member-to-be of a circle of shamans, some of whom have been receiving debilitating portents for months. It’s a basic missing person’s job.” Ethan shrugged. “And I’m confounded.”

“Doesn’t seem much like your kind of work.”

“Anything that pays is my kind of work.”

Stubbs’ toothy smile didn’t waver. “Well, that’s...mercenary...of you.”
“Which is what comes of being a mercenary. I have no illusions about what I do, nor about what it’s made of me.” Ethan looked at the man, just held his eyes until that smile finally faded. “You, on the other hand, hope to maintain your integrity in the belly of the beast.”

“I have the resources to accomplish something here.” He toed the loose corner of a linoleum square. “I’m making progress. I have a new client who—.”

“Who is suffused with goodness and light, and whose noble nature will surely save the world?”

“Yes!”

“I envy your optimism. I hope you aren’t too disillusioned when you discover it’s misplaced.” Ethan put one hand on Stubbs’ shoulder and ushered him to the door. “Do let me know what you unearth about my missing person. And Jason?”

The man paused in the open doorway, puzzled and wary.

“Have a splendid afternoon.”

Stubbs stepped around the stack of boxes and bags already accumulating on the landing and climbed the stairs without a backward look. Ethan frowned after him. It was possible he would have to find new counsel soon. He began hauling the parcels inside, one at a time.

The place could have been a bunker—or a tomb. It consisted of six concrete walls, five of which were buried in the earth. The sixth wall—the ceiling—supported one corner of a dilapidated and disused commercial building filled with refuse and inhabited by rats and pigeons. The sole means of egress was a narrower-than-code doorway off a landing that was a little less than three feet square. A concrete stairway ascended to street level at an ankle-twisting forty-five degree angle, parallel to the wall of the building. It, too, was surrounded by concrete.

He tore open the boxes, removed the power tools and attachments, and—after donning a pair of extremely unflattering safety goggles—began chipping away at the plaster. When he’d uncovered a patch of concrete the size of his hand, he blew away the dust and lifted the goggles.

It glittered.

“Behold,” he said, staring in wonder as blue-tinged fluorescent light refracted and rebounded off flecks of quartz and pyrite embedded in the concrete wall. “The Crystal Cave.”
She’d been there forever.

Or maybe it was only a moment. It didn’t matter. Time was meaningless.

This was a place of warmth and peace, both infinite and close, suffused with golden light. She was safe, in the presence of something or someone pervasive and powerful, known perfectly for every gift and fault she possessed, and accepted completely.

And she was complete. Finished. She knew that everyone she cared about would be alright and that she was free to remain bathed in that peace and light for eternity. She was free—completely unburdened, unshackled from her obligations as slayer, as sister, as child, as friend. She was free, and she was happy, and she was loved.

Then there was that horrible ripping agony, fragmenting her spirit into a thousand pin-prick shards of bright red devastation. It was hot, burning, aching, and it went on until she was too broken to fight it anymore. When she had given up—when she knew with certainty that she would never be at peace again—the burning stopped and she was alone in an icy, airless darkness. She had been cast out, unwelcome, from the only real home she had ever known.

She wanted to close her eyes, to sleep and dream. Maybe if she just lay still, she would slip quietly back into the light. Maybe this was only a nightmare, and she would wake, soon, to find herself back where she belonged.

After just a short while, it became too hard to breathe. She started to panic, to pound with her fists on the roof of her prison. She beat against it until the wood splintered and the earth fell in on top of her.

She was buried, smothering, as the dirt filled her nose and mouth, caked in her eyes and ears. She screamed over and over again, incoherent things, ragged things. She cried, tears mixing with the dirt, leaving her face mud-streaked and filthy.

When she finally clawed her way out of the close, cold darkness, hands and feet bloodied from the fight, she found herself in a huge, empty darkness punctuated by walking nightmares howling in rage and terror. There was fire and destruction around every corner. There were monsters in every shadow. She was alone.

She would have been terrified if she could feel anything at all. It was all too loud when it wasn’t too quiet. Dead silences were interrupted at irregular intervals by earsplitting shrieks, the roar of machinery, the clashing thunder of battle. It was all too dark. It was all too bright. Midnight slashed apart by bonfires and searchlights. Things came at her, attacked her, and she killed them. She remembered how to kill things even when she could remember almost nothing else.

There was one other thing she could remember, and so she went to find it. She climbed up to a high place, where she could see the millions and millions of stars that stretched out across the infinite sky. It gave her a sense of distance and eternity, and it reminded her of where she had come from.

Looking at the sky, she could remember peace. She could remember life. There was a girl, then, nestled among the stars, precious and perfect. She reached for her, took her hands, and they walked away from the high place. Together they crossed the darkness and found a place they both knew was safer, if not exactly safe. It would do.

The girl made her clean and warm again, spoke to her in soothing tones, although she didn’t really
understand the words. It was good. In a world as large and terrifying as this one, there were two good things: this little girl and the infinite stars.

But then someone was yelling. The voice was angry, touched with a note of panic. Incomprehensible words assaulted her. She felt her heart pounding in her chest. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt. She was frightened, but the girl reassured her, took her by the hand and led her out into the open space, led her down the stairs.

She saw him, then, standing at the doorway with a look of naked terror in his eyes. She watched it transform from fear to grief and wonder to an echo of the kind of love that had been torn away from her when she was thrust back into a box in the ground. In his eyes, she could see who she had been. He made her remember what she was. He took her hand and led her away, talked to her softly. He asked her questions, but didn’t seem to expect answers. He didn’t expect anything.

That’s when she knew: Of the three good things in this cold, hard world, he was the very best. When the others came in with their noise and motion, and their mean, grasping demands, he disappeared quietly, meeting her eyes as he left. She could follow if she needed him.

Barely a moment had passed before she’d sent the noise and fuss away, climbed from the window of her room, and made her way across town to find him. The cool, quiet darkness of his presence calmed her. It wasn’t the warmth and joy of Heaven, by any means, but he offered the only tangible peace she’d found in the world so far. She needed him.

They surfaced at the same moment, awakening eye to eye. He lifted one of her hands to his lips, examining it as though he expected to see scars on her knuckles. “They...just...left you there?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” she smiled at him softly, sadly. “No wonder you got me when nobody else did, huh? I didn’t know anyone else in Sunnydale who’d earned their Dug-My-Way-Out-of-My-Own-Grave Vampire Merit Badge. Hey—is there a bonus for killing something before you come out of post-resurrection shock?”

“Stupid, stupid children!” he snarled. “How could they—?” Leaving fledglings in the ground to dig their way out after they rose broke them. That was the point. It was a rebirth, through pain, through fear, into a world of darkness, blood, and death. The stupid little Scooby gang inadvertently mimicked an ages-old vampire ritual and then had the sodding gall to be surprised when their resurrected slayer felt a kinship with the creatures she was supposed to kill.

She slid her fingers into his hair, toyed with his curls. “That’s one reason. Plus there is a kinship between slayers and vampires.” She kissed him, touched her lips gently against his. “‘How could they?’ They’re children, Spike. That’s all. They’re just kids. They’ve been thrown into this—whatever this is—and they don’t know what they’re doing.”

“Why didn’t the watcher stop them?” He was anguished, still struck by the dream’s intensity. He’d seen Heaven through her eyes, and knew how it felt to lose it. “Why didn’t I stop them?”

“They didn’t tell you,” she whispered. “They didn’t tell either of you.”

“They didn’t tell you?” “After that, you came to me?” He couldn’t imagine her wanting to be with them, not after that, but he couldn’t imagine her wanting to be with him, either. He had trouble believing it, even now. “We were...together?”

“For a while. Eventually, I let them pull me away from you. I tried to be one of them, again, tried to rejoin the land of the living.” She swallowed hard. “I was...stupid. I thought if I could just go back to
being what I’d been before I died, then I could have a normal life—house in the suburbs with a big
backyard, handsome husband to pay the bills, two point five smiling kids who never snuck out the
window at night to kill things, and a dog that played catch with a Frisbee.”

He felt a sudden bolt of sympathy for the girl she had been. She was wearied, overwhelmed by the
never-ending grind of being the slayer when she died, and then she wasn’t allowed to rest. Her little
friends pressed her thoughtlessly, selfishly back into service. He couldn’t blame her for wanting a life
in the sunshine. “ ‘S not stupid,” he said. “Pretty girl wantin’ a regular life without all the ghoulies an’
ghosties. ‘S only natural.” He choked the words out. They made his stomach hurt.

“It wasn’t gonna happen. Slayers come with extra baggage and an expiration date. We don’t get
regular lives. All it did was mess stuff up between us.” She tucked her forehead against his shoulder
and squeezed her eyes shut.

“You went away, Spike. We...hurt...each other, caused real damage, back and forth. Then you did
something you couldn’t...forgive...and you went away.” Those words rebounded in her mind, heavy
with remembered emotion. Whatever horrific thing he’d done, whatever grievous act he had
committed was, for her, more forgivable than leaving her alone. Kindred, she’d called herself,
providing proof by slipping into his family as easily as if she had fangs, and this was more evidence
still. For Buffy, abandonment was the greatest of all sins. He pulled her up against his chest. This
time, he could promise he wouldn’t leave.

“I missed you,” she said, “and I couldn’t tell anyone, because they all thought I should be glad you
were gone. While you were away, I figured out I wasn’t one of them, that I’d never be one of them. I
hadn’t been one of them before I crawled out of my grave, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to be one
of them after. But when you came back....” He felt her grief and he knew where he’d gone.

“That was my trip to Africa? I came back with a soul?” He’d done something bad enough that he felt
he needed a soul to...what? To atone? To prevent it from happening again? Or to be someone who
would fit into her world? He wished she knew more about why he’d gone to get it.

She nodded, stretched upward and kissed each of his eyelids. He could smell her tears. “You were
really, really brave,” she said. “It hurt you even more than I did. You had...we had...just started to
be...okay...again when you died. You did the hero thing, Spike. Incinerated yourself in a great big
ball of sunlight and saved the whole stupid world. I’m very proud of you, sweetie, but,” she rubbed
the tip of her nose against his, “please don’t do it again. Okay?”

“Can’t say I was plannin’ on it,” he offered, “but should my judgment happen to lapse, I ‘spect you’ll
be there to remind me.”

“You better believe it, buster! In this timeline, we’ve each only died once, and I’d like to keep it that
way.” The words were stern, but her voice shook.

“You still out of sorts from that dream?” He stroked her hair.

“That’s one way to put it, I guess. Do you know how long ago that happened to me?” He shook his
head. “I was twenty. Ninety-three years have passed for me since I clawed my way out of a coffin.
Ninety-three years, Spike.”

He nodded slowly. “Climbin’ up out of the ground’s somewhat hard to forget. I still dream about
doin’ that, myself.”

“I know you do.” She glowered. “I’ve seen. Makes me want to kick Angel and Drusilla in the teeth.
But that’s not what that dream means to me, anymore. It’s not a nightmare.”
It seemed an awful lot like a nightmare to him. The wrenching loss, the isolation, the pain and fear and confusion. “Oh?”

“This part of my life is old news. The Scooby dramas, Angel, Riley and The Initiative, my worries about being normal and having a real life, Glory, school, money. Think about it. How much of the stuff you thought about when you were twenty is still important to you? It’s all from so long ago that it’s lost its...resonance. I even have trouble remembering it all, sometimes.” She kissed him again. “I’ve had that dream over and over, at least a couple of times a month since I came back, and I see stuff in it now that I didn’t notice at the time.”

He held his breath, waiting. “I hauled my useless, damaged body up out of the ground into this hell-world where everything hurt me, and I looked around for some tiny sliver of Heaven, some reason to want to stay alive. You were the only thing I found, Spike. The way you look at me is the closest thing to Heaven I have ever seen on earth.”
“You’re quiet, this morning. Trip go okay?” Willy had stayed out of arm’s reach since he’d sat down at the bar, even though he’d hardly had anything to drink, and wasn’t feeling particularly aggressive. He’d been writing, had filled page after page of his journal, pondering—definitely not brooding about—the recent developments in his life.

“Feel like everythin’s changin’. Throws me off a bit, yeah?” Willy quirked an eyebrow. He brushed the topic away with the side of his hand. “’S nothin’, really. Family. Spendin’ time with Angel—a little weird. Buffy clobbered him a couple of times while we were there, ’til he figured out he wasn’t in charge anymore. Then she invited him to Thanksgiving dinner, which ought to be interestin’. I’ve been asked to extend an invitation to you, too, by the by.” He lay his journal open, face down, on the bar. “Really appreciate it if you’d come. Keep me from bein’ so outnumbered by the children that I have to eat a couple.”

“I’m touched, Spike. Thanks.” The bartender favored him with the bright, genuine smile he’d gotten to see more often since he and Buffy had been staying in the little room at the back of the building. He was ambivalent about that smile. On one hand, being on the receiving end of Willy’s sincerity was rare and gratifying. On the other, it reshaped his narrow face into something that could almost be described as handsome, making Spike’s demon snarl with resentment. “I’ll be there. Want me to bring something?”

He shrugged. “Somethin’ sweet, maybe? Crowd is...hard to plan a menu for, now that I think about it. Toss a few demons into the mix, an’ it’s worse than invitin’ vegetarians.” Willy chuckled. “Should probably ask Buffy. I’ll bring her by tonight.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Willy considered him for a moment, polishing beer glasses reflectively. “Seems like you’re getting real domesticated, lately—don’t know if you’ve noticed that. You’re not concerned your reputation’s gonna suffer?” He held his hands up, as Spike let out a low, warning rumble. “Don’t get me wrong—and I’m saying this without witnesses, so I got nobody to impress. I like seeing you two together. Far as I can tell, you’ve never been happier—either of you. That sure can’t be a bad thing.”

“You’re just wonderin’ if I’m gettin’ beat up on the way home every night?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Willy grinned. “I do hear things, but could be it’s just talk. Someone has a rep like yours, folks get eager to say they’re the one that took you down.”

“It was bad a couple of weeks ago.” Spike leaned against the edge of the bar with a hint of his old swagger. “It got better.” ‘Bad’ was an understatement. They were constantly under siege, both from vampires who were after the Gem and demons who were offended by his relationship with the Slayer. At least the disapproving Scoobies hadn’t recently tried to stake him.

“T ook care of that, did you?” Willy asked.

“Did. You fishin’ for information about what happens when someone tries to take us on?” Spike had been pleased with Buffy’s solution to the problem. She liked to massacre all but one of the attackers from any given group. Then she’d send the survivor back to his people with instructions to cease the attacks or face bloody retaliation. It was brutal but effective, and the frequency of attacks was more than manageable now. “What you’ve heard—prob’ly true. Slayer doesn’ mess around. Be obliged if you got the word out.” He let a leer spread slowly across his face. “Got better things to do with my nights.”
“Oh, sure.” Willy rolled his eyes. “Go ahead and rub it in, you lucky bastard. Leave us single guys hanging.”

“Catch you later, Will,” Spike said, clapping the man on the shoulder. “Gotta go be domesticated. More invitations to deliver.”

He stopped by Clem’s place first. The pink-skinned demon was delighted to be invited to dinner at Buffy’s house. “Well, sure!” he said, grinning ear to floppy ear, the skin around his red eyes crinkling into deep, happy creases. “I never expected...well, that’s just...I’d love to come! Who all’s going to be there?”

“Got Buffy’s little crew, the watcher, Willy, Angel....”

“Say—is Sean coming?” Clem asked.

“On my way over there to ask him now,” Spike said. “As it is ordered, so shall it be done. You can save the comments about who wears the pants in the family, ‘cause I’m not even pretendin’ it’s me. Course,” he continued, batting his eyelashes, “you fellas might find you spend a lot less time wearing pants, too, if you adopt that philosophy.”

The Clement demon laughed. “Well, I’ll definitely be there, but if you do see Sean today, could you ask him what happened to Saturday? We were supposed to go bowling. He stood me up.”

Something knotted up in the pit of Spike’s stomach. He’d never met a kid as reliable as Sean. Boy made a living being where he said he was going to be, doing what he said he was going to do. If he hadn’t shown, he hadn’t been able to. He forced a smile. “Will do, Clem. Take care of yourself, a’right?”

Spike sprinted to the car, pushed every speed limit, and got to Sean’s apartment in about five minutes. He didn’t bother knocking on the door. He pulled the spare key out of its hiding place under the big terra cotta planter outside the door and went in.

The apartment was as neat and comfortable as Sean always kept it. There was a plastic container of tapir blood on the kitchen counter. Tapir blood? Boy had weird tastes. It looked like Sean had taken his dinner out of the freezer to thaw, like he usually did before he went to class in the evening, but then he’d never come back for it. It had been out long enough to go bad, and the smell was nauseating.

Sean didn’t have classes on the weekends, so he must not have come home Friday night. He’d been gone for more than forty-eight hours. That was not good. If he were anybody else, Spike would assume that the slayer had staked him, but Buffy considered the boy family. Since Spike did, too, and Sunnydale’s demon community was aware of it, there was only one group who’d have the nerve to grab him. He dumped the container into the sink and ran the water until the rotting blood was gone.

Then he got back into his car and drove to the university as fast as he possibly could.
Spike slipped into the back of her psychology class five minutes before it ended. He couldn’t calm himself. He was barely holding back the demon, despite that rock solid self-control, and she couldn’t blame him. She was livid. Riley better be glad she wasn’t a vampire. If she were, she’d be flashing fang, right now.

As soon as class let out, she and Spike moved like one creature to flank Riley Finn. Each of them took an arm and led him quietly away from the group.

“Whoa—hey, Buffy. Will. What’s up?” The big man looked back and forth between the two of them. “Is there something I can help you guys with?”

“Riley, we need to talk.”

“Well, okay. I’d be happy to, Buffy. I’ve got some free time right now. You guys...wanna go get some coffee?”

That’s how the three of them ended up at Willy’s before the bar opened, sitting in the still darkened room in a very dark corner booth. She didn’t know exactly what Spike had said to Willy, but he’d started the espresso machine up without any argument.

“So...you guys come here a lot?” Riley squinted into the darkness. “It’s...comfortable—very...dark....” He tried for affability, but he was clearly rattled by the whole scene. They hadn’t exactly kidnapped him, but it was close.

“Special Agent Riley Finn, identity number seven five three two nine,” she said, “I’m gonna need to ask for your full cooperation.”

“Oh...kay....” Riley said, sitting up straight. He dropped the awkward Iowa boy routine in the space of a breath. “I think I’m at least one page behind everybody else. You wanna catch me up?”

“You are a member of a top-secret government organization known as The Initiative, which is dedicated to killing or controlling HSTs—that’s short for Hostile Sub-Terrestrials—in Sunnydale, where there is an unusual amount of such activity, although the military is not clear on exactly why that might be.”

“I am not at liberty to say....”

Spike slammed his fist down on the table. His eyes went gold, but he managed to keep his human features in place.

Buffy sighed. “Honestly, Riley, you don’t need to. I know who you are and what you do. I know who you report to and who reports to you. I was prepared to leave you and your boys alone until your science projects got out of hand, but now you’ve pissed me off.”

She glowered into her coffee. “Willy, I’m gonna need something a lot stronger if I’m gonna get all the way through this conversation without punching Riley in the face.”

“Sure thing, Slayer. You want your usual?” She wasn’t sure if the man had used her title deliberately, but Riley perked right up when he did.

“I guess.” Willy set a tumbler of beach-glass green kshikle’un down on the table in front of her. He’d
served it with two tiny hot pink straws and a curl of lime zest on top. It was a very pretty drink. You’d never guess ingesting the whole thing would kill a man Riley’s size. Buffy sipped at it through the straws. “Oh, god, that’s better. Thanks, Will. I’m sure Agent Finn would thank you, too, if he knew how hard I could punch.”

Willy snickered. “And may he never have the opportunity to learn. He’s got a nice, straight nose.” He rubbed at his own prominent schnoz. “Photogenic. Bet he wants to keep it that way.”

“So, Riley,” she said, “have you ever heard of the slayer?”

“Well, yeah. Hostiles chatter about the slayer all the time. She’s like...the bogey man, I suppose. Supposed to look like a girl, deals death with her hands, moves too fast for the eye to follow, strong as ten men, et cetera. It’s clearly a folk myth. The HSTs vary a lot, admittedly, but they’re of sub-human intelligence. It’s natural that they’d come up with...and you’re all looking at me like I’m stupid.”


“Riley,” Buffy said without a trace of amusement in her voice, “I am the slayer.”

“Well, I got that he called you that,” Riley said, waving a hand at Willy. “But it can’t mean what the hostiles say it does. I mean, you’re just...a....”

“The bogey man,” Spike recited in a disinterested tone, examining his nail polish for chips. “Deals death with her hands, moves too fast for the eye to follow, strong as ten men.”

“The latest in a long line of mystic warriors chosen to combat the forces of darkness—and when I put it like that,” she said, “it sounds totally crazy.”

“Lot of stuff in this town is crazy,” Willy pointed out, pulling a chair up to the edge of the table. “Does not mean it is not true.” Buffy, Spike, and Riley all turned to stare at him. “What? No way am I gonna miss out on hearing the rest of this. This stuff is gold.”

“Look, Riley,” Buffy said, “He’s right. True is true, no matter how weird it sounds. Me—slayer. Mystic warrior, magically imbued with superior senses, strength, and speed to protect humanity from demonic threats. Responsible for keeping the insanity that is Sunnydale from spilling out onto the rest of the world. You—government-created super-soldier, enhanced with a chemical cocktail of who knows what, under the careful ministrations of one Dr. Maggie Walsh. Step one in our government’s grand effort to build combat cyborgs with HST-derived abilities. Not responsible for anything but getting in my way and pissing me off.”

“I am not enhanced with anything....” Riley started, but she cut him off.

“You take a handful of pills every single morning,” she said, “and you’ve never thought to ask what they were. Your strength has almost doubled since you came to work for The Initiative, and nobody’s told you why or how it happened. It’s not just physical stuff, either. You know you learn more quickly than you used to. You know your memory is better, your recall of data is faster. There’s no way around it, Riley. You are a science experiment.” She shook her head. “But you’re only the first iteration. There are others in the works, right now, and they are bigger, badder, and way more dangerous than you.”

From the look on his face, he was well aware of the changes that had been made in him. “You’re saying the stuff I can do—they got it from the HSTs?”
“A lot of it. Yeah. Only...that’s a really dumb name for them,” she said. “They’re really just
demons.”

“Thank you,” Spike said on a relieved exhale. “All that talk about ‘hostiles this’ an’ ‘hostiles that’
was startin’ to make me...hostile.”

“You’re always a little bit hostile, honey.” She ran her fingers through his curls. His whole face lit up
when she did that, planes and angles softened, eyes shifted a shade more blue. “I love you anyway.”
His lips parted. God, but he was beautiful. Even if she totally screwed up and the world ended, it
was worth coming back just to see him look at her like that. “So, Riley—how many demons have
you killed or captured? Are you still at sixteen? Or did you make seventeen, recently?”

“Seventeen,” he answered automatically, “as of Friday night, but how did you...?”

Spike growled. It was an inhuman sound that made the solid surfaces in the room vibrate. The soldier
flinched. Even Willy edged away from him a little. “Would you describe your seventeenth hostile for
me, please, Riley?”

He looked back and forth between them with alarm. “Alright. Male, Caucasian, five foot six, brown
hair....”

Spike growled again, louder. “Put up much of a fight, did he?” Sean couldn’t fight his way out of a
paper bag. He’d never needed to, before. He’d always been able to talk himself out of trouble.

“No,” Riley said. “That was the really funny thing. That variety of hostile is usually pretty
aggressive. They bite, so you have to deal with them from a distance. This one hardly even fought
back. We didn’t even have to Taser him. Just dropped a net on him and hauled him home. No fuss,
no muss.”

“He alive?” Spike asked in an angry rumble.

“Well, yeah,” Riley answered. “Because of his docility, he’s an ideal experimental subject. Easier for
the techs to handle. There’s a new technology, a prototype. The idea is to make the subject harmless
by....”

“By implanting a microchip in his brain which delivers a powerful electric shock every time he even
thinks about hurting humans,” Buffy said. “Oh, my god. No. Please no. Please tell me we’ve still got
time. Tell me that hasn’t happened yet.”

“Not until the end of the week,” Riley said. “There’s a specialist flying in. Buffy—what’s going on?
Why do you care what happens to the hostile?”

“Vampire,” Spike snarled. “There is nothing hostile about Sean.”

“Excuse me?”

“He’s a vampire, Riley,” Buffy said. “His name is Sean. He doesn’t hurt people.”

“You know him? How do you know him?”

“I’ve been tutoring him, you lackwit,” Spike said with barely contained rage, temporarily mislaying
his counterfeit working class accent. “He’s a student. You morons threw a net over him while he was
walking home from school.”

“What?” Riley had been reduced to single syllables. His simple, open face hung slack.
“Sean Walden is a student,” Spike said, enunciating each syllable with exaggerated clarity, “at the university. Part time. He is enrolled in ten credit hours, this quarter. In the film department. I would wager you could even look that up, if you had half a mind...or,” he narrowed his eyes, “perhaps it would take more than the half you appear to have.” He leaned up on the tabletop towards the larger man, somehow managing to loom over Riley despite the difference in their sizes. “I wonder, did you even think to check his identification? He carries his student ID with him, in his wallet, never leaves his apartment without it.”

“I...uh...why would I....”

“Clearly, you wouldn’t,” Buffy said, “which is one of my many issues with The Initiative. There’s a turf war, Riley. It’s been going on for thousands and thousands of years, fought by people like me and,” she licked her lips, smiling a little, “Spike. Your organization violates the rules of engagement.”

“So here’s what’s gonna happen, soldier boy,” Spike said. “You’re gonna find a way to get us into and out of that great concrete box you call home so we can retrieve Sean....”

“Along with any other demon we consider harmless,” Buffy interjected.

Spike leaned all the way across the table on his elbows, until he was nose to nose with Riley, and then he let his eyes blaze gold. “Or we’ll take the whole bloody place down around your ears.”

She couldn’t have said it better herself.
Angel answered the phone. It was William.

Not Spike, all sneer and black leather, as he had seen him just a day ago, but William, as he had been a hundred years before, new-made, no boast or brag yet worn as armor. “Sire?” His voice trembled.

“Aye, Will?” He fell into the role as though no time at all had passed. It helped, of course, that Buffy had asked for the reprise. He would be Angelus if she needed him to be. He would be whatever she needed him to be.

“I need your assistance, Sire. It’s a family matter.”

If Angel’s heart could still beat, it would have skipped one. He had not heard those words in a very long time. They made him feel real. “Where are you?”

“Sunnydale.” Two hours’ drive, an hour until sunset.

“I can be there in three hours. Who is—it’s not Buffy, is it?” It couldn’t be. If something had happened to Buffy, it would have reverberated through his entire line. Every Aurelian in the continental United States would know about it. She had power.

“Our boy. Sean.” That made sense. Family, but not of direct descent, and a fledgling besides, so he’d felt nothing. He would have to talk to Spike about taking official responsibility for the boy. Mark him or make him submit, but get him into the line so they could all feel when something was wrong. If you weren’t going to take care of your fledglings, there was no point in making them. “He’s been taken by the soldiers.”

Buffy had mentioned them. Gruesome. Government-issue gruesome, like the Nazis. “Is he alive?”

“Yeah. For now. They’re planning to run some kind of tests on him—make him into a lab rat. Slayer and I have one of the soldiers—Riley Finn.”

“You took a hostage?”

“More or less. Buffy knows him. We took him to Willy’s. He’s coming with us tonight when we go in to get Sean.”

“You’re planning to take on the Army?”

“Not if we can help it. Slayer says she knows the way to where the boy’s being held. Needs the soldier for his passwords and his... ‘biometrics’ is the word she used. Between the two of us, we should be able to take care of the guards we encounter.”

“And what do you need me for?”

“Ride herd on the soldier. Buffy—there’s also a strategic reason. Soldier is a key piece.”

“Got it. Where?”

“Outside Lowell House on the Sunnydale campus.”

“Two hours after sunset,” Angel said, and hung up.
He tucked extra stakes in his jacket pockets, a knife in a sheath on his ankle. For good measure, a pistol in a side holster....

“You going somewhere, Angel?”

He spun around. “Cordelia.” She shouldn’t sneak up on him like that. He could accidentally hurt her. “I didn’t hear you come in.” Her eyes narrowed.

“Angelus?”

“Yeah—what?” She took a step back, pulled a stake from the waistband of her slacks, and dropped into a balanced stance. Wait. “No—no. Cordelia, it’s me. I’m still me.” He took a step toward her.

“You—no, you stay over there!” She brandished the stake.

“Cordy....”

“I mean it.”

He held his hands up. “Fine. Fine. I haven’t time to argue. Leavin’ at sunset.” He collected a dozen or so holy water hand grenades from the drawers of his desk and put them in a backpack.

“Where are you going?” She hadn’t put the stake down.

“Sunnydale. On a family matter.”

“Family...like vampires?”

He nodded. “Will’s boy is in trouble.”

“Will? Do you mean Spike?”

“Never liked that name.” He brushed past her in the doorway. She backed up but didn’t stake him. She followed him downstairs. He packed extra socks and underwear, and then held up two shirts. “Red or green?”

“The red looks better on you.” She offered her honest opinion without hesitation, the way she’d do even if his soul had fled. Soulless Angelus would still receive fashion advice from Cordelia Chase. He smiled at her. That felt real, too. “You seem awfully happy. You sure you’re still you?”

He nodded. “Just...family is....”

She tucked the stake back into her waistband. “They really did a number on you. Buffy and Spike, I mean.”

“That they did.”

“So...are you gonna be weird every time something...family...comes up?”

“It’s likely.”

“Good to know. I don’t wanna stake you if I don’t have to.”

“Cordelia?” He cleared his throat. “Thanks. For being willing.”

She smiled, light in his darkened world. “Any time.”
“But you’re not human,” Riley said, staring at him warily as he and Buffy walked together toward Lowell House, chatting offhandedly about their upcoming wedding. They’d gone over their plans for getting into The Initiative while they were still at Willy’s, and then waited until dark before driving to campus. Spike sensed Angel lurking in the shadows long before he could see him. The point was to make certain that the soldier couldn’t just walk away from them.

“Right,” Spike drawled, “and you are?”

“What do you mean by that?” Riley blustered. “I’m human—I was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.”

“Ooh!” said Buffy, patting Spike’s backside and directing her eyes at a darker place in the shadows. Ah. That’s where Angel was hiding. “I know this game! I was born human in Los Angeles, California.”

“And I was born human in London, England,” Spike said. “Don’t always end up where we start. Don’t always get a choice in the matter.”

“Wait...you’re not human?” Riley asked Buffy.

“Thought we covered this already,” Buffy said.

“Can I play, too?” Angel coalesced out of nothing in that spine-chilling way he’d always had, as though a piece of the shadows suddenly became solid, as though he were...well, as though he were a vampire. “Born human. Galway, Ireland. ‘Course, that was some time ago, now.” There was a touch of his old Irish brogue when he spoke, but almost too little to identify. It was just enough to menace. Angel had been practicing.

Spike could hear Riley’s heart pounding against the inside of his ribcage. “‘Lo, Angelus. Thanks for comin’ on such short notice. ‘Preciate it.”

“Who’s the pulser?” Angel asked, leaning in very close to Riley, letting his nostrils flare. “He doesn’t smell right.” Angel knew very well who Riley was. He was just letting his inner Angelus out to play. He had to admit the older vampire had mastered the role. Riley’s scent was acrid with fear.

“Angel,” Buffy said, “this is Agent Riley Finn of The Initiative. Riley, this is Angelus, Master of The Order of Aurelius. He and Sean are....”

“Family,” Angel said in the kind of resonant, vampiric whisper you could feel in your bones. “You kidnapped someone from my family and put him in a cage.” While Riley’s eyes were locked on Angel, wide and terrified, Buffy and Spike exchanged self-satisfied grins. It was a good call, summoning Angel to Sunnydale. He was already starting to seem like his old self—not the crazy, broken Angelus who made a brief appearance when Buffy accidentally stripped his human soul away, but the real Angelus, the Angelus who was brilliant and cunning and ruthless, the Angelus Spike had idolized when he was a fledgling.

“You’re a vampire!” Riley finally spluttered out.

All three of them stopped to stare at the frightened young man. “You back a page or two again, Riley?” Buffy asked. “I know we move quickly. Try to keep up.”

“No, I mean...your face isn’t....” He swept his fingertips across his brow.
“Is that what you’ve been usin’ as a qualifier?” Spike asked. “If so, I expect you’ll join the ranks, soon.”

“Hmph.” Angel looked Riley up and down with a disparaging eye. “I wouldn’t turn him.”

“When we bring them in, their faces are always...feral....” Riley insisted.

“Ah, but those would be fledglings, boy,” Angel said. “Newborns who haven’t yet learned to control themselves. You tryin’ to tell me you’ve only ever faced fledglings?”

“One moment,” Spike interjected very quietly. “There’s somethin’s got me curious. Was Sean...feral...when you took him in?”

Buffy’s eyes widened and she stared at the soldier. It was clear that he did not understand the depth of the danger he was in at that moment. Sean rarely went into game face. He’d only done it for Spike once—voluntarily—to prove that he could. If Sean were feral, as the soldier put it, he must have been under extreme stress—probably in a great deal of pain.

“Well, yeah,” Riley said. “They all are.”

Spike was at a loss for words. Fury beat the back walls of his eyes so hard that he struggled to stay in human face. Fortunately, Buffy had no such difficulty. Stalking stiff-legged up to Riley, she growled, “What did you do to him?” She smacked the big man hard in the chest, flat handed. “What the hell did you do to him, Riley?”

“Nothing!” he said, scrabbling backwards directly into Angel, who hadn’t been there a moment before. Angel caught the man and held him by his upper arms. He glanced back over his shoulder at the old vampire and continued uneasily. “Well, nothing out of the ordinary. We just grabbed him with the gator stick and threw a net over him.”

“Gator...” That’s when Buffy lost words. Her mouth worked, but nothing came out of it. She took Riley’s arm and dragged him toward Lowell House. There was nothing rational left in the slayer’s mind. If Sean was hurt, Spike was pretty sure Buffy would carve it out of the soldier’s skin—provided, of course, that Spike didn’t kill him first.
“Don’t be so stodgy, Rupert. It’ll be fun.”

“I can hardly be faulted. My diapers were tweed, after all.” Joyce Summers clung to his arm like she was afraid he’d run away. He patted her hand and raised an eyebrow. “How did I let you talk me into this?”

“Oh, no. The way I remember it, you talked me into going.” She grinned nervously. It made her look older, but more lovely, the lines around her eyes drawing out the kindness of her smile. “I only wanted you along for moral support.”

“I couldn’t very well sit and watch, now could I?” For just an instant, he wanted to kiss her. Then they could skip this event altogether. It would be easy and safe, unsurprising to anyone who knew them both. It would also be wrong. Joyce deserved more than a relationship of convenience—something real, at least. Maybe he did, too. He shook away his regret. “I’d be arrested for loitering.”

“And that’s what you said!” She pinched her eyes closed and breathed, in through her nose, out through her mouth. “Oh...I’m not sure I can do this.”

“What’s wrong? Won’t it be fun?” She punched him in the shoulder, much harder than he’d have given her credit for. He rubbed the sore spot. “I expect we’ll both survive the evening.”

“I feel like...am I too old for this?” She smoothed her skirt, patted at her hair, and tried, unsuccessfully, to keep her hands still. They fluttered like caged birds. “I’m too old for this. Do I look alright?”

There were times he wanted to find Hank Summers and beat the man bloody.

“Joyce.” He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and turned her to face him. At eight o’clock on a Monday night in Sunnydale, it inconvenienced no one. “The event is advertised as ‘over forty,’ correct?” She nodded. “We are, both of us, over forty. If we’re too old, at least everyone else will be, too. And you look stunning.”

“Thank you, Rupert. I know you’re right, but—.”

“Necessity is a mother.” He delivered the line deadpan, and she giggled.

“Exactly!” She took his arm, again, and continued toward their destination. Gradually, the sidewalk became busier. “When Buffy was still at home, I had her to distract me. There are an endless number of things to occupy your time when you have a teenager in the house.”

“But now she’s in college. Yes.” He’d done everything he could think of to fill his days since the destruction of the high school. Buffy’s foray into university life had even seen him intensifying his exercise routine. He hadn’t been this fit in years. “My calendar has opened up, too.”

“She’s just gone! And then there’s Spike. When she is around, they’re....”

“Joined at the hip?” A vivid reminder that his own sex life—magically induced debauchery excluded—had ended with Jenny’s death more than a year ago. “Relentless, aren’t they? Lately, I’ve found myself missing Sunnydale High.”

“Oh...dear.” She covered her mouth with her hand, but her eyes were dancing. “That is awful.” A
few heartbeats passed. “I miss L.A.”

“You could go back.”

“I’ve thought about it. Buffy doesn’t really need me, and I’d be able to do so much more with the
gallery in the city. There just aren’t enough people in Sunnydale to build a robust client list.” She laid
her head on his shoulder. “But we’ve made a life, here. Did you know I paid off the mortgage?”

“I didn’t. Congratulations.”

“What about you? Have you thought about going home?”

“Not...seriously.” He hesitated. “I’m still Buffy’s watcher.” He had a list of events that would require
his attention over the course of the next year. “She needs me...intermittently.”

“We’ll just have to keep ourselves busy, then.” As they approached the university, the sidewalk
gradually became crowded with young people, bumping and jostling from place to place. The two of
them stood out. Joyce stopped abruptly and stared at the address painted on the curb. “This is the
place.”

A hand-lettered sign on the door read, “Closed for Private Party.” He tugged it open, and ushered
her into a comfortable wood-paneled pub. Perhaps thirty people—all over forty—milled about,
chatting in nervous undertones.

“We’ve faced zombies, demons, and vampires,” Joyce whispered, eyes wide and panicked. “We live
on a Hellmouth. How hard can this be?”

He didn’t have time to answer. An impeccably suited blond woman in her late twenties approached,
smiling broadly. She carried a clip board. “Hi! Are you both here for speed dating?”
The Initiative building was dark and empty. Their footsteps echoed strangely in the silence. Patter...thud...patter...thud, the sound truncated when it hit bedrock. The place was hollowed stone.

They stopped once to redirect the cameras in their path. Buffy and Spike shifted, restless, green eyes and blue fixed with demon implacability on the back of Riley’s head. Angel kept a hand on his shoulder the whole time, just in case. From Riley’s perspective, it probably looked like a threat.

It wasn’t.

Family drove him, sure, as it drove his whole order, but he’d gotten less sentimental over the years, and he’d never met Sean. Plus, there was not much anyone could do to his family—short of killing them—that would cause lasting damage.

No, he planned to keep Riley alive, should Buffy or Spike feel a need for vengeance, which looked more likely every time the soldier opened his mouth. They met four pairs of guards on the way in to the holding cells. Each time they did, Spike and Buffy separated to take on one apiece, incapacitating them with savage efficiency, before coming back together again. As they approached the second set of guards, Angel leaned in to whisper, “Well! Look at that, would you? What a match they make! It’s like poetry....”

Riley tried to pull away, but couldn’t shake his hold. “Buffy told me he was a writer!” Spike bounced a guard’s head off a concrete wall, tossed him aside with molten ease, and grinned over his shoulder. Angel nodded his approval.

“And so he is. Our Will’s a bright one. You have a problem with that?”

“It’s just...hard to reconcile with these...killings,” Riley said, wincing as the guard slumped to the floor.

Angel considered the soldier from beneath lowered lashes for a moment before leading him over to the slack forms of his fallen comrades. “I think you’ll find they haven’t killed anyone,” he said. “Why don’t you check?”

Riley leaned down and pressed his fingertips into the pulse points of both soldiers. They weren’t even seriously injured. “Huh,” he said. “It just looked....”

Angel took hold of the man’s shoulders and pointed him at Buffy and Spike. “Take a good, hard look, boy. That’s what the good guys look like. Notice that you aren’t one of them.” Riley didn’t have anything to say.

By the time they reached the holding cells, he was impassive, responding to yes or no questions with a curt nod or sharp shake of his head. “You got the keycodes for all these?” Spike asked. Angel tightened his grip. The soldier might still give them trouble before they got what they came for.

“Yeah,” Riley said, scanning the row uneasily. “How many of these...creatures...are you gonna let out?”

“Depends on who you’ve got in there,” Buffy said. “We’re gonna walk down this row. I’ll point, and you can unlock. Got me?”

Buffy made her selections.
She pardoned four Clements, two Fyarl, and an M’shub. She condemned a Polgara and three demons Angel had never seen before. At the far end of the hallway, surrounded by empty cells, was Sean.

The boy curled in the back corner of his cell with his knees against his chest and his face tucked into his crossed arms. “And here we are,” Buffy said. “Open the door, Riley.” For a moment, he looked like he might refuse, but Buffy folded her arms across her chest.

As the soldier moved forward to punch in the key code, Sean lifted his head and hissed. It would have been a very pretty demon face—large golden eyes, wide set above broad cheekbones that tapered smoothly to a delicate chin, like an ocelot—if it weren’t for the fact that one side of it was a pulpy mass of cuts and bruises.

The door slid open with a hydraulic whoosh, leaving Riley standing in the doorway with nothing between him and an angry vampire but a few feet of empty space. He backpedaled, taking several stumbling steps into the hallway, but Sean did not stand up. He glared at the big man and raised his chin stubbornly, although he made no attempt to move out of the corner of his cell. He just sat there.

“Oh, god!” Buffy gasped, catching on just a moment before he did. Sean didn’t get up because he couldn’t. Buffy’s outrage ricocheted through the claim and back up the lineage. Angel felt it. This did not bode well for the Initiative.

“Will, no! Stay back!” Riley protested, grabbing at Spike as he pushed past him into the cell. Spike crossed the distance to Sean in three bounding steps before dropping to his knees beside the boy and pulling him into his arms. In concert, Buffy and Angel yanked the soldier away. “He’s gonna get himself killed going in there!”

Spike was oblivious to Riley’s concern. “It’s okay it’s okay it’s okay,” he whispered petting the fledgling’s hair. “Everythin’ gonna be a’right, lad. I promise. I promise. Let’s see what’s hurt, yeah? We gotta get you out of here.” Sean had been brutalized, his lower leg visibly broken, one arm limp. An awful ‘pop’ rang through the hall as Spike snapped his shoulder back in place. “Somebody’s roughed you up right proper.”

“Spike!” Buffy whispered. “Get him. We need to go.” Spike shook his head and offered the kid his wrist.

“C’mon, lad. Drink up so we can leave.” Sean tried, weakly, to bite down. Spike forced his wrist upward until fangs hit vein.

“Buffy!” Riley snapped, fighting against Angel’s grip. “Do something! He can’t possibly realize....”

Angel clamped a hand over Riley’s mouth. “Watch,” he said.

Curled small against Spike’s chest, Sean drank, long slow draws that reverberated in the silence of the institutional night. After a while, he slipped back into his human face, blinking frightened gray eyes first at the crowd in the corridor and then at Spike. “My life,” he said softly, “from your hand.” A pause no longer than a heartbeat. “Did I say that right?”

“Perfect,” he whispered. “Let’s get you out of here, yeah?”

Spike lifted the fledgling in his arms and started towards the end of the corridor. “Understand?” Angel asked Riley as they turned to follow.

Riley shook his head. “No,” he said. “I really don’t.”
Spike scouted ahead.

There were twenty holding cells in total, but only nine contained demons. On the left hand side of the corridor, four Clement demons shared the first cell—it looked like the commandos had taken an entire family. Next to them were two Fyarl demons, each in a room of his own, as well as the M’shub Buffy’d let loose on her first day back. Then there were six empty cells. On the right side, there was a Polgara, an Enkead, a Byuger, some toad thing Spike didn’t recognize, five empty cells, and, in the very furthest cell, Sean.

At Angel’s prodding, Riley opened all the occupied cells on the left. When they were released, the Clements clustered up, blinking their round, red eyes rapidly and whispering in—was that German? Out-of-towners. That made sense. The local Clements were pretty good at avoiding attention. Only tourists would be dumb enough to get caught. The Fyarls and the M’shub followed Buffy like baby ducks, all in a row with the M’shub in the middle. She did not release the Polgara, the Enkead, the Byuger, or the toad. That just left Sean.

He curled fetal in the back corner of his cell, forehead resting on folded arms. At first, Spike thought he was asleep. He looked so small. “And here we are,” Buffy said. “Open the door, Riley.”

When Riley stepped in front of the control plate, Sean straightened, trembling with the effort, and hissed. It looked like someone had taken a wood rasp to the side of his face.

When the door opened, he raised his head, glaring blades and rains of blood with gleaming yellow eyes, but he didn’t try to stand.

“Oh, god!” Buffy said.

Spike reached Sean in the space of a breath and knelt. He gathered him up off the concrete floor and whispered, “It’s okay it’s okay it’s okay.” There was too much blood in his matted hair to tell if there were head wounds. “Everythin’s gonna be a’right, lad. I promise. I promise. Let’s see what’s hurt, yeah? We gotta get you out of here.”

He ran his hands carefully over Sean’s limbs. His left leg was cleanly broken, just below the knee. There were vivid purple contusions running the entire length of the right leg, but no bone damage. His right shoulder was dislocated—at least that was easy to fix.

There was bruising all the way around his neck in a ring three inches wide. He had three or four cracked ribs and a broken collar bone. The boy was not going to be able to walk. They might have to knock him out to carry him. “Somebody’s roughed you up right proper.”

“Spike!” Buffy whispered. “Get him. We need to go.” She hadn’t heard anything. There was no impending attack from the bowels of the building, nothing moving in the elevators. She was just nervous about how long the unconscious soldiers would stay down. Spike shook his head. He held his wrist to Sean’s face, nicked the skin on his teeth until it bled just a little.

“C’mon, lad. Drink up so we can leave.” The boy struggled a little with pushing his fangs into flesh. He usually drank his blood, microwave-warmed to body temperature, out of a coffee mug. Or chilled from an iced tea glass. He’d never taken down struggling prey. He didn’t know the best angle to enter the skin to reach the vein. Spike pushed the boy’s fangs deeper into his own arm.

Finally, he drank, gulping with the frantic need of someone newly risen—or starving. He drank until
it pushed him back into his human face. He glanced out into the hallway, and then back at Spike. “My life,” he said softly, “from your hand.” When Spike didn’t immediately respond, he continued, “Did I say that right?”

Spike almost couldn’t talk. “Perfect,” he whispered, blinking back tears, stroking the boy’s silky hair. Sean had sworn loyalty to him, sworn a blood oath, said the words like he’d been taught not half a week before, and he hadn’t even hesitated. It was touching—heartwarming—and completely unexpected. He couldn’t have been any prouder if he were Sean’s sire. “Let’s get you out of here, yeah?”

He lifted Sean up and carried him out as fast as he could without jostling.

“I couldn’t get away,” Sean said. “I tried.” He lifted his bloodied face, already a little better from feeding. “I can push so much harder, now. So much harder. I thought it would make a difference. But it didn’t. They weren’t strong enough, and the soldiers got there too fast.”

“’S a’right. ’ve got you.” He pressed the boy’s head back down to his shoulder. “Close your eyes.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured into Spike’s blood-soaked t-shirt.

“Quiet, now.”
They moved through the corridors quickly, following Buffy to the exit she’d chosen. She took the remainder of the guards out of play with terrifying ease, even without Spike’s help.

Spike held the little hostile—no. Sean. He’d just helped the slayer and her vampire pals break into the Initiative and release a bunch of hostiles. If he was going to have to justify his actions at a court martial hearing, he needed to learn their names.

Spike held Sean cradled gently against his chest the way a parent holds an injured child. There was so much affection and fear and relief swirling between the two of them that he had a hard time not getting a little choked up. The guy was worried.

Was that what the scary vampire—Angelus—wanted him to understand? He got that the bite on the wrist meant something—maybe even something profound. That much was obvious. It was the equally obvious ritual of the thing that had him stumped. Vampires seemed to come with a complex culture of which the Initiative knew not one single goddamned thing. He sighed. He hated operating without solid intelligence.

His superiors had assured him that the HSTs were animals. Vampires, they said, were even less than animals. They were things: reanimated corpses, eating machines with only vestigial memories of their previous lives. He stole a sideways glance at Angelus, sweeping along the empty hallway, black greatcoat flaring out behind him, huge and impressive, like some avenging (he hated even thinking it) angel. He looked like the sort of guy people wrote comic books about—the tragic antihero with the dark and dangerous past. He was definitely someone, rather than something.

The three big hostiles stuck close to Buffy, talking softly amongst themselves in a language he didn’t recognize. There were growls and clicks and funny whirring sounds that he knew he wouldn’t be able to duplicate, no matter how hard he tried. Every once in a while, Buffy would look back over her shoulder at them and giggle or roll her eyes. Once she even turned all the way around, hands on her hips, to blow a raspberry at one of the yellow guys—a Fyarl. That’s what they were called. The Fyarl, in near-perfect mimicry, put its hands on its hips and blew a raspberry back. It reminded Riley of the guys on his squad.

“See, I don’t get this part. How did she choose which ones to let out?” he asked Angelus. “These guys are at least as big and... alarming... as the guys she left in the cells.”

Angelus looked amused. “I’m at least as big and alarming as the guys she left in the cells. Not the yardstick she was using.” They walked in silence for a moment. “Look at them. What are they doing?”

“Well,” Riley said carefully. He wanted to state his observations without overreaching—although he was coming to the conclusion that maybe anthropomorphizing was not as big a crime as Professor Walsh had led him to believe. “They’re walking and... talking. Sort of looks like they’re joking around. Could be they’re... maybe they’re teasing Buffy?”

Angelus smiled and nodded. “Actually,” he chuckled, pointing out the red hostile, “that one is flirting with her, if you can call it that. He’s implying that Spike’s sexual organs are of less than adequate... girth... and that Buffy would be better off with someone whose endowments were greater.”

Riley stopped walking and stared at the vampire. “You’re kidding,” he said, trying to shake the

“Yeah. Of course. I’m actually kind of surprised Spike hasn’t kicked the hell out of him, yet. Tends to run a hair on the possessive side. Must be really worried about his boy.” Alright, so at least some HSTs were intelligent and capable of communicating on human terms.

“So the other guys in the cells,” Riley said hopefully, “they weren’t sentient?”

“Yes and no. Polgara is sentient, but mean and not very bright. It would attack if we let it out of the cage. I’ve never seen the other ones before. It’s possible Buffy hasn’t, either, but they weren’t talking, and they didn’t look...when we opened the other cell doors, they didn’t react.”

“She was guessing?” Riley was relieved that someone else was using the best guess method. “Man, I wish there was a better way.”

They walked on in silence for a moment, and then Angelus said, “You know, sentient or not—it’s never gonna be right to cut them open to see what makes them tick.”
“Everything was fine until we ran into vampires.”

“What?” Her eyes widened comically, but he was done being surprised.

“A whole pack of them, just traipsing across the university campus!” It was almost funny. Deborah hadn’t agreed, of course. She’d demanded he drive her home immediately, then bolted inside and slammed the door. She didn’t even say goodbye.

“Sunnydale....” Joyce covered her open mouth with her spread fingers. “What did you do?”

“Staked one and ran for the car is what. Nothing else I could do.” He peered into his empty glass and signaled the bartender. “This is not bad. Should we get a pitcher?”

“We’re grownups.”

“What about you? Any prospects?”

“Maybe.” Her eyes darted around the room, and then she leaned in close and whispered, “Tell me if I’m crazy, but...is it possible some of those people weren’t...human?”

He laughed. “Entirely.”

“I got a phone number. Greg. You know Greg’s Flowers, over on Cliff Street? He seemed nice, but...kind of...blue.” A crease formed between her brows. “Not sad. I mean actually blue. His palms, and behind his ears. It’s subtle.”

“Looked human, other than that?” She nodded. “Laster demon—a half breed, from the sound of it.” He patted her hand. “Herbivores. They’re harmless.” And they wouldn’t hyperventilate over a pack of vampires.

“So I should go out with him?”

He considered the question. Lasters were big and broad, strong as the proverbial ox, and blue in every place humans were pink. Human shaped, but about a foot and a half taller. They ate a variety of flowering shrubs, and mated for life. They were among the most peaceful of all the demon species he’d studied, right up there with the bovine Chirago, and this one owned a successful small business. In Sunnydale, she could do a good deal worse. “I don’t see why not.”

“Huh.” She gave him a crooked smile. “That is not the answer I expected.”

“What did you think I’d say?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Isn’t there some kind of official Watcher’s Council party line? Something like, ‘Kill the demons! Save the world!’”

“Yes, well, they fired me.” He made another effort to catch the bartender’s eye, which was steadfastly ignored. The man actually turned his back and walked through the door behind the bar. “And attempting to convince Buffy of that is a lost cause, at this point, don’t you think? Perhaps we can try again with Willow and Xander?”

“What the what about Xander?”
Xander stood at the edge of their table, a small notepad in his hand and an apron tied about his waist, shifting nervously from foot to foot. He was out of breath.

“Xander?” Giles blinked. Did speaking Xander’s name summon him? What kind of demon did that make him? “What on earth are you doing here?”

“Taking your order?” He pulled a pen from behind his ear and brought it toward the pad with a flourish. “For the record, I don’t want to know what you’re doing here. Together. With your...togetherness. Don’t tell me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” By force of will alone, he managed to avoid smirking. “Could we just get a pitcher of the Black—.”

“Fresh out,” Xander said. “All gone.”

“Are you sure?” Joyce leaned forward and touched the back of his hand, exposing rather a lot of pale, smooth cleavage. Xander’s shoulders stiffened, and he blushed furiously. “Could you check? For me?”

“I am,” he said, stepping backward, “absolutely sure. How much of that stuff have you guys had?”

“Oh...a pint or two.” She stuck her lower lip out. “I was nervous!”

“Uh...huh. Giles? What about you?”

“Just the one. I’m driving.”

Xander closed his eyes and covered his mouth with one hand. He whispered something that sounded an awful lot like, “Thank god,” and then he said, “Since we’re out of the Black Frost, I recommend the Blushing Monk. It’s fruity—tart and sweet with notes of raspberry and sweet malt. You’ll love it. Trust me.”

Joyce shrugged. “Sounds good to me.”


With no small amount of hesitation, Giles dropped his car keys into Xander’s outstretched hand. He pocketed them, along with the notepad, tucked the pen behind his ear, again, and relaxed into his usual negligent slouch. “This was one doozy of a day. Glad it’s my last.”

That was news. He hadn’t known there was a first. Giles was chagrined to note that he hadn’t kept up with Xander or Willow. Buffy and her dramas had occupied his imagination so thoroughly that he hadn’t even noticed the lapse. He wasn’t their father, of course, so he was under no obligation, but no one else was clamoring for the role. If he didn’t notice, nobody would. “What will you be doing?”

“Construction. Entry level stuff—lifting heavy things, digging deep holes. Pays a lot better, and I can get rid of my fake ID.” He tugged his wallet from his back pocket and flipped it open. “Would you look at that mustache?”

“I see.” The picture was awful, and a poor likeness, even considering that it wasn’t actually Xander. “Congratulations.”
“Thanks.” Xander shrugged. “When digging holes is an improvement, it’s time to move on.” He headed back toward the bar.

“What was that about?” Joyce kept her eyes on Xander as he walked away. “What wasn’t he saying?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was there something wrong with the beer?” A worried little frown creased her forehead.

“It certainly seems that way, doesn’t it?” He leaned back into the comfortable leather of the booth bench. “I’ll worry about it tomorrow. Tonight, I’m going to enjoy myself.”

“So...what’s the verdict on this speed dating thing? Is it a go? Something you’d do again?”

“I suppose so.” He nodded his thanks to Xander, who slid the pitcher onto the table and strode away, barely making eye contact. “You?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe. If I’m going out with a...a what? A Laster demon? Maybe it won’t matter. Ooh—this is pretty.” She poured a glass of shimmering rose-gold for each of them. “But, I mean, was this the right kind of event for you?” He raised an eyebrow. “Don’t look at me like that, Rupert. Are you sure you want to be involved with a woman?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I do wish I hadn’t told you that.” It was one of far too many chocolate-induced confessions, another reason to resent Ethan.

She tugged his hand away from his face and squeezed it. His cheeks burned. “We can go to L.A. It’s no trouble, and it might be fun. But there’s nothing in Sunnydale—I looked.”

“That was...thank you.” He swallowed hard, turned her hand over, and kissed her palm. “Thank you. That was kind.”

“One way or another?” She smiled, bright and lovely, and he wished, once again, for a spark that simply wasn’t there. “One of us needs a real date.”

“I’ll drink to that,” he said. They clinked their glasses.

“What about Deborah? Do you think she’ll call you back?”

“Not a bloody chance.”
They exited the installation through an unguarded maintenance tunnel. The Fyarl helpfully boosted everyone up to the tunnel entrance and then jumped up themselves, waving a jaunty goodbye before disappearing into the cool night air. The red guy, an M’shub if he recalled correctly, yelled something that might have been, “Wait up!” and lumbered after them.

On the walk back to the car, one of the wrinkly pink-skinned hostiles—Clements—chatted with Buffy in heavily accented English. She was an older female, traveling with her mate and their adolescent children. They’d come to visit the Hellmouth on their annual vacation, the Clement explained, retrieving a color brochure from between her arm folds. They were, in fact, tourists.

Buffy helped them call a cab to take them back to their hotel—on the cell phone the adult male had hidden in his folds—exchanging numbers with them, afterward, and promising to keep in touch. She waved goodbye to all of them as they rode away. Riley stared at the scene slack-jawed.

“Clements are pretty innocuous,” Angelus said.

“Oh, god, yes,” Buffy giggled. “They are the sorriest, snuggliest excuse for a demon scourge the world has ever witnessed. I’ve never met a mean Clement.”

“They seemed very...human.” Out of everything that had happened so far, the Clements bothered him the most. Not only were they not scary, they were more acclimated to human culture than he was—at least lately. He couldn’t remember how long it had been since his last family vacation. He was lucky to get home for holidays, while these demons were acting out a live version of The Cleavers Go to Sunnydale. “I mean, really human. Cell phones, vacations, hotels...were they speaking German?”

“Well, yeah,” Buffy said. “They were visiting from Germany.” Before Riley could respond, a group of about a dozen vampires ran from the deeper shade behind a building. They ignored Angelus and Buffy, went right past Spike and Sean, and galloped straight toward him.

“What the hell?” he yelled, flailing his arms and falling back. Angelus and Buffy moved in to flank him while Spike took Sean out of the way of the battle. He’d thought Buffy moved quickly when she was fighting the Initiative guards. It was nothing compared to the phenomenal blurring speed she fought with, now. She moved like a lightning strike. Angelus fought beside her, lumbering by comparison but still so fast it was hard to keep track of him.

He had his military training, his combat skills, even if they didn’t measure up to the supernatural talents of his compatriots, so he fought, too. At least these were vampires as he understood them to be, their ridged faces and feral yellow eyes showing no evidence of sentience, no spark of understanding. These were things, the eating machines of his Initiative conditioning, no more intelligent than sharks. They were completely controlled by their hunger for his blood. Riley breathed a sigh of relief. The odds were bad enough. He could do without the moral ambiguity.

So he fought. The only weapon he carried was a small caliber handgun, which was less than useful against vampires, so he resorted to fighting hand to hand. He could hurt them that way, but he couldn’t kill them. One of them, a lanky male with arms and legs like a basketball player, backed him up against the wall of the building, very close to Spike and Sean. He glanced down to make sure he didn’t step on them, and the thing wrapped its long fingers around his throat. He couldn’t breathe. He struggled with it, tried to pry its fingers loose until he felt his vision dimming. Distantly, he heard a horrible cracking noise, and his sight cleared to a cloud of dust. Angelus had walked up behind the
attacking vampire and twisted its head from its shoulders, barehanded. Riley was both grateful and terrified.

He extended his hand to Angelus, who looked at it with the wariness and revulsion ordinarily reserved for a poisonous eel or a rattlesnake. “Okay, then.” He put the hand back in his pocket. “Well, thanks for the save, anyway. I’m glad to be breathing.” The vampire huffed scornfully and turned away. He watched Buffy work to dispatch the last two vampires by herself. He started forward to help her, but Spike put a hand on his ankle and stopped him.

“Girl’s a mite hacked off, yet,” he said, patting the top of Riley’s foot. “Needs to work off some steam. Best stay back, an’ give her space. You too, Angelus.” Angelus harrumphed and stalked to the other side of the courtyard, arms folded across his chest.

“Man, she is impressive,” Riley said to Spike. “I mean, you are, too, but...wow.” He watched for a moment as Buffy pummeled the vampire with her fists. She had a stake tucked into the waistband of her jeans, but she didn’t pull it out. “Is it just me or does she seem to be...playing with...that vampire?”

Spike chuckled. “Oh, she’s playing with him, a’right. Fledgling’s not much of a challenge for the slayer. Most beautiful thing I have ever laid eyes on.”

“Fledgling,” Riley repeated. “That means it was just made, right? Like, recently killed and reanimated? I get that, but I don’t get what it really means. Why do we kill these guys? What’s the difference between that vampire,” he pointed out the one Buffy was fighting with, “and Angelus?” Spike choked. Angelus’ head snapped up and he glared at Riley from across the clearing. “Okay...I’m sensing that was a dumb question. Care to tell me why?”

“Fledglings are...young...inexperienced an’ a little stupid. They don’t know anything. These’re prob’ly made by other fledglings, too, so there’s been no...they’re made random, yeah? Not picked for any reason. Angelus is old an’, much as it pains me to admit, smart, hand-picked by his old, smart bitch of a sire.”

“Okay...so I can see that Angelus is a better class of vampire than these...piles of dust. What I don’t understand is why we kill them and not him? Logically, I mean. I don’t get it.” It made his stomach knot up. It already bothered him that some HSTs had to be reclassified as sentient beings. It bothered him more to have to split up species. “You’re not trying to tell me that only some vampires are intelligent?”

“Matter of degree,” Spike said, stroking Sean’s hair. “Some’re brighter than others, same as humans. That so hard to figure out, Finn? Use your head. Sort out who you can trust. Angelus is on your side, saved your miserable hide from those,” he gestured at the piles of dust, “who were tryin’ to kill you. Enemy combatants.” He rolled those words around in his head, again. Enemy combatants. The whole concept was distressing. If HSTs were individuals, capable of choosing sides in...in a what? Buffy called it a war. If they could be allies or enemies in their own right, they weren’t animals, and it meant that the Initiative’s approach to handling them—all of them—was flawed at the outset.

“Allright,” Buffy said as she walked back over to them, brushing the dust from her hands. “That’s taken care of. I want to keep Sean with us for a little while longer.” She nodded at Spike. “Back to Willy’s?”
They were back at Willy’s within the hour.

Riley and Angelus sat on one side of a booth, while he and Buffy sat on the other, a barely conscious Sean propped up between them. Together, they fed the fledgling a steady supply of warm blood. Riley stared for a while, questions bubbling behind his eyes. Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore. “Is that...human?”

“Well, yeah,” Spike said. It was mostly human, anyway, plus a little of whatever Buffy was. “Not what he usually has, but somebody beat him bloody. Needs to heal.”

“Uh...what does he usually have?” Riley asked.

“I’m kind of curious about that, too,” Angelus said.

“Would have been tapir, the night he was taken,” Spike said. “Before you ask, no idea where he got it.”

“I like tapir,” Sean slurred softly into his mug, “and okapi and capybara...but not goose. I’d eat pig before I tried goose again.” He shuddered theatrically.

Riley and Angelus wore identical expressions of confused revulsion. Amazing how much alike it made them look: two brawny, blunt-featured Irishmen—one light, one dark—hunching uncomfortably over a table a bit too small for them. “You’ve tried a lot of different kinds of...blood...I take it?” Riley looked like he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer.

“I used to be a foodie. Loved to cook. Nothing tasted right after I...changed.” Sean shrugged. “So I had to figure out something new.”

“Accept, adapt, and move the hell on,” Buffy put in, grinning. “Seems like I’ve heard that someplace before. Anybody else want nachos?” She ordered a large platter without waiting for a response.

“Okay. I’m catchin’ up, here. One step at a time,” Riley turned to Angelus. “So...what do you eat?”

“Mostly...pig.” He gave Sean an apologetic little nod. “It’s cheap...easy to find...I wouldn’t have a clue where to get okapi.” Sean wrinkled his nose. “I guess I’m not much of a foodie.”

“You don’t eat people?” Riley asked.

“No,” Angelus said. “Not unless...” He broke off, gaze fixed on the surface of the table. “No.”

“Well, I do,” Spike leered, leaning across Sean to chew on Buffy’s earlobe, “often as I can.” She blushed a pretty rose all the way to the roots of her hair, but leaned into his touch nonetheless. Angelus and Riley both glowered.

“Okay,” Sean sighed, pushing ineffectually on Buffy’s shoulder. “Let me out. Out! I want out!” He kept batting at her until Buffy, laughing, moved to let him up. “I’m a big boy, feeling better by the moment, thank you. I can sit up by myself, now, and you two,” he fluttered his hands at them, “can molest each other without my help.” As soon as Sean had moved from between them, Spike pulled Buffy in next to him, kissed her, and nuzzled her hair. “Gah,” Sean made gagging noises, “it’s like watching your parents make out!”
Riley glanced around the table, confusion evident on his open face. To him, it probably seemed that Buffy and Sean were in their late teens—they looked like classmates—while Spike and Angelus were older, perhaps in their mid- or even late twenties. He couldn’t grasp the group dynamic because he couldn’t sort out their relative ages. From his perspective, they were all within ten years of each other.

“I think you’re right,” Buffy breathed into his ear. “I had trouble with that when I first met Angel. I’d treat him like he was only as old as he looks and then he’d talk about what life was like before the invention of something important—like cars. It messed me up. Riley, when were you born?”

“Nineteen-seventy-seven,” he answered without a second of hesitation. That was something of note. If you asked the soldier a direct question in an authoritative tone, he was likely to answer before he thought about it. Training won out.

“Sean? What about you?”

“Nineteen-seventy-eight,” he said, cocking his head to the side in a gesture that mirrored Spike’s own. Angelus looked pained. “When were you born?”

“Nineteen-eighty-one,” Buffy said, “but I’m older than that. I cheated. What about you, Spike?”

“Eighteen-fifty-three,” he said, smirking at Riley.

“Wait—I thought you went to Cambridge,” Riley protested. He looked at Angelus. “You said he went to Cambridge.”

“He did,” Buffy said. “It was just...a while ago. Angel, when were you born?”

“Seventeen-twenty-seven,” Angel said, “but I...uh...I guess I cheated, too. I’m older than that.”

“Okay—leaving aside birth dates from the wrong century, for a second, I’m losing ground again. How can you cheat? How can you be older than you are?” Riley looked lost. “This is rough. I get almost caught up and then my feet get knocked out from under me again. I feel like I should be taking notes.”

“It never hurts,” Spike said, digging into the nachos. They were so spicy his eyes burned. He sighed happily as he set a jalapeño slice on the tip of his tongue.

“Welcome, sweetie,” Buffy said, twining her fingers into his. “Here’s how it works, Riley: This world is one of an infinite number of dimensions—realities. In each dimension, time moves independently, so in some places a whole lifetime can go by while hardly any time passes here, at all. Angel and I,” she swallowed hard, squeezing Spike’s hand, “have both spent a lot of time in other dimensions.”

“That’s the simplest way to put it, I guess,” Angelus said, nodding his head gravely, “without going into needless detail.”

Spike snorted.

“Do you disagree?” Riley turned sharp eyes on Spike. The young man was brighter than he had initially assumed. Although there was no hint of creativity in him, not one jot of poetry, he was extremely good at figuring things out. He started by getting his facts straight.

“Oh no,” Spike laughed. “That’s the simplest way to put it, a’right.” It was so simple it was almost a lie. As far as it went, it was true. It just went nowhere. “Tell me, soldier boy. Have you or anybody
else you know ever been to another dimension?”

“Well, no,” Riley said. He was confused, that boy, but he sat very still and he listened. “This is the first time I’ve ever heard anybody say that whole concept wasn’t just theoretical.”

“Suffice it to say the experience is fairly rare, then, yeah?”

“I’d say that’s true,” Riley advanced hesitantly.

“Oh wow!” Sean broke in. “So you’ve both gone through rifts in the space-time continuum? That’s, like, huge! Awesome! Or,” he appeared to think about that for a moment, “terrifying. But...wow. Still huge. How do you even live after something like that happens? Doesn’t it change everything?”

“Out of the mouths of babes.” Spike shook his head and grinned at Riley. “There they sit, those two, summin’ up the biggest, most profound experience of their lives with, ‘We’ve both spent time in other dimensions,’ like they’re talkin’ about goin’ out of town on business.” He knocked his beer back and set the mug on the edge of the table, catching Willy’s eye. “Couple of bleedin’ stoics, if you ask me.”

‘This is why I need you.’ He heard the words as clearly as if she’d spoken them out loud, and they practically knocked the breath from him. “That right?” he whispered back, and took her in his arms.

Riley tried not to stare. So did Angelus. Neither of them was particularly successful. He didn’t care. Apparently, Sean did.

“Hey—guys. Big, meaty guys—over here,” Sean said, whistling to attract their attention. “Eyes on the very sympathetic victim of a brutal attack and abduction.” He waved his hands in front of their faces. “Try to ignore the live soft-core performance in the corner of the booth.”

“Are they...always...like that?” Riley asked.

“Hey!” Spike said.

“No. Oh, god no,” Sean snickered. “They’re usually much worse. They’ve still got all their clothes on?” Riley nodded. “Yeah. Usually much worse. They’re being discreet ‘cause they’re regulars, here. If they get out of hand, Willy will boot them.”

“You said they’re like your parents?” Sean wouldn’t look. Riley couldn’t look away.

“Yeah,” Sean said. “Really embarrassing parents who look like porn stars, so when they do this in public, everybody watches.”

“Sorry,” Riley said, wrenching his gaze away.

“‘Sokay. It’s hard not to. They’re...hot. I get that. They’re really old and powerful, too—which doesn’t freak me out but might bug you.”

“And they’re mated,” Angelus put in.


“Mated?” Riley asked.

“Uh huh. It’s a vampire thing.” Sean may have missed the widening of Riley’s eyes, the way he pulled back to reassess everyone, but Spike didn’t. “So they’re, like, a hundred years older than me,
they’re so together you couldn’t slip a quarter between them, and they’re taking care of me—
teaching me stuff. Yeah. They might as well be my parents.”
“Is everybody here a vampire?” Riley choked the words out. There was panic in his voice. If he hadn’t been wedged between Angel and the wall, he might have bolted.

Before anybody else could answer, Willy, who’d just come by the table to leave another pitcher of beer, said, “Course not. Three vampires, one slayer, and you—whatever you are. You guys want some more nachos?”

Buffy sighed. She wasn’t looking forward to this part. “That’d be great, Will. I think Riley needs food, too.”

“Right away,” the bartender said. “Kid?” He nodded at Riley. “You want some advice with your burger?”

“Couldn’t hurt, I suppose.”

“I’ve lived in Sunnydale a long time, and I’ve learned a few things. The folks at your table? They’re dangerous. Even the little guy.” Willy whacked Sean in the side of the head with his damp bar towel. “Heart breaker.” Sean ducked his head, grinning. Adding her own blood into the mix had been a good call. He’d perked right up. “Point is, they’re not scared of you. In Sunnydale, if someone isn’t scared of you, and hasn’t tried to kill you, he’s probably your friend.”

“Well put, Will.” Spike fished his journal out from his coat pocket to jot the observation down, his left elbow cramped awkwardly between his body and the wall. “Angelus’s my sire, Finn. Thought you understood that. We’re family—why he came so quick when I called.”

“But...I’ve seen you...on campus during the day. You eat...food. You don’t have...I’ve never seen you with....” Riley ran his fingertips across his forehead. “I guess we already established that doesn’t matter, didn’t we? But you’re a person. Your name is....”

“We already played that game, Riley,” Buffy said. This wasn’t going well. They’d have to tell him more—maybe a lot more. The vampires weren’t going to like it. “Everybody here was once human, however long ago that might have been. Angel, tell us about yourself?”

For one tense second, she thought he’d refuse. He glared, hurt and fury warring, but she didn’t back down, and he dropped his eyes. “If it will help,” he said through clenched teeth. “I’m somewhat tired of this game, too. I was Liam O’Connor, born seventeen-twenty-seven in Galway, Ireland. Sired by Darla of Aurelius in seventeen-fifty-three, becoming Angelus of Aurelius—and I feel like I’m reciting from a textbook. Do I have to keep going?”

“Nah.” She patted Angel’s hand. His skin didn’t respond to her touch, and she broke contact quickly. “That’s good enough for now. Spike? Your turn.”

“Finn, you gotta get over this. I was William Pratt—believe we were introduced—born eighteen-fifty-three in London, England. Sired by Angelus of Aurelius in eighteen-eighty, becoming William of Aurelius, known as Spike.” He didn’t like it, not even a little, but he could feel her need. He trusted her. She tilted her head up to kiss his cheek and felt him lean into her, softening. “There’s my contribution to the textbook. That better not be misused.” That last was directed at Willy, who’d quietly pulled up a chair and was listening intently.

nineteen-ninety-seven, becoming...do I get a new name or do I keep my old one? It never occurred to me to ask.”

Spike smirked. “Whatever you’d like, lad. If I were you, I’d keep the old one, though. You’ve established a...reputation...with it. How else is everybody in your little black book gonna find you?” Willy stifled a snicker.

“I can’t help if I’m charming.” Sean smirked back at Spike, managed a credible eyebrow waggle. “Just gifted that way. I’ve always used my birth name for my film work, too. So...Sean of Aurelius it is, then.” He blinked at the gathering of faces. “Can I go into the textbook, too?”

Buffy glanced over at Willy. “Oh, I think you can count on it,” she said. “So...I was Elizabeth Anne Summers, nicknamed Buffy from birth, born nineteen-eighty-one in Los Angeles, California. I was called in nineteen-ninety-six, at the death of the previous slayer, Hannah Brisbane, becoming...well...Buffy, The Vampire Slayer.”

“Wow,” Sean said. “So that’s how slayers work? One dies to make the next one?” She nodded. “Well that’s...really...lonely. I mean, it’s better than waking up in a box, but still.”

“It’s best that way, sweetie. We’re not good at groups.” There were places in her mind still awash in the blood of girls she’d sacrificed for a world they would only pull apart again. It pooled, thick and dark, hot as life and pulsing, and threatened to pull her down. Spike leaned in, cool hands steady, and wrapped this world around her. He was here. He was real. She had another chance. Someday, she might give up. Someday, she might drown, but not today. Not now. “Alright, Riley. Your turn.”

“What, me?” She nodded. “But I don’t have...” She waited like stone, every battle for a hundred years heavy in her eyes. “Well, okay. Riley Finn, born nineteen-seventy-seven in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. But I’m not a....”

“When did you join the Initiative?” She interrupted him, the general’s crack of authority in her voice.

“Nineteen-ninety-seven,” he answered without thinking, like a soldier should. “Oh...god. That’s when the changes started happening....” He was breathing hard. “It’s different than all of you, but it isn’t really, is it? I’m not completely human, anymore. That’s what you’ve been trying to tell me.”

“Agent Finn shoots and scores!” she said.

“Okay, I’m slow, but I’m catching up. The thing I don’t get is what you want with me,” Riley said. “I’m a soldier. I’m not a mystic warrior bogey-man who moves too fast for the eye to see. I’m not as strong as a vampire. I sure as hell am not...what? Two hundred and seventy-two years old.” He waved his hand at Angel.

“Three hundred and seventy-two,” Buffy said. At Riley’s blank stare, she continued, “Because of the time in that other dimension.”

“Right.” Riley did a double take. “He spent a hundred years in another dimension?” He closed his eyes. “Of course he did. And what about you? How much time did you spend on some other plane of existence? ‘Cause you’re, like, a hundred years older than him, right?” He pointed at Sean.

“Ninety-five years,” she said. Willy whistled appreciatively. “Come on, Will. I’m totally different. You knew something was up.”

“I did,” Willy said, “but I did not know what. That explains so much.” He nodded at Spike. “So very much.”
“Okay,” Riley said, “but my question stands. You haven’t tried to kill me, and you’re sure as hell not afraid of me. I guess that makes you my friends, right? What do you want me for? Why are you being friendly?”

“Believe it or not, Riley, I want you to come to my wedding,” Buffy said. “Bring Forrest and Graham. It’ll be fun.”

“Oh—now that will be interesting!” Willy said, slapping his thighs. “You’re going all out with this, aren’t you, Slayer? I’m starting to get excited. You know that Anya girl came in here asking if I’d help her find a caterer. She’s got big plans for that spread. Sweet kid.”

“And I’m lost again,” Riley said. “Could someone explain what I’m missing?”

“They’re getting married,” Angel said. He sounded resigned.

“Buffy and Will? Yeah, she mentioned.” Riley sounded a little resigned, too. “I still don’t understand.”

“The Initiative knows nothing about demon social structures,” Buffy said. “They think demons are animals, so they don’t know they’re messing with the politics of the region.”

“Your wedding is political?” Riley was still confused, but he’d latched onto the first thing that made sense to him. “Oh, wait....” He looked at Spike, eyes round with realization. “You’re a vampire.”

She wanted to cheer. Her great, reckless gamble would pay off. She would have human allies. Military allies. Riley would be on her side.

“Am.” Spike grinned. “You figurin’ this?”

“She’s not a vampire.” He pointed at her. “She’s a...a...slayer, right? And that’s a really big deal.”

He had the attention of the entire table. “Like—superhero with a destiny kind of big deal.” Now Buffy was grinning, too. Madly. She couldn’t help it. “So I’m guessing that slayers don’t typically get...mated...to vampires. It’s gotta be rare—maybe unprecedented. I bet it’s not a popular decision.”

He gulped the rest of his beer down, warming to his topic. “And you,” he said to Angel, “you’re...you’re the...Master? You’re the head of this vampire family, which is a lot bigger than the three of you, right?”

That got a little smile from Angel. “I’m the Master of the Order of Aureliius. It’s somewhat bigger than this.”

“Oh, it’s way bigger,” Sean enthused. “It’s big and really, really old. Like...the oldest vampire order that’s still around. Our line can be traced all the way back to Marcus Aureliius!”

“Stoics from the beginning,” Spike put in, with a sideways glance at Angel.

“You taught him that?” Angel asked. When Spike nodded, he said, “I didn’t think you were listening.”

“He’s always listening,” Buffy said, “even when you wish he wasn’t.”

“So then you guys are a really big deal, too, right?” Riley asked. “As big a deal as Buffy?”

“Aristocracy,” Sean said smugly.

“Seriously?” Riley said. When nobody looked anything but serious, he arched his back into the
padded booth bench, and leaned his head against the wall. “Whoa...so this is like a royal wedding? Something for the history books?”

“Exactly.” Buffy said. “Only when that happens it’s usually between the royal families of friendly nations.”

“Which you’re not?” Riley asked.

“Mmm...not historically...no,” she said, deadpan. It was so unexpected that Spike choked on his drink, sending Willy into gales of laughter. Even Angel chuckled. “Come on, guys. Knock it off. I told you he didn’t understand....” She trailed off into giggles.

Riley blinked at all of them, finally fixing on Sean as the only person who wasn’t laughing at him. “So...I take it that’s an understatement?”

“Oh yeah,” Sean said, cocking his finger and thumb like a gun at Riley and winking. “Major understatement, big guy. Angelus was known as The Scourge of Europe. He and his family cut a swath of destruction across the continent that remains unequaled today. It was a reign of terror that lasted a hundred and fifty years, ending in eighteen-ninety-eight when he tortured and killed the favored daughter of the Kalderash Clan. That’s a gypsy tribe, by the way. They gave him back his human soul—left him with a conscience and a hundred and fifty years of regret. Moral of the story is never mess with gypsies. They can fuck you up.”

Angel had sobered while Sean was talking, but at that last line he dropped his head into his hands. She could practically smell his grief, although his face was impassive. “Now there’s an understatement,” he whispered. Sean reached across the table and took one of Angel’s hands in his, petting the back of it absently. It seemed to soften the edges of the old vampire’s mood, and he didn’t pull away.

“Then there’s Spike,” Sean continued, “also known as William the Bloody, Slayer of Slayers. He picked up where his sire, Angelus, left off, although he was more about mayhem than malice. Spike likes a good fight. Probably why he was baffled when I didn’t take to it, but,” he shrugged, “I’m just not a fighter.”

“Slayer of Slayers?” While Sean was talking, Riley had scooted up to the edge of his seat, listening intently. It would have made sense for the words to come from him, but they didn’t. They came from Willy, who leaned forward with the same breathless anticipation. “Excuse the interruption,” he said, waving off the circle of surprised eyes. “Go on, please. I’ve never heard these stories.”

“Slayer of Slayers,” Sean said firmly. “Hell of a title, huh? Although Spike and his paramour, the mad prophetess Drusilla, traveled together for more than a hundred years, leaving their own trail of devastation across Europe and the Americas, he really made a reputation for himself by hunting and killing slayers—a race of warrior girls who were imbued with demonic powers in the far distant past for the specific purpose of hunting and killing vampires. You know...like Buffy.”

“Okay...but he switched sides at some point, right?” It was Riley, this time, impatient for the rest of the story. “I mean, I saw him take down the guards in The Initiative. He moved so fast they might as well have been standing still. I get that he’s an incredible fighter, but he’s one of the good guys, right?” He looked at Angel, frantic for confirmation. “Right?”

“Hey!” Sean said. “Hold your horses. I’m getting there.” He hadn’t let go of Angel’s hand the entire time he was talking, and now he pulled it off the edge of the table and then under it, out of sight. He did it unobtrusively, without appearing to shift his attention at all. “In nineteen-ninety-seven, Spike fled Prague with a severely injured Drusilla, after a near-lynching from the locals. He brought her to
Sunnydale in the hope that being close to the Hellmouth would help her heal. When that didn’t work, he decided to try something else.”

“You are a total drama queen,” she said, poking Sean in the ribs. “You written the screenplay for this yet?”

“Maybe,” Sean replied innocently. “My agent told me not to say.”

“Twerp,” she said, ruffling his hair. “Spike kidnapped Angel, who’d been working with me for about a year, in order to perform a ritual involving sire’s blood.”

“The Ritual of Eligor,” Spike put in, “restores a vampire to full strength through the sacrifice of the sire.”

“You were gonna kill him?” Riley’s head swiveled back and forth between Spike and Angel. “He was gonna kill you?”

“Drusilla was dying,” she said. “What would you do to save someone you’d loved for a century?” When Riley didn’t answer, she went on. “But Spike undid himself. He put a reward out for me, dead or alive and Willy,” she emphasized the last syllable deliberately, “kidnapped me and brought me to the church where Spike was performing the ritual. I got loose before the ritual was complete and freed Angel. Then Spike and I faced off. We fought, the building caught fire, and he tried to grab Dru and run. I knocked a pipe organ down on him, broke his back. He was in a wheelchair for months.”

“I thought it couldn’t get worse,” Spike said, unamused, “but then someone,” here he glared at her, “broke the gypsy curse, thereby releasin’ a soulless and insane Angelus who—of course—decided to end the world.”

“That would be after he stalked and tortured my friends and family,” Buffy said. “See, there’s another thing The Initiative doesn’t understand. Even if a being looks irredeemable, it may not be true. When Angelus tried to destroy the world, Spike—dangerous, violent, malevolent Spike—came to me for help. We called a truce and stopped it together. Up to that point, we’d been trying to kill each other.”

“And that,” Sean announced with a flourish, “was the beginning of the end for William the Bloody. Buffy sent Angelus to Hell through the portal he’d opened—with a sword to the belly, I might add—though not before her team magicked his soul back into him. Spike took Drusilla away, like he and Buffy had agreed, but they got to South America and she dumped his pasty ass. She told him he was already gone on the slayer. Since Drusilla is a seer—the genuine article—it’s really hard to blow her off when she says stuff like that.”

“There followed several increasingly lame and half-hearted attempts to get rid of me,” Buffy said, nuzzling Spike’s cheek, “and here we are.” Spike turned and caught her in a kiss. She melted into him.

“And there they go again,” Sean sighed. “It never ends. Anyway, they’ve all tried to kill each other—all three of them—and it’s not like it was a long time ago. It’s been within the last couple of years. So, in answer to your question, Riles—no. They have not been friendly nations.”

“So this wedding is a serious break with tradition,” Riley said. “They’re all allied now, and this makes it official. Wait!” His eyes widened in understanding. “No—it’s already official. They’re mated, right? That’s official. This makes it public!” He leaned back, surveying the group with something like awe.
“Why do I want you there, Riley?” Buffy asked him, smiling slightly. Her heart pounded in her chest.

“You want my attendance at your wedding to demonstrate my approval of this unprecedented alliance.” The big man grinned so broadly his face became a series of creases and dimples. “So—do you want me in uniform?”
Riley slumped upstairs just before dawn, the whirlwind of his thoughts too much for his depleted brain to parse. Lowell house was dark and still, locked down for the night by habit and regulation, as usual, but lacking all the usual early morning noises—the rustle of restless sleepers, the ding and chime of alarm clocks, the occasional early riser—and that was decidedly unusual. It made him jumpy.

As he turned the knob to enter his bedroom, the outside door creaked open. “Riley?” Graham spoke his name in a half whisper, but he might as well have yelled it, the way it split the silence. “Finn? You there?”

“Right here.” He tugged his door closed, again, put his back against it, and waited. Graham took the stairs two at a time.

“Where’ve you been, man? You missed all the excitement!”

“Doubt it,” Riley said, and Graham skidded to a halt like he’d run into an invisible wall. His shoulders stiffened.

“I went looking for you last night. Holmes said he saw you leave campus with Buffy and her friend —.”

“Fiancé.”


“They’re getting married. That’s what they wanted to talk to me about.”

Graham’s face froze. “That’s...man, your luck.” He shook his head. “Okay. That blows, but you gotta focus. More important things are happening, right now.”

“You sure about that?” Riley was pretty sure he’d witnessed all the important things Sunnydale had to offer in the space of the last twenty-four hours.

“Less than I was a minute ago.” Graham’s mouth pulled outward at the corners on the way to a smile but didn’t make the jump. It settled into a grim horizontal line beneath his serious eyes. “You wanna get some breakfast? Catch up?”

Riley scrubbed at his face with the heels of his hands and then dropped his palms, smack, against his thighs. “Why not?”

Graham led him out of the building, not to a coffee shop or restaurant, as he’d expected, but to a phone booth—the one all the way across campus—and then called a cab.

While they waited, Graham said quietly, observationally, “Someone broke into The Initiative, last night. Released a bunch of hostiles.” Riley held his breath and stared into the distance without blinking. “Walsh is in a tailspin. The higher ups are blaming her.”

That broke his composure. “They can’t possibly think she—.”
“They don’t. Her alibi checked out. But whoever did used her override codes. At first, they thought that limited the pool of suspects, but when they questioned her, she had to admit we all had access to them.” That was true. Walsh wrote her override codes inside the front cover of her grade book. It was common knowledge, it was a clear breach of protocol, and it was bound to come back to haunt her eventually. He tried to ignore the twinge of guilt that knotted his stomach.

“They have any idea who it was?”

“Negative. All the cameras on the surface were killed. Twisted apart. No prints. No images. Nothing.” Angelus’ two powerful hands, inches from his face, a cracking noise, and a shower of dust where a monster had stood a moment before. Riley shuddered. Graham noticed. “She’s civilian, so they can’t court martial her, but there might be charges—they’re talkin’ treason. Big stuff. She’s under house arrest until they decide. There’s an interim guy coming in to evaluate the entire operation.”

“Yeah?” Riley swallowed hard. “Anyone we know?”

“That guy Ward I was telling you about?”

“Walsh’s C.O.?”

“The very same. He’s D.o.D.” Riley’s stomach did a slow roll backward. Graham’s eyes narrowed. “Uh huh. You have an alibi for last night? You were with Buffy and her fiancé?”

“Among others,” Riley sighed. “Yeah.”

Without dropping his eyes, Graham nodded. When the cab pulled up, he turned abruptly and strode toward it. Belatedly, Riley jogged to catch up. Graham paused with his fingertips resting on the door handle, expressionless face turned away from the driver. He said, “So I gotta ask—and I want you to think long and hard before you answer—will your alibi withstand sustained scrutiny from the Department of Defense?”

It was a seven minute cab ride to their destination. That part was unsurprising. It was a seven minute cab ride to pretty much anywhere in Sunnydale. Graham paid the driver in cash and they went inside a little hole-in-the-wall cafe. “Breakfast, boys?” A portly, middle-aged woman approached, smiling. “Your usual?”

Graham nodded. “Two. To go. And coffee.”

“In a jiffy.” It was an accurate estimation. In about five minutes, they were presented with a bag containing two massive Styrofoam boxes and a cardboard carafe. Graham paid for that in cash, too. “Oh no!” the woman protested, trying to pass some of the bills back to him. “That’s too much.”

“Not for you, Bernice.” Graham closed his fingers around her hand. “Nothing’s too much for my girl.”

“Oh, away with you.” Her already rosy cheeks flushed crimson, and she swatted Graham’s shoulder. “Out the back, then. Off you go.” There was something odd about her eyes—some structural strangeness Riley couldn’t place. “Mind that bottom step.”

They walked around the counter, through the kitchen, and out the back door into a narrow semi-enclosed alley. Ten feet down, the alley became a flight of concrete stairs descending some distance to an underground space—a basement or parking garage. The stairway ended with a startling two foot drop into near total darkness that echoed with each step. They made a diagonal, leftward, across the space to a door.
Graham opened it and ushered him in. There were more stairs. These branched. They took the left fork to a door Graham unlocked with a key. It opened onto a wood paneled hallway with doors on both sides. They walked to the end of the hallway and climbed another flight of stairs, and then repeated the process until Riley was hopelessly turned around. Finally, Graham stopped in front of a door. “Home sweet home,” he said, and unlocked it.

Behind it lay a small apartment, neatly but sparsely furnished, windows covered in heavy curtains. A black rock fountain burbled away in the corner of the living room. “This is a safe house,” Riley said. “How long have you had a safe house?”

“Since I started documenting sentient hostiles.”

“Demons.” Riley sat down on the couch and opened one of the Styrofoam boxes. It contained several waffles, sliced fruit with whipped cream, hot syrup in little plastic cups, and bacon. His stomach growled.

“What?”

“They don’t like to be called hostiles.” He found a plastic knife and fork and began eating. The waffles were very good. He pushed the other box toward Graham. “Are there cups for that coffee?” He peered into the bag. “Ah ha.”

“Come again?”

“Huh? Oh, if you don’t know the species name, you should say demon. Maybe because it’s value-neutral? I don’t know.”

“Holy hell—Finn, where were you, last night?” Graham dropped to the couch like his legs wouldn’t support him anymore.

“In the Alibi Room.” He chuckled. “Seriously. It’s a bar.”

“With Buffy and Will?!”

“Yeah. They invited me to their wedding. You, too, if you want to go, and the rest of the guys from the squad. I need to give them a list.”

“So your alibi is—.”

“Airtight, if I want it to be. Thing is, I’m not sure I want it to be.”

“Why’s that?” Graham hunched over the coffee table and stared at his rapidly cooling waffles.

“Because you’re right.” Riley knocked his coffee back with the kind of desperation he’d seen in Sean the previous night, as he gulped mug after mug of lukewarm human blood and his wounds healed like the tape was on fast forward. “A lot of the beings we had in the blocks are sentient. They’re people. If I’d been as sure about that yesterday as I am right now, I would have let them out myself. You should eat your breakfast.”

“Wait—so Buffy—.”


“The Slayer’s real?” Riley nodded. “Jesus. And Will?”

“Vampire.”
“But he was outside in—.”

“They wouldn’t tell me why.”

“So they had something to do with the break in?” Riley shrugged and kept eating. “But...why?”

“That little vampire.”

“The trouble maker? I finally found out who he was. I haven’t contacted his family yet.”

“Good. Don’t.” Graham raised his eyebrows. “His family,” Riley explained, “his very powerful vampire family, is pretty ticked off that we took him. I wouldn’t rub it in.”

“So they’re really people. Self-aware, complex cognition, higher—.”

“Yeah.” He stabbed the last strawberry in his Styrofoam box. “Yeah. And I’m willing to testify to that. I’ll be a whistle blower, bring the whole operation down. I just have to find a way to prove it without putting any more people at risk.”

“I...uh...” Graham tugged the paper bag he’d brought with him open and pulled out a video tape. “I might be able to help you with that.”
I can smile at the old days - Buffy

For a slayer with super-human reflexes, Buffy could be painfully uncoordinated.

She’d drifted to consciousness suffused with peace and a sense of accomplishment. Spike slept tucked against her shoulder, naked skin smooth and cool as the underside of the pillow on a too-warm summer night. It was a wonderful way to wake up, and the feeling lasted until she opened her eyes and saw the glowing numbers on her alarm clock. They read 10:27.

“Ullgh,” she said, and pitched sideways, landing on her knees on the hardwood floor with a *whomp* loud enough to wake the dead. Because the universe was deeply unfair, the dead continued to sleep soundly. She scrambled over discarded clothing, clambered across the room to the bathroom, and fell into a shower only a little cooler than blistering.

Afterward, she pinned her hair, still wet, on top of her head, and threw on a tank dress and a cardigan. She didn’t have time to do her makeup, which was ironic, so she threw everything in her big canvas shoulder bag and headed for the door. Unfortunately, she’d left her ankle boots near the foot of the bed. Even more unfortunately, she tripped over them. She and her bag full of books, snacks, stakes, clothes, and beauty products went airborne. She came to a halt only when her forehead connected with the doorjamb.

“Late late late late...I’m gonna be late and Walsh is gonna flunk me.” That knot on her skull would be purple by the end of the day. She found the flats she’d lost in flight and slipped them back on, trying, simultaneously, to gather her bag and its contents back together. “I suppose I can always hope she gets a Polgara spike to the gut before finals.”

“Could arrange that for you, love,” Spike slurred into the pillow he held over his own face.

“It’ll all work itself out,” she said, lifting it to kiss him. He was asleep again before she set the pillow back down. She closed the door and locked it behind her. When she shuffled around the corner from the back hallway into the business end of the Alibi, Willy slid a glass of something pinkish across the bar toward her. She shook her head. “Gotta catch a bus. I really don’t have time to—.”

“Sure you do,” he said. “Cab’ll be here in five.” He laid a folded cloth napkin on the bar next to the glass. “So sit?” She sat. He filled a travel mug with coffee and screwed the lid on tight before setting it down in front of her. “Very hot. Take it with you.” She reached for it, but he whisked it away.

“Drink the smoothie now.”

She laughed, but did as she was told. It was strawberry banana with something else. Peach, maybe? He watched her in silence for a few moments. When he finally said something, his voice was very small. “Buffy?” He licked his lips. “I gotta ask. Where did you go? In your travels. Did you see a lot of other worlds?”

“Dozens. Dozens of dozens. So many I can’t remember them all.” She reached across the bar and took his hand. “But that’s not really what you’re asking, is it, Avilli?” He flinched at the nickname, but his face held hope so bright it burned. “Tola eventually got married, you know—three times. Divorced three times, too. She never got over you.” He blinked. Buffy grinned. “Your dad’s company is...functional...but he’s still at the helm. Your brothers don’t have your business sense, and he’s scared to retire. And last?” She squeezed his fingers and released them. “Skip the diamonds. They’re a bust, since lab grown got cheap. Focus on rare metals.”

He nodded slowly. Tears pooled at the corners of his eyes. “That’s...I don’t...I still have a place,
there? I can really go home?"

"Cibola is still golden, and she misses you."

He smiled, eyes and mouth bracketed by crescent creases filling up with tears. "Anything you need, Slayer? All you gotta do is ask." A car honked outside, and Willy set a paper sack on the bar. "Lunch," he said. "Go on. Catch your cab." She tossed the sack in her shoulder bag, grabbed the coffee, and tiptoe stretched to kiss him on the cheek before dashing out the door to the waiting cab.

"Sunnydale Memorial," she said to the driver as she slid into the backseat. Then she closed her eyes and held the coffee, warm despite the cup’s insulation, against her cheek. Haunting strains of Cibolan flute song echoed over the desert, and she began to stroke the sleek furred body pressed against her thigh. "Is that where we are?" She squinted into the sunlight.

The cat made a noise that was half purr and half chirrup, like a kitten, and slow-blinked a feline kiss. She scratched under its chin and looked around. There was a low wall, off in the distance. It glittered gold. "We aren’t anywhere."

"Okay. I get it. You’re part of me, inside my head. The Observer, right? That’s why you got hurt when I was attacked, and better when I paid attention to you. Psych one oh one. The symbolism isn’t even subtle."

"We are what We have always been." Cats—all cats—had that patronizing thing down cold. All they had to do was look at you, and you felt about two inches tall. It was even more effective when the cat was four feet long. "But what are you?"

"I’m the slayer." It chuffed like it was laughing and bounded away. "And you’re running." She hauled herself to her feet and brushed the sand from her skirt before jogging after it. Her bag bounced against her hip, huge and awkward. "You’re running, and I’m chasing an imaginary cat across an imaginary desert while carrying equally imaginary—but still really goddamned heavy—textbooks. Why the hell are you running?"

At the wall, the cat stopped and waited for her, patient, amused. Silent. "What?" She tried to stare it down. "I’m the chosen one. Slayer comma the. The one girl in all the—."

No, she wasn’t.

She slumped to the sand, cross legged, book bag crashing down beside her. "That’s not true, is it?" It wasn’t true at the end of the world, when there were a hundred others. It wasn’t true at the fall of Sunnydale, when an army of slayers shone forth like pinpricks of light through holes in the fabric of the world. It hadn’t been true since she drowned in a puddle at sixteen years old. "Faith is the slayer."

"And so?" the cat said.

"My calling has ended." She whispered the words. "My sacred duty is...is done. I’m finished." Her heart pounded in her chest. "I’m free."

"Is that true?"

"It is," she said, breathing hard. "It really is—but it doesn’t matter."

"Why is that?" It stalked toward her, grinning. Could cats grin?

"Because I like this world." She felt the laughter bubble up from her belly. "There’s figure skating,
Roquefort, and waterslides, half price shoe sales, rom-coms, and teacup poodles. And people.” Was she laughing or crying?

“There are so many people. My mom is here and Giles—Willow and Xander and Oz and Anya and Tara and...and Spike is here. He’s real. Really real, and—.” Sobbing. She was sobbing.

“So I’m not destined to save the world, anymore. Big whoop. That doesn’t mean I can’t. I’m still strong and fast. I still know how to fight.” She smacked her palm against the golden wall for emphasis, and it crumbled to dust that shimmered in the sunlight for just an instant before the desert wind lifted it away.

“And if you think I’m gonna sit on the sidelines while there’s any chance the whole thing’ll fall apart?” She shook her head. “Then you don’t know me very well at all.”

“Kid? Hey, kid!” The taxi driver leaned into the back seat and shook her shoulder.

“Wha...huh?”

“We’re here. Sunnydale Memorial.” He smiled, not unkindly. “Maybe you should drink some of that coffee?”

“It’s a plan,” she said, and stepped out into the big, bright world she had chosen to protect.

Inside the hospital, she stopped at the nurses’ station. “I’m here to see Faith Lehane? To do her hair and makeup. I was told someone would be available to help me change her clothes?”
By the time they finished planning Riley’s presence at the wedding, it was after five o’clock in the morning, and everyone was exhausted. Angel agreed to take Riley and Sean back over to the university, and Spike and Buffy stumbled to their room, barely managing to undress before slipping into bed and falling fast asleep. Spike woke at twenty minutes to eleven the next day as Buffy tripped over the shoes she’d left on the floor next to the bed and slammed her head into the doorjamb.

“Late late late late...I’m gonna be late and Walsh is gonna flunk me,” she whimpered as she fell back onto the floor, rubbing her head. She slipped her shoes on and grabbed her bag. “I suppose I can always hope she gets a Polgara spike to the gut before finals.”

“Could arrange that for you, love,” Spike muttered, pulling a pillow over his head.

“It’ll all work itself out,” she said, lifting the pillow to kiss him goodbye before bouncing out the door to school. He pulled the pillow back down and slept for the next three hours.

That’s why it was two in the afternoon when he finally slouched out to the bar to greet an objectionably chipper Willy. “Good...morning, Spike! What’ll it be?”

“Sod off, you bleedin’ bounder,” he said, glaring. Willy set a glass of beer on the counter in front of him, smirking, and patted him on the shoulder sympathetically. Spike sighed. “Thanks, Will. Preciate it. Gonna go over to Sean’s in a few. Gotta check on him. Boy was more broken up yesterday than he was actin’.”

“I was getting that,” Willy said. “You folks had kind of a big night, and—hey—I learned some things, too.”

“You just remember that information’s not for sale, yeah?” Spike reminded him. “Slayer says I can trust you, and she hates it when she’s wrong.”

“Oh, jeez, Spike,” Willy choked. “You think I’m stupid? Better for me, in the long run, to have you all on the same side. It was a trick deciding who to support in any given conflict, let me tell you. Generally, I settled on whoever I thought was most likely to kill me for picking the other guy.”

“I need a yes or no, Will.” The bartender was so accustomed to playing both sides against the middle that he never answered a question directly.

“Yes, Spike. You got me. You and that girl of yours.” Every once in a while, there was something deeper and more serious in the man’s face. Spike didn’t know what it meant. “Someday,” Willy said, “I might even tell you why.”

Spike made it over to Sean’s apartment no more than an hour late. He dropped the spare key back into the pot outside and knocked on the door.

“Shush!” Sean said, yanking the door open. He wrapped his fingers around Spike’s fist. “I mean it. He’s still sleeping. Come in, but be quiet.”

The boy was dressed in his gray flannel pajama bottoms and a pair of fuzzy socks. Without shirt or shoes, he seemed smaller than Spike remembered. He was at least four inches shorter than Spike, who was by no means a large man. He couldn’t have been much bigger than Buffy.

The bruising on his neck and torso was almost completely gone, although he still walked with a limp,
and he was clearly favoring his right arm, keeping it tucked in close to his body. That leg wasn’t entirely healed yet, then. Probably not the collar bone, either. “Won’t wake your friend,” Spike promised in a whisper. “Though I gotta wonder when you found the time to—” He stopped short.

On his stomach on Sean’s bed, legs tangled in a gray and green patchwork comforter, Angel lay still as the dead, sound asleep, and stark naked. It was good that Spike didn’t need to breathe. He would have been gasping for air. “Yeah,” Sean said. “I’ve been watching him all morning.”

Spike turned slowly to study the fledgling. “You little suck up. Makin’ quite the impression on the Master of your Order, you are. And fast. Met him...what? Sixteen hours ago? Only been alone with him for eight. How long did it take you to get him naked?”

“Yeah, no,” Sean said, rolling his eyes. “Not that I wouldn’t—wanna make that clear. Just that I didn’t. I slept on the trundle.”

“Still a suck up,” Spike said, watching Angel sleep. “So what happened?”

“When he was driving me home, he had questions. Pop quiz on family history and tradition. Wanted to see what you’d taught me, I think. He’s kinda gunning for you, Spike. He’s really gunning for you, Spike. It was too late for him to get home before dawn so I asked him to stay. Getting him naked was the easy part. I just had to say, ‘I’ll make up both beds and then change in the bathroom. You can get under the blankets while I’m gone.’”

Spike walked over to the head of Sean’s narrow bed and smoothed Angel’s hair with his fingers. “Oi! Angelus,” he said just loud enough to irritate the drowsing vampire, “you are easier than a drunken prom date. Hasn’t anybody ever told you it’s rude to molest the fledges?”

Angel opened one bloodshot brown eye and glared at him. “What do you want, Spike?” he rumbled. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I come here every afternoon. Been teachin’ Sean what he needs to know—’spose you figured that.” He knelt down so that he and Angel were eye to eye and continued in a whisper that didn’t carry beyond the bare inches between the two of them. “Didn’t expect to run into you, today. Thanks for helping me get my boy home last night, Sire.”

“You’ve done alright with him,” Angel said in the same nearly inaudible whisper. “He really doesn’t hunt?”

“Never has,” Spike said, “and Buffy’s asked me not to show him how. He’s gotten along fine so far without it and he’d have to stop to get immunity as per the terms of our agreement, anyway. He’s never killed anyone—not even right after he rose.”

Angel propped himself up on one elbow, knocking the blankets completely off him. “You are going to teach him how to defend himself, though. Right?” he continued at human volume. He didn’t seem to notice Sean staring.

“Sure, and maybe now he’ll even listen,” Spike said, narrowing his eyes at Sean.

“Aye, Will. Maybe now, but if he’s haughty and disrespectful, talks back, and does everything you tell him not to do, I’ll know the world is just, for there is no one,” Angel snickered, sitting all the way up, “as deserving of that as you.”

Sean gasped as Angel sat, totally exposed, on the edge of his bed. “I’ll just...just go...um,” he stuttered, “heat something up.” Then he fled to the kitchen.
Spike shook his head at the stammering boy. “He would if he could. Put some clothes on, Angelus. You’re distractin’ my fledge.” He smacked Angel’s bare thigh affectionately. “Unless that’s your aim? Should I leave you two alone?”

Angel ignored the implication, started pulling his clothes on. “You were really paying attention? All those years I struggled to teach you history, tradition, and protocol—you looked like you’d rather be anywhere else. You heard me?”

There he was again, blunt as brick and not much brighter. Angelus had condescended to him, had beleaguered every point until the newly turned William was so incensed he went out of his way to disoblige his sire. “You never read my journals, did you?” Spike said softly, dropping into the measured cadences of his youth. “I wrote it all down, memorized every word. I could undoubtedly still recite it....” He shook his head. It was more than that. Out of weary desperation at the tedium of Angelus’ lessons, he’d written what amounted to a dissertation on vampire protocols. “I still have them. I’ll bring them by, sometime. Let you have a look.”

There must have been something in Spike’s tone that Angelus didn’t like. He stiffened, turned on Spike with flashing yellow eyes, as he had so many times over the years of their acquaintance. “You useless fecking toff,” Angel hissed. “Think you’re better than me, with your fancy schooling and your house full of servants....”

“I am better than you, you illiterate buggering bogtrotter!” It was amazing how little time it took to turn their interaction from a reasonable discussion to a shouting match. “You think you’re somebody different, now, ’cause gypsies crammed a soul up your sorry, self-satisfied ass, but you’re not. You’re the same irresponsible lout who cuts out soon as things get rough. I wrote your stories down—yeah, I surely did. Wrote Darla’s down, too. Fuckin’ wanker.”

“I do not have to justify myself to you, William.” Angel fairly spat the words. “Without your family money—which you did nothing to earn, I might add—you’d be even less than the nothing you are now!”

“That’s right,” he growled. “I didn’t make it, but I sure as hell kept it. Managed that estate from the time I was thirteen years old, increased that fortune for which you have so little regard. Tell me, Liam, what did you contribute to your family’s well-being?”

They were standing, now, both in demon face, fists clenched and snarling, when Sean came back into the room. He carried a round wooden tray with three white mugs on it. “Oh...kay...” he said, depositing the tray on an end table. “Vampires...scary, old vampires...I don’t suppose I could convince you both to sit back down and maybe not destroy my apartment? Hmmm? I’d really appreciate it.” Two pairs of yellow eyes fixed Sean with identical animal stares.

“I brought something for you to try. If you’d just sit back down—Angelus, maybe you could finish getting dressed? Holy fucking fuck,” he sighed, glancing back and forth between them, “you guys are terrifying. There is no way I am ever going to be that....”

That seemed to shake Angelus loose. “Don’t you worry, boy. If Little Lord Fauntleroy, there,” he lisped through fangs, flicking his fingers dismissively at Spike, “can become a real vampire, you’ll be just fine.”

Spike opened his mouth to argue but then realized that Angel’s argument was virtually the same as the one he’d been planning to use. “’S true, Sean. Wasn’t a likely specimen myself. Time changes us all.” He and Angel would have to come to terms over this stuff if they were going to work together. There couldn’t be some kind of confrontation every time they were in the same town, or Buffy would lose patience with it. He could feel her disappointment in the back of his mind. “I’ll behave if
you will,” he said directly to Angel, raising an eyebrow, “and get your bloody clothes on, you big poof.”

Angel nodded his head without comment and started dressing again, slipping back into human face before he pulled the maroon silk mock turtleneck over his head. Sean watched him move with frank admiration, not looking away even when he finished. “So...” Sean said, handing a mug of steaming liquid to each of them and pointing to the edge of the bed. “Sit down and taste this. It’s tapir. Please don’t spill it on the bedspread—it’s handmade.”

The blood tasted of berries and fresh young green things, sweet and delicate. Sean had dusted the surface of it with brown sugar and grated vanilla bean. It was surprisingly good. “Huh,” Angel said, licking his lips.

“Better than pig?” Sean asked them. When they both nodded, he said, “It’s probably my favorite, of all the things I’ve tried. It’s like...I don’t know...like I can taste the place they come from—and a whole bunch of other stuff, too. You know, in Japanese folklore, tapirs eat people’s dreams. Do you think...I might be able to...uh...taste them?”

Angel blinked at the boy, bemused. “I think there’s an infestation of poets in my order,” he said, turning to stare at Spike. “You’re sure he’s Luke’s?”

“As sure as I am Drusilla’s yours,” he said. “You act like you’re so different from us, Angelus, but you’re not. You are an artist, as I recall you remindin’ me more times than I can count.”

“An artist? Really?” Sean turned to Angel, leaned toward the big man with a lot more interest than the statement merited, and Spike smiled. The boy was completely incorrigible. “What do you do?”

Angel, however, didn’t see the come-on for what it was. He seemed frozen in place, locked into centuries-old memories. He was reliving past crimes in his mind from the perspective of his conscience, suffering over and over again for every death he’d inflicted. Artistry, for a soulless Angelus, was about causing the maximum amount of suffering with a minimum expenditure of effort. “He draws,” Spike said, laying his hand on Angel’s shoulder, bringing him back to the present, “and he’s good. Really good. Does portraits, mostly, but right now he’s designin’ all the costumes for the wedding.” Angel looked at him with something that might have been gratitude.

“Oh wow,” Sean said with perfect sincerity. “That is so cool. Would you draw me? I mean a portrait—a finished piece that I could frame? I could pay you...and I’m really good word of mouth, so you would probably get other commission work from it.”

Angel looked so dumbfounded that Spike laughed out loud. “Angelus,” Spike said, trying to draw his attention. “Angel—you should do it. Be good for you to use it for somethin’ the soul doesn’t object to, a’right?” Without warning, Spike wrapped his arms firmly around his sire, leaned in to his ear and whispered, “Think you should let our boy seduce you, too, but you won’t. Least you can do is spend the time to do the picture, yeah?”

He released an even more flabbergasted Angel and stood up. “Glad to see you feelin’ better, lad. I’m gonna leave you two to your portrait, but let’s do this before I leave.” He pulled the Gem from his finger and extended his hand, palm up, to Sean, who took it in his.

The boy shifted to demon face and pushed his fangs into the flesh of Spike’s wrist, drinking until the life in the blood pushed him back into his human guise. He kissed the puncture wounds gently. “My life is yours,” he said, wonder in his soft gray eyes. “You taste like loyalty.”
“You should, you know,” Sean said a moment after the door closed on Spike.

“Should what?” Angel shifted awkwardly on the edge of the bed. He’d finished his drink and set the cup aside, and now he had nothing to do with his hands. They clenched and unclenched repeatedly, almost of their own accord.

“You should let me seduce you. Frankly, I’m kinda bummed he thinks you won’t,” Sean said, moving to stand directly in front of him. He was extremely close. “But I’ll persevere, ‘cause that’s the kind of person I am.”

“Ah...oh,” Angel said. He tried to shift backward on the bed, tried to put a little bit of distance between himself and Sean. He failed. There was just no place to go. He took one deep breath, dropping his eyes closed for a moment, inhaling the scents in the room. The tapir blood was sweet and light with its delicate vanilla overlay, and then there was the earthy scent of the ferns and mosses. Sean’s scent was young and buoyant, shot through with that cold-in-the-belly tang that said family.

“I wonder what you’d taste like,” Sean whispered, inching closer. With his face tilted slightly upward and Sean’s slightly down, they were nearly eye to eye. He could fall into those eyes without half trying. There was something about the boy that put him in mind of Drusilla when she was very young. He couldn’t pin it down—Sean had nothing of Drusilla’s madness or her child-like glee—but the demon recognized it, nonetheless. The scent of lust and fear overwhelmed all the others, and he was mortified to realize it was coming from him. Sean nudged his knees apart so that he could stand between them. “Why are you afraid of me?”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Angel breathed, and it was true. Sean Walden did not appear anywhere on the list of things that frightened Angelus of Aurelius, Scourge of Europe. There weren’t very many things on the list. He was a monster, older by centuries than most monsters got to be, and most of his fears were in his past. Only a few remained.

But he was afraid.

He was afraid of himself, afraid he would succumb, get seduced, be drawn off the path, and put the whole world in danger. It happened before, and people died. He existed—hard to describe it as living—under the constant, oppressive threat of losing control of the demon spirit inside him and becoming something terrifying and malevolent, something he didn’t want to be. It was exhausting. Some days, he wanted to give in to it, just to have it done. Let the worst happen so he didn’t have to struggle anymore. Other days, he wanted to sit someplace quiet and wait for sunrise.

Sean buried his left hand in Angel’s hair, working his fingers firmly against his scalp. Angel shivered, but didn’t pull away. “I’m not afraid of you, either,” Sean said, tugging gently downward on the back of his hair, tilting his face further up. Angel’s eyes drifted closed. He pressed his skull back into Sean’s hand, hungry for the contact. “I don’t need to be scared. You’re doing it for me. Doesn’t anybody ever touch you?”

Angel shrugged, slitting his eyes open to meet Sean’s. “Maybe they’re afraid.” Nobody had touched him intentionally since Buffy, and now Buffy would never...she was gone...was with Spike, of all...people. She was out of his reach forever. He tried to bite back the despair, but felt the darkness fall over him, anyway. He was wearing that expression, he knew, the one people called broody or glowery. He hated those words.
“It could be,” Sean said. He brought his other hand up, too, ran his nails lightly up and down the back of Angel’s head. “Do you want them to be? Afraid of you, I mean.”

“No,” Angel said, “or maybe a little. Yeah. I don’t know.” Perhaps he did. It kept people at arm’s length, at least, kept him from temptation.

“Seems like it would be easy for you to make people afraid of you. Seems like it would be something you would just take for granted. I bet you were a little scary even before you were changed—big and intimidating.”

“I guess—I guess I was,” he said. “That’s what Darla....” He trailed off. Sean switched to using his fingertips to massage the back of his neck and the very top of his shoulders, but he didn’t relinquish eye contact. That was okay. Everything was okay when Sean was doing that to his neck.

“That’s what your sire was looking for,” Sean said, nodding grimly. “Yeah—familiar with that shtick. We’re all chosen for some trait we may or may not want to personify for eternity. It’s a little weird.”

“Why do you think you were chosen?” Angel asked, curling his hands around the back of Sean’s legs, holding him steady. Sean tucked in closer, pressed his fingers harder into the muscles. He couldn’t even guess, at this point. Spike thought Sean was intended to be Luke’s playmate, but Buffy thought it was something more—something permanent. Honestly, the whole thing was so off kilter and out of character that they couldn’t really know what Luke was looking for.

“Me?” He grinned, switching to using the flat of his hands to grind into Angel’s shoulders. “I’m really good at getting big, scary men to relax.” Angel’s eyes snapped open. He started to pull away. “Hey—don’t ruin all my hard work. You are totally wound, big guy.” He turned Angel’s face to the side so that he could reach further around him to work the muscles between his shoulder blades. “I’m almost not strong enough to work these kinks out. Right shoulder’s still sore.”

Angel did pull back, this time. He touched Sean’s collar bones, wrapped his hand around the ball of his shoulder and flexed the joint gently. The boy felt so small. “It still hurts?” he asked.

“A little. Spike put the shoulder back in place last night. The bone’s almost healed. I know that’s screaming fast, but some of what they were feeding me after we got back was—”

“Buffy’s. I know. I could smell it.” Yeah, that hurt. He tried to keep his reaction off his face, and he was almost successful. It lasted barely long enough for Sean to see it.

“This has got to be hard on you,” Sean said, reaching out to touch his cheek. “She’s not who you remember, is she? She hasn’t been—the way she sees it—for a very long time, but for you, it’s been no time at all.”

Oh. “I wasn’t sure you knew that Buffy and I were....”

“Involved? Yeah.” He pulled Angel against him again, got his fingers back into his hair. “No secrets in this big, happy family. I know about that, and about how your soul got knocked loose. I know that when you lost it, you were different than you were before you got it. The demon part of you has been trapped in there—chained, really—for a couple hundred years, and you’re in deep conflict all the time.” Well, that was kind of...personal.

“Spike told you that?”

“Some of it. Buffy told me some of it, too. Plus I pick up things nobody expects me to notice...Spike says he was like that when he was young. He also says it used to really piss you off.” Angel laughed,
and it was like the sound a rusty gate makes when it’s opened for the first time in the spring after a long, damp winter. It felt good. “Yeah, when he said ‘used to’, Buffy laughed at him, too. Hey—why don’t you take your shirt off and lie down? Let me do this right.” Sean took a step back to wait for him to comply, but he hesitated. “You’re not afraid of me, remember?” he coaxed. “One of us has a hundred pounds and a third of a millennium on the other one. I literally could not do anything to you that you did not want me to. You want me to finish working on those muscles, though. Right?”

With some trepidation, Angel pulled his shirt off over his head, and lay down on his stomach on Sean’s bed. He felt self-conscious and exposed. “Oh...wow,” Sean said. “I’m not sure I actually thought you’d do that. But, hey—not gonna waste the opportunity.” He was moments away from changing his mind when Sean pulled a plastic tub of cocoa butter from the drawer of the side table, and straddled his thighs, pinning him in place on the bed. Although he was bigger and stronger than the boy, he would still have a hard time throwing him off from this position.

Sean dug, over and over, into the taut muscles of his back with his weight on the heels of his cocoa butter covered hands, and he whimpered. Some of that had been knotted up tight since his return from Hell. “Leaving aside all the strange stuff that’s just you—you know, being a vampire, the soul, all that stuff—even if you were only human, this wired and isolated? Dude, you’re, like, primed for a shooting spree. You are one disappointment away from being that guy on the news who opens fire at a Doublemeat Palace.”

“You have no respect, boy,” Angel said mildly, turning his head so that his neck cracked loudly. Sean leaned down over Angel’s torso and jammed both of his elbows into the space between his shoulder blades. He gasped. “Oh...right there...god, that’s perfect.”

“I do, though,” he said, stretching his body out and resting his cheek on Angel’s back. “I have plenty of respect for you, Angelus. I just don’t have any fear, and that,” he rolled off Angel and patted his backside, “is why you’re comfortable with me.”

Angel folded his arms under his head and turned his placid face toward Sean. “Tell me what kind of portrait you’re after, lad.”
When You've Bowed - Buffy

Chapter Notes

"My blood runs with yours. My soul is your province." ~The Master

"The books tell that the last Demon to leave this reality fed off a human, mixed their blood. He was a human form possessed -- infected -- by the Demon's soul. He bit another, and another... and so they walk the earth, feeding. Killing some, mixing their blood with others to make more of their kind. Waiting for the animals to die out, and the Old Ones to return." ~Rupert Giles

She skidded to a stop in front of the classroom door, panting. "Hey, Buff," someone said, and she spun, heart thudding in exertion and surprise. Luke warm coffee splattered out the open top of the travel mug and over the cuff of her cardigan.

“Oh. Willow—hi.” Damn. That was definitely going to stain. It would suck to spend the entire Amara fortune replacing her wardrobe, but the shopping could be fun. “Didn’t see you there.”

“Haven’t seen you much, either.” Willow smiled, brilliant, self-conscious, and very, very young. It felt like decades since she’d seen that smile. It might actually have been decades. “You look great.”

“Thanks.” She grinned back. The lipstick she’d bought for Faith—Harlot, it said on the tube—looked pretty good on her. Who’d’a thunk? “I’ve been kind of busy—with the...everything.”

“I noticed.” Willow took the mug out of her hand, and passed her a moist towelette. “You’re late for class.”

She ripped open the package and slouched against the wall to dab at her sleeve. It lifted the coffee right out of the cotton, no muss, no fuss. Huh. “My sacred calling never leaves a voice mail. I was out ‘til five.” At least her bag was lighter, now. She’d gotten Faith into the red flannel pajamas, and tucked a floppy brown stuffed dog in bed next to her. She left a change of clothes and a makeup bag, too, just in case she woke up early. No weapons, though. In this time, Faith still hated her. “I really don’t want to go in there.”

“Guess it’s good you don’t have to, then.”

“I don’t have to what?” She put the towelette into Willow’s waiting hand. Willow focused on it and murmured something. There was a sound like popping gum and she dropped it into the wastebasket. Magic baby wipes? Useful, but excessive. She’d have to mention it to Giles.

“Class is cancelled. Professor Walsh had some kind of emergency. They don’t know when she’ll be back.”

“Oh, thank god.”

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about. Lately, your grades have been as good as—hey. Hey!” Willow wagged a finger at her, eyes round. “Has Spike been helping you with your homework?”

Buffy’s grades were good because she’d done this coursework before—and the coursework that
followed it. Not to mention the coursework that followed *that*. These were freshman classes. She usually finished her homework before class ended. “Uh....” But Spike had helped with history, provided beautiful first-hand detail that she’d almost used in a paper, once, so she wasn’t exactly lying when she said, “Maybe a little.”

“That’s neat. I mean, that he can help. I always wondered.” Buffy raised her eyebrows. “He quoted Keats. When he kidnapped me and Xander?”

“In front of you? He must have been really—.”

“He was really. Really really. I felt kind of sorry for him, even though he was all *grrr* and bottle in face. He was so broken.” Willow clutched her notebook to her chest and leaned back against the wall next to Buffy. “What makes a person—or a vampire—break up with someone after a hundred years?”

“Me.” Buffy sighed. Now there would be girl talk. Every brush with Xander and Willow left her conflicted and exhausted. Part of her wanted to teach them everything they’d need to know to survive the next few apocalypses. They’d volunteered for this gig, after all, and ignorance killed. She’d seen that up close and personal. But another part of her just wanted to get them out—out of this life, out of this town, as far from the Hellmouth as she could drag them. “You wanna go to the café? I could really use some more coffee.”

“You?”

“Yeah. He’s had a crush on me since...uh...since the first truce. Drusilla figured it out and dumped him.”

“Oh. That’s...oh. Now I feel sorry for Drusilla.”

“That’s me. Homewrecker to the undead. Coffee?”

“I guess, for a few minutes, but I have another class.” They walked down the hall, and for a moment she could almost pretend she was still the girl Willow thought she was. Almost. “So he’s good looking—don’t give me that look. I have eyes. He’s rich? Your mom said—.” Buffy shrugged. “And smart. Plus, he’s a bloodsucking corpse, so totally your type.”

“Hey!” She punched Willow in the shoulder. Willow gigged and dodged, spilling more cold coffee on the floor. “They’re not corpses.”

“I’ve always wondered about that. What are vampires, really?”

“Dust.”

“Well, sure. Once you get through with them.” Willow wrinkled her nose. “I mean before that.”

“Still dust. They’re not dead, Will. They’re—.”

“Undead?” Her eyes danced.

“And unliving.” Buffy swallowed the New Slayer Orientation speech. Just barely. “Six pounds of dust shaped like a memory and driven by a demon soul, held together with magic that drains the life force of the world.” It was not enough. She still sounded like she was talking from the front of a lecture hall.

“A demon...soul?” Willow came to a halt in the middle of the hallway, her freckles standing out in
sharp contrast to her pale face. “Life force? What?”

“Yeah. Coffee first? Please?” They walked the rest of the way to the café in silence.

When they got through the line and to the table, Willow peered into her decaf mocha for one long moment before she spoke. “When a person is turned into a vampire, a demon takes over their body and—.” Buffy shook her head. “But they’re demons. Evil. That’s why we kill them?”

“They’re evil.” She wrapped her chilly fingers around her mug and squeezed. She felt the metal creak a little. “Not because they’re demons, but because they destroy the world just by existing. That’s why there’s a vampire slayer but not a Fyarl slayer or a Polgara slayer. Besides, they’re our monsters—local. Our problem.”

Willow stared at her, the cogs and wheels spinning behind her eyes. “They were made with a spell, weren’t they? A long time ago. Black magic?”

“The blackest. You remember we weren’t here first, right?”

“Demons were, but we kicked them out. Giles said that—infected with the demon’s soul! Oh! I remember!” She blinked. She’d forgotten how quick Willow was. “They’re not possessed, like the Exorcist. They’re infected, like a disease? So what’s a soul?”

That was the million dollar question, wasn’t it? If she’d answered it when she was Willow’s age, her whole life would have been different. “It’s a thread.”

“Like Madame Blavatsky?” Willow tapped her fingers on the edge of the table. “The silver cord that connects your physical body to your astral body?”

“Kind of. Like a strand of it.”

“Huh. What’s it connect to?”

“Yours? Humanity. All of it. It makes you...part of the whole.” It made you not alone, no matter what it felt like when you were eighteen and the world terrified you.

“Do you mean the collective unconscious? Jung?”

“You have read so much.” She should never have gotten stuck at UC Sunnydale. She deserved more. She deserved Oxford. And Devon. And the best education Buffy could beg, borrow, steal, or buy for her. “But a lot like that. Yeah. It doesn’t make you good, exactly. It just pulls you in the direction of—.”

“Humanity? It sounds like you’ve been reading, too, Miss Smartypants.” Willow shook her head, smiling.

“Maybe a little.”

“And your soul thread thingy connects you to all the other slayers?”

“All the way back to the First Slayer, complete with bad hair and hygiene issues. Those girls are beyond focused, let me tell you. Our collective unconscious has a one track mind—which leads to slayer dreams. Past slayers poking me with their ideas.”

“Huh. Then Spike’s pulls him in the direction of what? Demonity?”

“Is that even a word?” Someday, it would be a death metal band from Germany—and boy oh boy
did she ever wish she didn’t know that—but not yet. Willow stuck her tongue out. “Yeah. He has the collective wisdom of vampires embedded deep in his psyche. He is pulled in a vampire direction. He has...vampireness.”

“Now who’s making up words?” Willow finished her coffee and slid the cup across the table. Her brow creased. “So what does Angel have?”

“Conflicting loyalties.” All the color drained from Willow’s face and her mouth dropped open. That was not a topic Buffy wanted to discuss without coven backup. Before Willow could ask another question, she scanned the quad for a distraction—any distraction. Fortunately, one was close at hand. “Hey, look! We have admirers.” Riley and Graham stood just beyond the coffee cart, in the shadows cast by the afternoon sun, watching them. Lurking, really. Surveilling in an obvious way. She’d have to talk to them about that. But, for now, she bounced in her seat and waved. With a strained look between them, they made their way across the lawn.

“Hey, Willow. Buffy. Mind if we join you?” Riley slid into the chair opposite her, not really smiling. He had dark circles under his eyes. “You remember Graham?”

“I’ll have to catch up with you guys later,” Willow said. “Gotta get to class. Buffy? The Bronze, seven tomorrow, couples. See you there?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”
“I suppose it would be too much to ask,” Buffy said, as he joined her at the little outdoor table where she sat with Riley and one of the other Initiative boys, “for you and Angel to get along for one whole visit?”

“Glass houses, pet,” he said, kissing her earlobe. “Hey, Finn. You got your feet back under you, yet?”

“I’m gettin’ there.” The big man extended his hand to shake Spike’s. “Cold hands,” he said, laughing nervously. “That’ll take some gettin’ used to.”

Spike favored Riley with a slow, predatory smile. ‘I’ll bet there’s a lot that takes some gettin’ used to. Graham, right?’ He extended his hand to the second man.

“That’s...that’s right,” Graham said, shaking Spike’s hand. “You’re Will—Buffy’s fiancé?”

“That would be me,” Spike said. He understood the primary purpose of the wedding in a more visceral way every time he had to interact with someone human. It was simply easier to explain him when she could say they were engaged.

“You just don’t look like....” Spike let his eyes go yellow and Graham stuttered to silence.

“Oh, he is,” Buffy said, pulling his head down onto her shoulder. He was instantly less irritated. “Don’t encourage him. He’ll flash fang. Spike, Riley and Graham did some digging, like I asked them to, and they found the Three-Fourteen project. They’re trying to figure out a way to take the whole thing down so that it doesn’t get back up again. Seems Walsh is operating without oversight—or authorization.”

“A noble aim, I’m sure. I was disenchanted with the notion of demon super-soldiers back when the Nazis were tryin’ it, yeah? My big worry right now is how we keep the wrong people out of Initiative holding cells.”

“How’s Sean doing?” Riley asked. At least he had the grace to look guilty. “He looked pretty beat up....”

“He was. Your mates broke his collar bone, leg, and a couple of ribs. Dislocated his shoulder. Boy was in a lot of pain. Better today, but still limpin’.” Spike’s eyes were on the other guy—Riley’s friend Graham. Graham didn’t look guilty. He looked angry. He practically vibrated in his seat, and his fists were clenched.

“Forrest,” Graham said, “should be court-martialed.”

“Or given to a pack of hungry vampires. I know. You told me earlier,” Finn said. “It’s not like I don’t agree with you. It’s just—I’m not sure we’re going to be able to convince anyone—I mean, they’re not human.”

“They’re sentient,” Graham pointed out, “and even if they weren’t, they still feel pain. He’d do time for treating a dog like he treated that hostile.”


“Graham looked over the footage,” Finn said. “Sean wasn’t, uh, entirely defenseless. He tried
everything he could think of to get out of that cell, and when it didn’t work, he started talking to the big hostiles on the other side of the hallway—egging them on. They cracked three cell doors before Forrest...uh...."

“Beat him up and put him in isolation?” Buffy said.

“Yeah,” Graham said. “It was sickening—I didn’t realize Forrest—fuck.” The man smacked the palms of his hands down on the tabletop hard enough to put everyone’s coffee at risk. “I get that our system isn’t set up to give justice to...someone...who isn’t human. Is there some other system? Is there a...a...vampire...court?”

“Well,” Buffy said, smiling into her coffee, “sort of. It’s pretty much feudal. Instead of lords and vassals, you have masters and minions, but otherwise it’s the same deal. If a minion feels he’s been treated badly, he petitions the Master of the area to intervene on his behalf. The Master of the City—or town or county or whatever—has absolute power and authority. They’re usually warlords.”

“Usually are,” Spike said. “That’s how you take a city. Move in, eliminate the competition, and take over. Every once in a while, the locals will ask an old master to come in and take care of a place, but that’s rare.”

“Oh, another thing,” Buffy said. “Those terms—master, minion, sire—don’t always refer to someone male. Plenty of female vampire warlords. Important not to underestimate female vamps.” He got an extremely vivid mental picture of Willow with a full and prominent fang array, standing in command of an army of massive, muscular demons, mystical energy swirling from her fingertips.

“Already got the memo,” he whispered, kissing her cheek. “Won’t ever turn the redhead. Don’t need the competition.”

“Good to know,” Riley said. “Girls with fangs—still dangerous. There’s a whole...anthropology...here, isn’t there? Makes me wish I could take a class. Wouldn’t that be a hell of an academic specialty?” The big soldier chuckled. “So how does the master and minion thing interact with the vampire family thing? If there’s a conflict, who wins?”

“That’s...complicated,” Buffy said. “Depends on the situation and which family is involved. Spike’s family—the Aurelians—rank almost everybody, so if the master of some city were to injure an Aurelian, Angel could, if he chose, annihilate the Master of the City and all his minions and put someone of his own in power.”

Spike nodded. “He could. Prob’ly wouldn’t. More likely to spare their lives in return for sworn fealty. Useful to have a few cities in your pocket. Alliances, yeah?”

There was something hungry in the way that Riley looked at him, then. He had just glimpsed a world that was huge and ancient about which he knew vanishingly little. He wanted it. It made Spike think of the early journals he’d mentioned to Angel and all the analysis he’d done. It could probably be useful with a little bit of updating. “You really want a class, soldier?”


“Take me a bit to dig it all out, but I could put something together for you. Only vampires, though. Not qualified to speak in depth on the other races.” He considered for a moment. “Could give you a basic overview of the Sunnydale locals, I s’pose.”

“I’d go,” Graham said. “We’ve been flying blind in this town—we got nothing to work with. We’re supposed to capture and contain these...beings. Walsh says they’re animals, but I watched that tape,
man. Your friend—Sean—he kept talking the whole time, kept trying to talk Forrest down. They knew each other. They had a class together.” The smaller soldier squeezed his eyes closed, took a shaky breath. “Fuck. I’ve never seen anything that...vicious...inhuman. I don’t know. The little guy wasn’t even fighting back.” Graham struggled to get his emotions back under control. “Somebody has to do something. Do you think the Master of the City would help?”

Spike heard the growl but didn’t realize it was coming from him until Buffy started shushing him. “It’s alright, sweetie,” she said, gathering him in close to her, trying to soothe away the ridges on his forehead. “Shhh. He’s okay. He’s fine, now. We walked in there, beat up a bunch of soldiers, and snatched him right out of that horrible place. Is Angel still with him?”

“Was when I left,” he murmured into her hair, his words sibilant through fangs. “Sean was feedin’ him tapir blood flavored with vanilla bean an’ tryin’ to get him naked.”

“There, see?” she said, so gently it hurt. “He’s hitting on Angel. If he’s got the energy for that, he’s definitely okay.” She paused for a couple of heartbeats. “So...um...was Angel going along with that?”

“No, not that I noticed,” Spike said, “but hope springs eternal, I reckon. I know Angelus, though. Our boy keeps at him long enough....”

“I think that falls under the heading of things you don’t want to know about your ex,” Buffy said, stroking his hair. It wasn’t helping. He still wanted to find the man who’d hurt Sean and flay him alive. “In answer to your question, Graham: I think you should keep Forrest as far away from the Master of Sunnydale as you possibly can. I doubt he’d survive that brand of justice.”

“Okay....” Graham looked both confused and a little frightened. He stared at Spike, who was too angry to shift back to his human face. “I don’t think I understand.”

Riley had been studying Spike carefully, gears almost visibly whirring in the space behind his eyes, since Spike’s face had changed. The big man’s shrewd gaze jarred the eye against his placid, farm boy features. “I think I do,” he said slowly, leaning hard on those Midwestern vowels. “Hey Spike—who’s the Master of Sunnydale?”

Spike sat up straight. There was something about Riley Finn—even beyond his general appearance—that put him in mind of Angelus as he was at the end of the nineteenth century, just before the shackles of the soul. It made him extremely uncomfortable. He made a note never to turn this one, either. “I am,” he said, and his demon voice made the metal table hum. Finn smiled.
“There’s a whole...anthropology...here, isn’t there? Makes me wish I could take a class. Wouldn’t that be a hell of an academic specialty?” Riley chuckled at the absurdity of the notion, but he saw no sense in squandering the opportunity. He would probably never get another chance to ask a hundred-and-fifty-year-old vampire scholar about hostile...no, not hostiles. Demons. They were demons. This was his chance to ask the vampire about demon politics. It boggled the mind. “So how does the master and minion thing interact with the vampire family thing? If there’s a conflict, who wins?”

“That’s...complicated,” Buffy explained, and everything about her was different. He should have noticed the change in her the moment it happened, but she’d sat in his classroom—well, Professor Walsh’s classroom, at any rate—both before and after her trek into the unknown, and he’d only seen what he expected to see. There seemed to be a lot of that going around.

If Sunnydale’s pretense of small-town normality was held together only by the average person’s unwillingness to see the elephant—or the bright pink, elephant-eared biped—in the room...well, that was a case of confirmation bias run amok, and he wanted no part in it. He was a rational, intelligent man. He would learn as much as he could, make a point to see the world around him.

“Depends on the situation and which family is involved. Spike’s family—the Aurelians—rank almost everybody, so if the master of some city were to injure an Aurelian, Angel could, if he chose, annihilate the Master of the City and all his minions and put someone of his own in power.”

Spike nodded. “He could. Prob’ly wouldn’t. More likely to spare their lives in return for sworn fealty. Useful to have a few cities in your pocket. Alliances, yeah?” Riley was busy formulating another question when the vampire cocked his head. “You really want a class, soldier?”

“What?” He almost choked on his coffee. “Seriously? I’d love it.”

“Take me a bit to dig it all out, but I could put something together for you. Only vampires, though. Not qualified to speak in depth on the other races. Could give you a basic overview of the Sunnydale locals, I s’pose.”

“I’d go.” Graham blurted out the words almost before Spike had finished speaking. “We’ve been flying blind in this town—we got nothing to work with. We’re supposed to capture and contain these...beings. Walsh says they’re animals, but I watched that tape, man. Your friend—Sean—he kept talking the whole time, kept trying to talk Forrest down. They knew each other. They had a class together.”

Graham was handling the morning’s revelations badly. For his part, Riley had always been uncomfortable with the degree of aggression Forrest exhibited in the field. Sometimes he seemed to enjoy hurting things, which, in Riley’s experience, often led to massacres on foreign soil, international sanction, and court martial. It was not compatible with a successful military career.

“Fuck.” Graham’s hands gripped the edge of the table, white knuckled. “I’ve never seen anything that...vicious...inhuman. I don’t know. The little guy wasn’t even fighting back. Somebody has to do something. Do you think the Master of the City would help?”

The table began to buzz like a swarm of bees. Riley couldn’t figure out what it was until Buffy started shushing Spike. The vampire had changed. His face was ridged and fanged, his eyes a bright, dangerous gold. “It’s alright, sweetie.” She took the monster in her arms. “Shhh. He’s okay. He’s fine, now. We walked in there, beat up a bunch of soldiers, and snatched him right out of that
horrible place. Is Angel still with him?"

“Was when I left.” He exhaled the words in a forlorn hiss. “Sean was feedin’ him tapir blood flavored with vanilla bean an’ tryin’ to get him naked.”

“There, see?” She stroked his face, trailed her delicate fingers over the ridges on his forehead, Beauty to his Beast. It would have been more unsettling if he hadn’t seen her move, strange and deadly, through the Initiative corridors. Spike—Will—whatever his name was—was no more monstrous than Buffy herself, for all her sun-kissed prettiness. She was still a tale told in the dark. “He’s hitting on Angel. If he’s got the energy for that, he’s definitely okay.” She pressed her lips into the fine hair at his temple. “So...um...was Angel going along with that?”

“Not so that I noticed,” Spike said, “but hope springs eternal, I reckon. I know Angelus, though. Our boy keeps at him long enough....”

“I think that falls under the heading of things you don’t want to know about your ex,” Buffy smiled. Spike’s bleached blond hair was no longer slicked straight back. Under her hands, it had begun to tuft up into irregular curls. “In answer to your question, Graham: I think you should keep Forrest as far away from the Master of Sunnydale as you possibly can. I doubt he’d survive that brand of justice.”

“Okay....” Graham said. “I don’t think I understand.”

“I think I do,” Riley said. Angelus was the head of the order, Spike’s...sire. That was the word. Sean was Spike’s...student? Protégé? He was new to the family, unproven, but Angelus came running to save him anyway. He came because Spike asked him to. He was starting to get his head around these vampire hierarchies. Spike was somebody. “Hey Spike—who’s the Master of Sunnydale?”

Spike’s spine stiffened slowly, and he fixed Riley with a snake-eyed stare. “I am,” he said, and the words echoed in the metal beneath his fingertips. Riley held his gaze and grinned. This was going to be fun.

“Finding you guys was a stroke of luck. I’ll hold you to that class, Spike. Tell me when and where, and my men will be there.” The change started at his cheekbones. He knew that much, but he wouldn’t have been able to say with any certainty where the demarcation lay between man and monster.

First, his cheekbones became less pronounced. Then something changed around his eye sockets, which drew away the angularity in the center of his face. Riley couldn’ttell if his nose changed—perhaps his nostrils narrowed; perhaps not—but when his fangs withdrew, and his mouth softened, the vertical proportions of his face were entirely different. The last thing to change was the color of his eyes. The gold retreated inward from the edge of his iris, revealing a blue ring. It widened until the gold was no more than a jumble around his pupil, and then even that was gone.

When the process was complete, he once again faced Will Pratt, slender, pale, and unmistakably human.

“How long did it take you to get used to doing that?” Graham asked.

“Seconds,” Spike said. “Decades.” He dropped his eyes in a gesture at odds with the swagger of his persona. For just an instant, he looked less counter-culture heartthrob and more consumptive Victorian scholar. He went to Cambridge. He went to Cambridge in the eighteen seventies. There would be records.
Graham shook his head. “I don’t think I’d ever get used to it.”

“You would. ‘S easier than breathin’. Hard not to, at first. Harder to stay in human face.”

“So why decades?” Riley asked.

Spike pulled the corners of his mouth up into something that wasn’t really a smile. “Was born human, wasn’t I? It didn’t feel real. Felt like a dream until...oh, China, I’d say. Year nineteen double ought.”

Twenty years of dreaming. What a weird, wild time that must have...wait. “What were you doing in China during the Boxer Rebellion?”

“Killing his first slayer,” Buffy said. Without any apparent communication between the two of them, Spike laid something into her outstretched hand. The switchblade snapped open and she carved a gash across her own palm, letting the blood drip into Spike’s coffee mug until it was about three quarters full. Then she wiped the blade next to the cut, and held it to Spike’s mouth.

He...kissed...licked...mouthed the wound until it was clean, an expression of adoration, maybe even reverence, on his handsome face. “Freely given,” she said, and when she pulled her hand away, it was unmarked.

“I’m losing ground, again,” Riley said. “Should I be taking notes?”

“Yeah,” Spike whispered. There were tears on his cheeks. Note: vampires can cry. He wrapped his slender hands around his cup and sipped at the thick, red liquid. “That phrase—it’s a pledge, a ritual. Something one vampire would say to another to convey...acceptance. It’s only used between equals. It’s an offer of sustenance without the expectation that...without expectation.”

Riley blinked. Then he reached around his chair to his backpack and pulled out a notebook and a pen. Shame he didn’t have his voice recorder with him. “That kind of acceptance is rare, I take it?”

The vampire’s smile was lopsided. “Incredibly.”

“As rare as what Sean did? In the Initiative cell? What was it he said?”

“‘My life from your hand.’ Yes and no. That’s—he offered fealty, accepted me as his master. That happens whenever some master takes over a territory. The old master’s minions either submit to the new one or they die. But he...” Spike swallowed hard and closed his eyes.

Graham looked as confused as he felt. “I don’t think I understand,” Riley said.

“He wasn’t under threat,” Buffy said. “He did it without being asked, out of love and loyalty, and that is rare.”

“On a scale of one to ten?” Riley raised his eyebrows, pen poised over the page.

“On a scale of one to ten, it’s the Loch Ness Monster. It’s rain falling up. It’s the toothpaste going back into the tube. It hasn’t happened in a thousand years.” Buffy looked like she might cry, too. “Riley, it’s a fairy tale.”

“Like you aren’t?” He laughed, rough and a little manic. The two of them stepped straight out of The Brothers Grimm into a sleepy little California town, without the slightest concern that they might be completely impossible. He thought he was handling the situation pretty well, all things considered.
“I guess we are.” They leaned into one another and twined their fingers together. “I forget, sometimes.” He could never forget.

He wanted to film Spike changing, play it back a frame at a time so he could pinpoint the moment the demon appeared. He wanted books to read, histories, biographies, documentation of culture and tradition and—was there a language? A religion? Did they have folklore or fiction? Art? He wanted to lay his palm smack in the middle of Spike’s chest, skin to skin, and feel his heart not beat, see his lungs not fill with air, and understand how he still lived. What kind of thing was a vampire?

He lived here, in Sunnydale, where there were always vampires—always—the minute the sun went down, hovering at the periphery of perception, preying on humankind, and he knew nothing. Less than nothing, since most of what he knew was wrong, and he needed to know everything. He’d give his goddamned eye teeth to be Dian Fossey in the midst of this vampire pack.

“I’ve got a lot to learn.”
There was a knock on Ethan’s door.

At first, he wasn’t sure he’d heard it. Most of his day had been spent painting the black wood arch he’d built into the back wall of the closet. First, he’d engraved the required magical symbols into the wood—hundreds of them, tiny and carefully placed. Then he’d filled their narrow channels with his own blood, murmuring ancient words over each symbol until it lit like dark flame. When they were all finished, he spoke a single word, and the portal opened to his Sanctum library, with its reassuring scent of wood smoke and old books. He closed the closet door behind him, and sealed the arch with clear acrylic. It was draining work, and it required his complete attention.

The knock came again.

It couldn’t be a stranger. No incidental passerby would have noticed the entryway. The outer door was draped in obfuscation spells—just a little baffle to redirect—and camouflaged with protective coloration. He’d painted the new steel door the gray-brown of filthy old wood and spattered it with mud colored drizzles. A rusted hasp and padlock, massive pieces welded together and affixed to door but not frame, left it cosmically impenetrable but free to swing outward. He’d even smashed the bulb in the safety light.

The knocking became louder and more insistent.

No, it couldn’t be a stranger. It had to be someone who knew he was here, someone who’d come looking for him specifically, but he’d spoken to no one since he’d arrived. Nobody knew he was here except...

“Doctor Rayne? Please open the door.” The knocking became pounding. The pounding became frantic. “Please. I know you’re in there!”

Damn and blast. He hissed a word under his breath. The portal closed, leaving an elaborately decorated arch on a smooth white wall. He stepped out of the closet and shut the door behind him.

“Doctor Rayne!”

He strode three steps to the door and flung it open, narrowly missing the aquiline nose of Jason Stubbs, who skittered backward like a spider on a hotplate. Ethan seized the man by his lapels and yanked him inside. “So good of you to drop by. Do come in.”

Jason stared at him without speaking for a moment, professional composure in tatters, and then glanced around the room. “Love what you’ve done with the place.”

Ethan sighed. It did look remarkably different, even to mundane eyes. He’d stripped the old plaster off the walls, hung drywall, and painted, then he’d pulled up the peeling linoleum and covered the floor with gray ceramic tiles. The stained countertop and the decrepit appliances had been replaced, as had the single glass light fixture on the ceiling. His concrete box looked remarkably livable.

But the biggest difference was visible only to magical sight. The poured slab beneath the drywall sparkled with quartz and pyrite flecks, ensorcelled to stasis, durable and enchantable. Had Jason the ability, he would see a fine magical gridwork in a multitude of hues padding the walls around him, fairly pulsing with power. Nothing and no one could enter without his consent. More to the point, when that outside door was closed, not one shimmer of magic would escape the confines of the space. No matter how powerful the casting, this room would not leak.
“Thank you. Mi casa es su casa, and all that. I’d offer you a seat, but....” The furniture was scheduled to arrive Thursday. He frowned. “What day is this?”

Jason’s eyes fell on the telephone, which sat unused on the counter. “Wednesday.”

“Ah. Very good.”

“Doctor Rayne—have you slept since I saw you last?” He hadn’t. Of course he hadn’t. “Have you eaten?”

“I was just about to get dinner.”

“Oh huh.” He raised his eyebrows. “Like that?”

Ethan glanced down at himself. He wore white polypropylene coveralls streaked with paint and blood over a tee shirt and slacks that had definitely seen cleaner days. He shrugged.

“Where I was going, it wouldn’t matter.” A hot dinner and a hotter bath awaited him on the other side of that portal. Now that Jason had mentioned food, he was ravenous. His stomach yowled piteously. “Did you have some purpose in coming here?”

“I tried to call, but your phone,” he said, turning to the counter and pushing the plastic end of the phone cord into the wall, “was out of order.”

“I see.”

“It’s been two days since I saw you.” He shook his head. “Forty-eight hours. And you did all this?” He flung his hands up, palms to the sky. “Did you use magic? Is that why your eyes are black?”

He’d used plenty of magic, but he hardly needed it to hang drywall, now did he? “Do you have a point?”

“You’re insane.” He tipped forward into a little half bow. “With all due respect.”

“Certifiable, I’m told, but I do pay well.” It took all of his considerable training to slow his breathing and his heart rate to normal, to tamp down his power and drain the darkness from his eyes. “Now are you going to tell me why you’re here, or must I call your father?”

“My father is dea—.” Realization shocked over his features, followed swiftly by nausea. He soldiered on. “You asked me to notify you if the owners reconsidered.”

“And have they?” His heart rabbited in his ribcage. With great effort, he forced it calm again.

“Yes. They’re asking about ten percent more than your initial offer, but I’m negotiating for—.”

“Don’t haggle. Buy the building.”

“Will do.” He pulled a notepad from his inside pocket and jotted something down. “You are full of surprises, today. Next, the bomb shelter in South Dakota—it does not meet your specifications. There’s another, about a hundred miles north, which might. I’m looking into it.”

“Very good. Is there anything else?”

“Yeah. Doctor Rayne—.” He blew out one frustrated breath and met Ethan’s eyes directly. “Uncle Ethan.” Ethan blinked. Jason hadn’t called him that in fifteen years. “Let me buy you dinner. Please. You look...it would be...I can’t leave you here alone.”
“Where on Earth did you get such compassion?” Certainly not from his father, the Wolfram and Hart lawyer who’d kept Ethan out of prison after he tangled with Eyghon, nor from his half-Sluagh mother, with her uncanny appetites. Nothing in his upbringing could have predicted it. Nothing Ethan had done merited it.

“We decide what we’re going to be, okay? A little at a time, every day.” He slipped the notepad back into his pocket. “I am not my father.”

“That makes two of us.” Ethan unzipped the coveralls and let them fall to the floor. “So where are we going for dinner?”

“Italian, I think. Pasta and bread. With butter.” Jason held the door for him. As they walked together into the long shadows of late afternoon, he said, “I almost forgot. I heard something about your Moon Vine.”

“Really?” He’d nearly given up hoping. “Do tell.”

“Nothing specific. Just that it exists.”

“That’s good to know.”

“Vague, I know, but it gets more interesting. See, I heard it from Dash.”

Dash. Dash? “The cobbler?”

“Yeah. What do you think?” He broke his stride to show Ethan a pair of handmade russet leather dress shoes with exquisite detailing. His own shoes were in ruins.

“Tres chic. I may need to speak with Dash.”

“If it’s about shoes, go for it. If it’s about the Moon Vine, don’t bother. He doesn’t know anything else. The really interesting part is where he heard the rumor.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” Jason unlocked the car doors with an electronic beep. “Sunnydale. In the Market.”

Blast and damn.
“‘Lo, Rupert,” he said when Giles answered the door. He had a heavy steel lockbox tucked under one arm and a stack of notebooks under the other. He’d gotten up early, figured it wouldn’t hurt him to miss one morning drinking while Willy worked. He had things to discuss with the watcher.

But when he’d gotten to the door, it took him twenty minutes standing in the sunlight to convince himself to knock.

“Spike...ah...do come in.” Giles peered around the door frame in both directions and then up at the pale blue sky. “Good...morning.”

“Still havin’ trouble comin’ to grips with the daywalker thing?” He stepped past Giles quickly, before he could change his mind, and set the box on the floor in front of the couch. Giles waited for a beat at the open door, but when it was clear Spike was alone, he closed it. “Yeah, me too. It’s been useful, though. So much to get done.”

“Ah...yes, I do imagine there is. Would you like tea?”

“Ta, Rupes. I’d love some.” He sat on the edge of the couch and opened the lockbox with a tiny silver key. He removed his journals from the box and set them aside in eight neat stacks of roughly ten books each. That was eighty three journals spanning about a hundred and thirty years—starting a little more than a decade before he was turned. A large, thick scrapbook rested on the very bottom of the box underneath an assortment of oddly shaped souvenirs. “I come bearing news,” he said, raising his voice a touch so the man could hear it over the whistling teakettle, “about progress on the upcoming event.”

“I appreciate that. I’m afraid Buffy’s been somewhat....”

“Busy. Don’t fault the girl. We’ve had new developments.” He took the tea Rupert offered and leaned back against the couch cushions. It smelled like home. “Wonderful,” he sighed, inhaling the steam. “Remind me to take advantage of your hospitality more often, sir. Miss havin’ a decent cuppa in the mornin’.”

“I would never have believed I’d say this, but you’re welcome any time.” The watcher raised his shoulders in a listless half shrug. “It’s good to run into a countryman—even one of a decidedly different generation.”

“Damned kid!” Spike said. “That’s not music! Get off my lawn!” He caught the man’s amused eyes and grinned back.

“What’s all this?” Giles sat next to him on the couch, balancing his teacup carefully on his knee.

“Memorabilia,” he answered. “Here. Take a gander.” He handed Giles the scrapbook.

The watcher flipped it open and looked. The first few pages held mostly official papers and drawings—many of them done by Angelus—although there was also a handful of photos of himself and his mother: proper Victorian people, staid and serious. Giles lingered over the proof of his academic achievements. “Knew that’d be your favorite part,” he said when faced with the man’s raised eyebrows. “Spent decades tryin’ to live that down. Dredgin’ it up now—.” He tried to summon some kind of menace, but he just felt sick. This made him...he didn’t know what it made him, except Buffy’s. He reached through the link and found her, warmth and light and sodding everything. It steadied him. “Don’t make me regret it.” Giles smirked.
The first quarter of the book included all four of them. They were a family, unified, if not content, and Spike still remembered the time fondly, despite the bliss of his present life. After a while, it was just him and Dru, changing fashions but not faces through the decades. Snapshots gradually replaced portraits; color photos gradually replaced black and whites. Interspersed with photos were ticket stubs and programs, coat checks and cookie fortunes. They were the collected mementos of more than a century. “Spike,” the watcher said with a tremble in his voice, “this book is priceless.”

“To me, too, yeah?” He tugged the scrapbook out of Giles’ hands and tucked it back into the lockbox before handing over a video tape. “Could you play that?”

The man pushed the tape into the VCR and flipped the television on. The screen filled with Buffy whirling and kicking, stabbing and slashing, dispatching opponent after opponent with savage grace. The watcher was transfixed. Spike passed him two more tapes. “You...made...these?”

“Couple years ago, now. Brassed Dru off right and proper. She thought I was gettin’ obsessed with the Slayer.” He winked at Giles. “Guess she was right.”

They left the tape running while they talked. “Have some news for you, Rupert. First thing is that Angelus is on board. He’s gatherin’ his key players before he puts out a call for the whole order, but we are gonna do this thing. Way we figure it, he’s got seven of us as a core group to back him up when he delivers his ultimatum to the rest.” He went over their plan to bring the Order into alliance with the slayer.

“That’s...I don’t know what to say about that.” Giles set his teacup on the end table with a shaky chink. “It’s unprecedented.”

“Word of the day, Rupes. Remember the Initiative? Government sponsored demon soldier project?” Giles nodded. “They grabbed my...our boy...our...Buffy says...no, he’s not a sodding baby...our fledgling. Beat him near senseless and locked him in a cell. We had to run a raid on the installation to get him back. In the process, we added a pair of soldiers to our alliance.” Spike closed his eyes and saw through Buffy’s eyes for a moment. She’d come up with a trick. It was hard for her to think words at him, so she would write notes and think images of them at him. “She says to tell you our boy doesn’t hunt, never has.”

“I wasn’t aware you’d sired anyone, Spike. The Council’s records indicate that you’re reluctant to do that.”

“Don’t. Didn’t...could say he’s adopted,” Spike chuckled at the idea. “He’d like that. Sire dusted before he rose. Says me an’ Buffy are his folks.” The watcher, true to form, had a thousand and one questions on the tip of his tongue. Spike raised a hand, staving the man off. “Relax, Rupert. He’s comin’ to Thanksgiving dinner. You can grill him then.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Giles said. “So...what’s all this?” He gestured at the journals.

“Mostly? Drivel,” Spike said, “interspersed with a handful of valuable nuggets of information not recorded anywhere else in the whole bloody world.” He tapped the top of the leftmost stack. “There’s a treatise on vampire protocol and tradition in here. I wrote it in segments, mostly over the course of the twenty years I spent with Angelus and the rest of the Order, but I recorded additional pieces as they came up.”

“I haven’t,” the watcher said, running a fingertip along the spine of one of the older books, “mentioned anything about you and Buffy to the Council, and I don’t intend to. I just wanted you to be aware of that.”
Spike smiled. Watcher man with old books was as easy as Angelus with a new boy. The look in his eyes was exactly the same. “‘Preciate that. We got enough controversy brewin’ here in hometown Sunnyhell without adding watcher drama. Watchers are invited to the wedding, anyway. They’ll find out in due time.”

“So what’s all this for, then?”

“Have a fledgling now, don’t I?” He had a family. “Has to be trained. Got responsibilities to attend to. Should teach this stuff to the allies, too. Even the shiny, happy vampires in the clean white hats are still vampires. Figured I could enlist your help extracting it from my journals and you could have a copy of it when we’re done.”

Giles took in the sheer number of books on the floor for the first time. “These are your journals? These are all your journals?”

“Well, yeah. Except for the current one. That one is,” he pulled it from the pocket of his coat, set it with the rest of them, “here. Buffy bought it for me, the day she came back.”

Giles picked up one of the books, a very old one, from the look of it, and opened the cover. He glanced at the date on the top of the page, read a few lines, and then flipped pages. The journal began in eighteen-seventy. “But...this was...this is...extraordinary....” Spike rifled through the stacks until he found the first journal he’d ever owned. He passed it over to the watcher.

“First one was a gift from my father on my fifteenth birthday,” he said. “I’ve been doing this a while.” Giles opened the book gently, reverently, pushed his glasses up his nose, and began to read. It would have been funny to see the usually dignified watcher stiffening in his slacks over the journal of some useless, soppy adolescent if he hadn’t been the adolescent in question. He sighed. “If you plan to read them all start to finish,” he said, “let’s get them in order, yeah?”
“I...uh...wrote that,” he said. Giles’ hands went limp and the big book slid to the floor. Spike picked it up and read over the page. As far as he could tell, they hadn’t changed a single word.

“You falsified Council documents?” He raked his fingers through his disheveled hair and glared at the tome like it had betrayed him. “That’s...that’s deplorable!”

“Well...yeah. Vampire.” Spike had just admitted to planting the entirely fictional story of his own poverty-stricken, blood-soaked origins. He’d slipped it into a stack of books and papers owned by the watcher of a slayer he was stalking, early in the twentieth century. He was more surprised than anyone when the Council accepted it as canon and included it in a history of the Aurelian line. “You had nothin’ but speculation. Not my fault nobody confirmed the author’s identity. Bloody poor scholarship, if you ask me.”

“But Spike,” he said, drawing himself up and folding his arms across his chest, “you were—William Pratt was—a gentleman.”

He cocked an eyebrow at the stacks of books. “And a scholar, apparently. Why would you fabricate a prior existence as a thug?”

“Fact that you can ask that indicates a flaw in your education, Rupert. You know how humans treat scholars. You imagine it’s better among vampires?”

“No. I don’t suppose it would be.” Giles’ posture softened. “Better bloodthirsty than bookish, then?”

“Truth. Think you can help me with this?” They’d gotten the books in sequence and put sticky notes between the pages at the beginnings of relevant passages. “Gettin’ it in a semblance of order, I mean, so I can teach the boys. I’m not Angelus. Not one to pontificate without purpose.”

Giles chuckled. “Yes, I do believe I can—especially if I’m allowed to keep a copy when we’re finished. If all this is correct, the Council has nearly nothing on vampire traditions and eighty percent of what they do have is wrong. Where, may I ask, did you get it?”

Spike shrugged. “Angelus and Darla, mostly. Some of it came from Nest. He was big on ritual and observance.”

“Nest? I’m afraid I don’t know....”

“Heinrich Nest. Old bat face. Darla’s sire. Vicious wanker and an unmitigated pederast, but he knew his stuff.”

“You didn’t like him?” the watcher asked.

“Did you?” Spike asked, laughing at Giles who tipped his head to yield the point. “He was a powerful man, an’ power’s rarely about bein’ liked. Where do you want to start?”

They started by building the Aurelian family tree on the wall in sticky notes—all the way back to Marcus himself. The watcher balked when Spike identified Aurelius, the vampire philosopher who founded his Order, as Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, but once he recounted the number of people surrounding Marcus who died of—or miraculously survived—“hemorrhage,” Giles was forced to concede that it might be true.

“If there’s more than that recorded somewhere,” Spike said when they’d finished, “I don’t know it. That’s when the line became something.”
“Nineteen centuries of history,” Giles said, while Spike carefully copied the tree onto a sheet of paper, leaving the stickies in place on the wall. “Quite remarkable, though I do wonder why you came to me. You’re more than capable of putting it together yourself.”

Clever bloke, he was, paying a scrap too much attention. ‘Got a whole list of reasons, Watcher, startin’ with I haven’t put a class together for more ‘n a century. It’s not like ridin’ a bleedin’ bicycle.”

“There’s one reason. Care to share the rest?”

“Wanted to run it by you before everyone else got it, see what I need to fix. You’ll have more questions than the rest put together. Delivery needs to be seamless. Angelus,” he bit the end of the name off as he spoke it, “is gunnin’ for me.”

“You’re afraid of losing face with your sire?” Giles’ expression was sympathetic, almost kind. There was something in Spike’s interaction with Angel that he recognized.

“Tosser already accused me....” Spike shook his head. “For the sake of peace and Buffy, I gotta be able to answer every question, yeah? Don’t want to have to dust him.”

“Has Angel been...difficult...regarding your relationship with Buffy?” Spike arched an eyebrow. “Right, then. Other reasons?”

“Despite your association with the Council of Wankers, you are one of the very few people I’d let poke around in my journals,” he said, meeting Giles’ eyes nervously. “Feel like you might....”

“Understand?” Giles took one deep breath and exhaled slowly when Spike nodded. “Strangely enough, I do. You are not what you first appear to be.”

“Am,” he said. It was important for the man to understand this. No deceptions; no false pretenses. “Am every bit the beast your Council says I am. Just...I’m other things, too.”

“An apt description,” Giles said, his cheeks coloring self-consciously. That description fit him at least as well as it fit Spike. “Have we run to the end of your reasons yet?”

“Ah...if we’re just talkin’ about the journals, then yeah. Got other reasons for the visit, though.” He opened his current journal to a marked page. “While I was in Los Angeles, a girl—street musician—sat down next to me and started talkin’ like Dru. Roundabout and all in symbols, like. I am,” he said, with a sweeping gesture that took in all the books on the floor, “generally better than middlin’ at sortin’ out symbols, yeah? Had some practice. Just wanted to check this bit out with you. Sounded...important. Was a warning.”

“You think she gave you a prophecy?” the watcher asked, leaning towards him.

“Yeah, I do. She looked...was dressed...like a thistle, if you can picture it. Clothes were green. No shoes. Hair was...well...thistle colored and straight, up an’ out.” He pantomimed thistle shaped hair with his hands. “Seemed like a deliberate choice, too.”

“Like an identification with some kind of totem...plant?” While he was talking, the watcher stood and walked over to his bookshelf, examining the spines carefully. “I’ve read of Wiccan groups that were plant-identified before, but nothing on this continent.”

“She was on an’ on about plants that survive in the city outside of pots an’ greenhouses. Looked like she might be one of them. Maybe a modern development?” Spike moved to look at the titles on the shelf himself.
“Urban shamans?” the watcher asked. Spike nodded. “New world, and in California, no less. Will wonders never cease? May I ask what the prophecy was?”

“Was hopin’ you would, Rupert. The girl said to ‘remember that the night blooming moon vine, though lovely, is destructive by nature, and needs to be kept under careful control—if not destroyed —lest it take my house down.’”

“Well,” Giles said, taken somewhat aback, “there’s nothing like an obvious warning, is there? Do you have any idea what it’s referencing?”

“Unfortunately,” Spike sighed, “I believe I do. You know what a moon vine looks like?”

“Yes, of course. Trailing vine, trumpet shaped flowers….” He produced a picture of the plant from a large volume filled with color photos. “It’s quite pretty, actually. Interesting that it’s listed as a garden pest.” Giles read for a moment. “Ah…it’s also called bindweed. That’s…considerably less poetic, isn’t it?”

“Mmm.” Spike nodded. “S about perspective, I reckon. I always thought she was a flower, though I admit there were those who disagreed. We’re lookin’ at a right lovely blossom, blooms at night, a clingin’ vine holds on so hard it tears houses apart, yeah?”

“Ah,” the watcher said, glancing down at the photo again. “Now that I think about it, the plant even looks something like Drusilla—her diaphanous gowns.”

“Yeah. She was fond of burial shrouds, for a time. Wedding dresses with veils, after that. Lately, it’s been Victorian-era nightdresses. Usually white. Hard to mistake the similarity.”

“I see,” Giles said. “You think she’s going to cause problems for you in the near future?”

“Without a doubt,” Spike laughed. “I just don’t know what it is she’ll do. Or when.”

“But somebody does.”

“Truth, Watcher.” It would be a pleasure to work with the man. So quick, he was. “I’d like to know more about that somebody. Think you can help me with some research?”
Charcoal dust smeared his arms, dappled his bare chest, and coated the tips of his fingers until everything he touched turned black. He’d been drawing for hours.

As dawn approached, the boy wavered and held, anxious to impress. But when the first rays of sunrise hit the door and warmed the room, he yawned hugely, gave up his front, and toddled off to bed, fledgling tired and shivering. Angel kept working. He hadn’t done a portrait of a sitting model in a long, long time.

This drawing was full scale, texture and expression conveyed in minute detail. His current obsession was the wrinkles at the hem of Sean’s shirt. He massaged them into being with his fingertips, one delicate fold at a time. To his surprise, it engaged his souled self as wholly as it had the demon.

Was it human Liam, then, who loved to draw? No way to know for sure. He’d only learned it after Darla turned him. Human, he could barely read.

Not like William, who was born into his new life fluent in four languages, spouting poetries and histories from memory like the cossetted sot he was. He could fence and box, too, for all he looked like a brisk wind would toss him away. His education was extensive and thorough, a product of the privilege he accepted as his due, while everything Angelus knew he’d learned from Darla.

She’d made him.

When William declared Drusilla his salvation, Angelus mocked him. It simply wasn’t true. He’d been inside that house—the one in London, leastways, if not the country estate. He’d picked a dozen devoted servants off one at a time as they fled, screaming, and he’d pawned the family silver. He’d slept in those canopied beds beneath downy quilts as soft as goslings. He’d spent hours in that library. William may have been discontented with his lot and unlucky in love, but he had a station, a future, and a place.

Liam had none of that.

His family was Church of Ireland, at least on paper. How they prayed behind closed doors was between them and their God, or so the priest had said. Like many of their more pragmatic associates, they’d converted hastily just ahead of English law. He was fourteen when his father renounced his faith in open service. Afterward, they’d carried his wailing mother from the church between them. She didn’t eat for days, but his father kept his livelihood.

Sure, it wasn’t a life of luxury—they’d no manor in the countryside—but they had their little house and Anna to help them keep it. It would have been a life worth leading, had it truly been his.

Even had his father not seen fit to throw him out, the Buachaillí Bána would have come for him, looting and burning their way through the landlords, first, and then the loyalists. It was only a matter of time. He had no future there. No use in dreaming.

He didn’t really dream until his soul was returned.

In some strange cosmic twist, his memory for pictures—notable even when he was human—became indelible at the moment he was turned. His demon reveled in it. He replayed every kill in his mind a thousand times, detail by perfect detail, savoring his moments of glory and analyzing his mistakes. He became the Master’s vicious and calculating favorite, heir to the Aurelian legacy.
After the soul? He still replayed every kill in his mind a thousand times, detail by perfect detail, unable to look away, even in his nightmares. It was torture. He tried everything he could think of to escape. Killing murderers and thieves didn’t help. Each new kill only reminded him of the others. Eating rats didn’t help, either, but at least he didn’t add more human agony to his toll. Curling into a crack in the earth to await oblivion only helped for a while. A starving vampire would inevitably kill. His soul writhed in silent witness to that truth.

Spike was right. Better to fill his head with innocent images.

The fledgling shifted in his sleep and sighed, innocent. Had one like him arisen back in the day, he’d have been chained and left to starve until he was ready to make a proper kill. No mollycoddling. Persistent defiance would have seen him staked. Nobody in his line would keep a refrigerator stocked with exotic animal blood in little plastic tubs.

Nobody in his line would mate with the slayer, either, but he couldn’t bring himself to be surprised. Persistent defiance was the very definition of Spike, although Angelus had never seriously tried to kill him. A part of him thrilled vicariously to Spike’s mayhem. They were vampires, after all.

Sean whimpered, flailed, and flung himself to the floor in a tangle of blankets, narrow chest heaving. “There are two wolves!” he yelled.

As Angel knelt to help him back to bed, he said, “Thanks. Weirdest fucking dream. Two wolves and a broken lock. Everything all grim and significant.” He yawned and settled into the pillows. “And who was the chick with the face paint?” His eyelids fluttered closed. “Scary.”
“Shh, he’s still asleep.”

Spike stood outside Sean’s door, dumbstruck.

“In or out, Spike,” Angel said. He was dressed in a pair of black silk boxer shorts and absolutely nothing else. His naked toes worked absently in the soft pile of the rug inside the door. “You may enjoy basking in the slanting winter sunlight as it crosses the threshold, but we find it a touch uncomfortable.” There it was again, that hint of Ireland in his sire’s voice. It made him homesick.

Shaking his head at this most recent development, Spike stepped around him into Sean’s apartment. Sean was still asleep, stretched out on his stomach on the pull-out trundle bed, wrapped in soft blankets up to his chin. He looked like a child.

A wooden easel dominated the tiny room. On it, a sheet of heavy paper, its edges curled slightly, bore a half-finished drawing—in charcoal—of Sean in a director’s chair turned so you could see the name ‘Walden’ stenciled on the back support. Sean sat sideways, one foot hooked over the leg of the chair, looking over his shoulder at the viewer. His left arm crooked at the elbow so that it only partially obscured his name. He wore jeans and high-tops, a long-sleeved polo shirt, and a luminous smile tinged with absolute mischief. “It’s beautiful,” Spike whispered, and then, for reasons he didn’t really understand, “You have such a gift, Angelus.”

He expected Angel to respond with contempt, to question his right to have an opinion, but instead he nodded, unaccountably bashful. “I liked drawing the director’s chair,” he said, eyes unfocused, charcoal covered fingertips trailing abstractly through the air. “It—the way the straight lines interact with the body—it was a challenge.” With that, Angel turned back to his work.

Spike watched him for a while, let himself drift back into the fascination Angelus had once held for him, back when he was new and young and the world was ripe for exploration. He could draw now, of course. For all he liked to talk up the bloodshed, immortality was mostly downtime. You had time to learn things, and he had learned to draw. But a thousand years—a thousand thousand—spent chained to an easel still wouldn’t give him Angel’s eye. The detail was exquisite. Sean looked like he might step from the paper and speak.

“How long’s he been asleep?” he asked, quietly so as not to startle Angel from his work.

“How long’s he been asleep?” he asked, quietly so as not to startle Angel from his work.

“Close to long enough, I guess,” Angel said in the same undertone. “I just hate to wake him up when he looks so....”


He selected some very ordinary cow’s blood from the refrigerator and poured it into a saucepan, stirring it with a spatula as it heated. “You like spicy?” he asked Angel when he padded into the room after him.

“I...uh...sure,” he said, watching this vampire version of a scene of comfortable domesticity with confusion and a little distrust. “When did you learn to do that?” he asked, as Spike crumbled burba weed onto the surface of the blood.
“Not really sure I can answer that question. Right after we met Sean,” he told Angel, folding the herb into the liquid, “he and Buffy got into a recipe exchange. This one was Buffy’s. Apparently, she learned it from me—in the Othertime—about a year and a half from now.” He poured the heated blood into three large coffee mugs and handed one to Angel. “There you are. Breakfast.”

“Thanks,” Angel said. He lifted the mug to his lips and sipped at it. “Ooh...that is spicy. That’s...it’s not bad.” He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes to savor the warmer-than-body-temperature liquid.

“Treat your demon well, an’ it might behave, yeah? No reason to eat cold swill.” He patted Angel’s shoulder. “Gonna go feed the boy. Back in a mo.” He took a mug of steaming blood into the main room of the tiny studio and set it down on the end table where the scent would reach Sean and wake him. Then he went back into the kitchen.

As he took a swallow from his own mug, Angel watched him curiously. “Why do you drink that?” he asked. “You don’t have to.”

“I agreed not to hunt. Part of the truce we made before everythin’ else.” He smiled softly. He could feel Buffy’s presence in the back of his mind, constant and reassuring. He was not alone. “ Couldn’t, now, anyway. Would hurt her.”

“No...I mean, I know, but Buffy feeds you,” Angel insisted, “so you don’t have to eat anything else.”

“Very Catholic of you, Angelus,” he said, rolling his eyes at the older vampire, “eating only for nourishment. Sex is out unless it produces offspring, then, too?” He shook his head. “Poor Sean. Kid hasn’t got a chance. Permanently unrequited.”

“You drink it because you like to.” The concept seemed foreign to Angel.

“Well, yeah. Do a lot of things ’cause I like to. Let the demon out to play. No reason not to. Lot of what it likes doesn’t bother Buffy.” He took one slow, deep breath, and let it out in a predatory hiss. “She even seems partial to some of it.”

“It’s not the same for me,” Angel said, working one fist open and closed in frustration. “You’re saying I need to indulge the demon more, like it’s just that easy. You want me to make it happy, but I can’t. I shouldn’t. If I get too happy, the curse gets broken and my soul leaves. Nobody wants that to happen—not even you, Spike.”

“No, Angelus—I’m saying that if you indulged your demon more, it wouldn’t matter so much if the curse was broken. Spent twenty solid years with you before you got that soddin’ soul. Two decades. At no time were you so bloomin’ cracked you thought you should end the world. No,” he sighed, “to make you that crazy took a whole bleedin’ century pretendin’ to be human.” He downed the rest of the burba flavored beef blood and rinsed his mug. “Angelus I remember was a warrior—a tactician. Wasn’t a madman.”

“You think I’d be capable of doing...what I do now, working with Buffy, working with humans, if I didn’t have my soul?” Spike plucked the empty mug from Angel’s hands and rinsed it, hung it back on the wall next to his.

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“Could if you decided to,” he said, “same as any of us. Same as I did. Same as Sean.”

“Sean,” Angel growled, “is different.”

“You can say that again,” the vampire in question said as he limped, barefoot, into the kitchen. He
put his cup in the sink and ran warm water into it. He made no effort to rinse it out or hang it up, grinned when Spike moved to do it for him. “Eh. Some cats never take to hunting, either. Soon as I don’t hurt anymore, I want Spike to start up with some self-defense training—getting taken by those soldiers again doesn’t rank high on my list of things to do on Friday night in Sunnydale. Maybe you can show me how to do that cool shadow-lurker bit, too?”

Angel stared at him. “Look,” Sean said, “I know I’m proof-of-concept. I’m the good guy vampire prototype—and that’s great. I can deal. I’m not doing anything different than I was before. The only new thing in my life is that now I have powerful people looking out for me.”

“Speakin’ of,” Spike said. “Come here, lad.”

Sean stepped toward Spike obediently, ignoring Angel’s snort of disbelief, and allowed Spike to check to see how the bones were mending. “Almost all better,” Sean said, sinking his fangs delicately into Spike’s proffered wrist and purring a little as he drew blood.

“Right up until he does that, I almost forget,” Angel murmured. “That’s what you were like. So human.”

“Yeah, an’ I’ll be damned if I can sort out why. This one was a bit of a hedonist before he was turned,” Spike said, “already livin’ a life a demon could envy—more like you, Angelus—an’ I was withheld, repressed, and Victorian. Why’d you take to it like you did whilst I had to be convinced? And how did he wind up on Buffy’s no kill list all by his lonesome?”

“This is not confusing, guys. I wasn’t angry at anyone,” Sean said, laughing. “I was mostly happy. I did what I wanted to do. My parents died when I was a toddler. I guess that’s sad, but I don’t remember them. My grandparents loved me, no question, even if they were a little confused when I came out. I mean, they attended PFLAG meetings and went to Portland Pride.” He mimed huge, shocked eyes. “They even switched churches—that’s how we became Lutherans. Nobody I cared about ever rejected me—and, hey, I didn’t wake up in a wooden box buried in the ground, so that’s another major plus.”

“PFLAG?” Angel asked. Sean covered his face with his hands.

“You guys are so old,” he whimpered.

“Oi!” Spike protested. “I knew what it was.”

“Yeah, Spike,” Sean said. “That’s ‘cause you’re the cool old guy who still keeps up. You,” he turned to Angel, ran his fingers down Angel’s bare chest until he reached the elastic of his boxer shorts, which he snapped for emphasis, “just need to get out more.”

Angel stared at Sean for one long moment before turning his languid, gold-flecked gaze on Spike. “Your fledgling,” he said, one corner of his mouth twitching, “is disrespectful.”

“You’re a big boy.” Surely Angel didn’t mean what it sounded like he meant. “You can take care of yourself.”

Angel’s smile deepened, and malice creased the corners of his eyes. “That’s not the point,” he said. “He’s your fledgling.”

A cold weight settled into his gut. “What do you want me to do?”

Angel’s smile deepened to a leer. “Control your fledgling.”
“You want me to...” Spike shook his head. “That’s soul’s not near as useful as I thought it’d be.”

“What? No.” Sean’s grin dissolved. “I’m sorry. Don’t make Spike—please. I didn’t mean to....”

“How will you run a city if you can’t manage a fledgling?” Angel folded his arms across his chest, eyes crackling gold but for a thin brown ring. “They’ll take you apart. I’ll say it again, Spike. Control your fledgling.”

Oh. This was a lesson. He remembered these. A century gone since the last one, and still he remembered. All the way down to his bones. “Sean,” he said, trying to keep his voice even, “apologize.”

“What?” It wasn’t the boy’s fault. He needed to be clearer. He had to be.

“Apologetic to the Master. Like I taught you.”

“Seriously?” Spike nodded wearily. There was nothing in the world he loathed as much as vampire politics, so hidebound it made the bloody Victorians look like flower children. “Uh...wow.” He knelt. “I have offended, Master.” He licked his lips. “I am unworthy. I offer my...my life...in penance.”

“Not bad,” Angel said, dark eyes pleased, gold withdrawn to a sliver of light at their centers. “You’re pardoned, Sean. Get up.”

“What? I....”

“It’s alright, lad.” Spike extended a hand to pull the boy to his feet. “That lesson wasn’t meant for you.”

“Sure, and it wasn’t, but at least he knows his rites.”

“I bloody well knew my—.”

“And defied me still. You think that’s better, do you?” Angel wore nothing but boxer shorts. He had a smudge of charcoal alongside his nose, and his hair tufted wildly out in every direction. For all his condescending, self-satisfied churlishness, he radiated so much power and reassurance that Spike had to fight to keep from kneeling at his feet in gratitude. His sire was with him. He would be alright.

“You hate this. Traditions and rites and protocols. You always have. How’d you get roped into taking the city?”

“Give you a hint—it starts with ‘Buffy.’ Ends that way, too.” Spike jammed his fists into his pockets. “Sides, I’ve technically been master here for some time.”

“How? Buffy killed the Master. Your bond doesn’t—.”

“I killed the Anointed One.”

Angel’s eyes widened. “I heard about that. It was chaos. That’s why there was nothing left when I —.” When he lost his soul and returned to the fold. “That was you?” Spike shrugged. “You almost single-handedly demolished the Order of Aurelius?”

“And presided over the rubble. That would be me.” He shrugged again. “It was fun.”

“And now you’re stuck with it.” Angel laughed, low and incredulous. “Gotta give Buffy credit. I never could get you to grow up.”
“Sod off.”

“Wait,” Sean said. “So...you have to build an Aurelian presence in Sunnydale basically from nothing, right? From the three of us?”

Spike rubbed his temples. “Yeah.”

“Uh...huh. Since you haven’t sired anyone, that leaves me—just me—as proof that you can head a family? And everything I do reflects on you.”

“Bout the size of it.”

“Okay.” Sean wrapped his arms around his stomach. “I’m supposed be an example of the new kinder, gentler vampire that can mingle with humans.” Spike nodded. “I’m also supposed to be an old-school Aurelian, Bram Stoker blood-thirsty, so the other vampires will accept me?” Spike nodded again. “But...aren’t those things contradictory?”

“Bright kid.” Angel nodded approvingly. “He’s a good pick.”

“How am I supposed to—oh.” Sean sighed. “It’s a confidence game. Can’t I be minister of propaganda or something? I could rock some Hugo Boss.”

“Nothin’ stoppin’ you,” Spike said, “but Angelus is—.” He swallowed hard. “He’s—.” He tried again. “Angelus is...right.” Angel rolled his eyes. “Can’t give ‘em reason to find fault.”

“Unified and traditional,” Angel said. “Beyond reproach.” He didn’t look any happier than Sean.

“I’m gonna need a lot more training—in everything, not just self-defense. I don’t know how to vampire. What’s your priority?” When neither of them answered, Sean lifted his hands, palms upward. “Well? What do I learn first?”

“It’s all a priority, Sean.” Angel hunched his shoulders. “We don’t get to pick.”

“But...there are only so many hours in the day. I have to take classes to use the equipment for work. I have to work to survive. I can’t wake up any earlier—I’ve tried. Speaking of.” He turned to the coffee maker on the counter behind him and pressed a button. The machine gurgled to life. “At least coffee still tastes right.”

“Your sire should support you.”

“You need money?” Spike pulled his wallet from his back pocket and opened it. He removed five crisp hundred dollar bills and a few crumpled twenties and passed them to Sean. “Is that enough? I can get more.”

Sean stared blankly at the fistful of cash. “That’s enough to give me some breathing room—at least for this month. So...what? I just ask for money and you give it to me?”

Spike shrugged. “Sure.”

“Within reason,” Angel said, glaring at Spike. “Do you have any idea how to manage money? Or are you just going to spend until you’re destitute?”

“Well, first—yes. But I don’t have to. Buffy set it up with the lawyer. Got a portfolio.” He knew better than to laugh at the look on Angel’s face. “Second, I have a personal allowance. This is pocket change.”
“You can fund this revolution?” That might have been hunger in Angel’s eyes.

“I surely can.”

“Alrighty, then.” Sean grinned. “This fucking sucks—make no mistake—but it sucks way less if it’s actually possible.” He poured coffee into three mugs and passed them around. Then he raised his.

“One model Aurelian coming right up. Viva la revolución!”
They arrived at the Bronze in separate cars so they wouldn’t be seen together.

Giles sat towards the back of the room, in the shadow beneath the stairway, sipping a surprisingly good latte. More from habit than necessity, he scanned the obituary section in the local paper for the usual, implausible details. Was there any other town in the world in which “neck trauma” was a common cause of death? It didn’t matter. Buffy’s return had made even that small contribution from him superfluous.

At least Joyce needed him for something.

He’d positioned himself in her line of sight, but behind her blue-tinged date, who would have to turn his torso all the way around to see him—Lasters lacked the range of motion to rotate their heads more than a few degrees in either direction. Thick ropes of muscle at neck and shoulder immobilized them like overbred oxen.

“He’s no more dangerous than a human man,” he’d argued when she approached him with the idea. “They’re big, not aggressive.”

“Rupert,” she laughed, “that’s dangerous enough. Just make sure he doesn’t spike my drink or do...oh, I don’t know...whatever demons do. Make sure I get home early and safe, with all my clothes.” He’d stammered something unintelligible, even to him, and she squeezed his hand. “I know, I know. It’s just coffee, but you can’t be too careful. Someone should know where I am, and I don’t want Buffy to know I’m dating again. Not until I’m sure he isn’t a robot.”

Funny that her real fear sounded sillier than the notion that a Laster demon might put Rohypnol in her coffee. At any rate, he’d left his research behind to come make certain that Greg had no ulterior motives. So far, it appeared that Joyce was having a delightful time with her demon date while he sat bored and alone in a room full of teenagers.

“Giles, right? Good to see a familiar face.” A slender, olive skinned man strode toward him with military precision and slid his cup onto the edge of the table. He raked long fingers through thick black hair flecked at the temples with silver. “I heard the bass player was too good to miss, but if I’d known the crowd was going to be this young, I might’ve stayed home anyway.”

He had no idea who this man was. “Have we met?”

“Briefly. Not surprised you don’t remember. You were busy with your fans.” He extended his hand. “Raj—well, Rajeev.”

The handshake shook his memory loose. Three women—thirtyish, wearing wedding rings—clustered around him, chattering about mailing lists and albums as though he hadn’t just played out for the first time in twenty years, had been interrupted briefly by the lone man who’d stayed past the show’s ending. A firm handshake, a quick smile, and then, “Great show,” and he was gone.

“Ah, yes. You came for the music?”

Rajeev grinned. “I try to keep up with local bands. You are planning to play at the Pump again, right? Felicia said she asked you back.”
“Once a month. It’s quite different—playing for adults.” He pulled a stool out from the table. Rajeev nodded his thanks and sat down.

“Ah—you performed when you were younger? I wondered.”

“And not since, I’m afraid.”

“Really? Then it’s about time you ventured out again.” The man’s eyes crinkled. In the half-light of the club, they were warm and very dark. “You’re too good to stay in the closet.”

The compliment made his cheeks burn, but Giles nodded his thanks. “Do you play?”

“Bass.” Rajeev—Raj—grinned, revealing deep dimples that sliced his cheeks into happy crescents. “No fun to play alone, and forget performing. Who wants to listen to solo bass?”

“Unless you’re John Patitucci.”

“And I,” he sighed, “am not. So I’m always looking for people to play with.”

“You don’t have a band?”

Raj shook his head. “I move around too much—I’m a contractor.”

“Do you build houses?” Giles raised an eyebrow. The man was fit but lightly muscled, and he only had calluses on the fingertips of his left hand.

“Not exactly.” His eyes creased at their edges again. “I design ultra-light bodies for unmanned aerial vehicles. You might say I’m a professional wingman.” He waggled his eyebrows at his own pun, self-deprecating. Charming.

“A government contractor—military?”

“Often. Not always. We take our funding where we can get it.” As the band set up on stage, the noise level rose. Raj leaned in close, lips slightly parted, half smiling. “And what do you do, when you’re not belting out power ballads?”

“I’m on sabbatical from the British Museum.” He leaned in a little, too, and smiled back. His pulse raced. “Writing a book on ancient Mesoamerican mythologies.”

Raj blinked. “So that bad boy thing you’ve got going on is all an act?”

“Uh...no. That is...well. No...it’s quite real, but....” Oh, good lord. An attractive man showed an interest and he turned into a babbling idiot. He might as well be a school boy, for all his sophistication. “That was a long time ago.”

“Fair enough.” Raj laughed, and waved his hand at the stage. “So what have you heard about the band?”

“Nothing at all. I didn’t know there would be music, tonight. I’m here with a friend.”

“But not a date?” He turned in his seat and scanned the crowd. “Ah ha. Your friend is lucky. She’s beautiful—and she might be the only woman in the room who can buy her own drinks.”

“I’m here with her.” Raj’s smile broadened. “And yes. He is lucky.”

“Sounds like she’s pretty lucky, too. So you’re the wingman, tonight?”
“Of the amateur variety, I assure you. Tell me about the band?”

“It’s called Shy,” he said. “It’s actually only the singer and the keyboard player. The bassist is borrowed. He plays with half a dozen local bands, pretty much whenever he feels like it. I wish I were half as good, but work, life, responsibilities—insert appropriate excuse here. When it all shakes out, I’m just not that committed.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Maybe when I retire.” He shrugged. “Maybe when you write a best seller?”

“Yes, well. I doubt it will ever be that.” Giles shook his head. “There are perhaps a dozen people who’ll read it all the way through voluntarily, and most of them are acquaintances.”

“That is some heady academia. No wonder you needed to channel your inner rock star.” He sipped at his coffee. “So the singer—Veruca. She’s young and inconsistent, but she’s a good front for the band. Charismatic.”

“Pretty?”

“Not my type,” Raj said, “and not what I mean. Compelling. She holds the audience—like you do.”

“Well, thank you. I try to—.”

“Rupert!” Joyce hissed, jogging toward him stiff-legged. “Look!” She pointed around the stairs and out into the main section of the club, where three young couples ringed a small table.

“Dear lord. I didn’t see them come in!”

“Neither did I,” she said, eyes wide and panicked, “but I have to get past them to leave. Can you distract them?”

“I suppose I....”

“Who is it?” Raj craned his neck around the stairs, trying to get a clear view. “Is it her ex?”

That would be a bloody miracle. “Her daughter.”

“Ah, modern life.” He chuckled. “Well, go on. It’s what you’re here for.” He slid a business card across the table. Giles picked it up.

“You don’t mind?”

“I didn’t say that.” Dark eyes crinkled over an impish grin. “But I’m willing to take a rain check. Call me. We’ll jam.”

“I will.” He tucked the card into his jacket pocket. “Enjoy the show.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Joyce mouthed the words, “Thank you,” and bolted back to her table. Giles gathered his cup and saucer and strode towards Buffy and her friends, trying, spur of the moment and with little success, to come up with something believable to say to them once he got there.

As it turned out, he didn’t have to. “You’re my person blanky,” Willow babbled. “This is my place blanky. With all the shock of the new it’s nice to know that there’s one spot we can come back to
where things are predictable and—.”

“Hello, all.” He was really no bloody good at being the diversion.

Buffy stiffened and started to her feet. “Giles. Trouble?”

“Oh no - don't get up Buffy. It's nothing like that. I just thought I'd pop by.... Anybody for a latte? On me?”

Buffy raised one eyebrow. “So much for your predictable blanky theory, Will.” While the circle of eyes was fixed on him, Joyce and Greg made their way to the door of the Bronze and escaped into the evening. When he glanced back over his shoulder, Raj was gone.

Chapter End Notes

I always thought Giles' behavior in the Bronze was suspicious. Didn't you?
Spike was always a little uncomfortable in the Bronze, and sitting with Buffy’s teenaged friends, clustered around a wobbly, too-small table, wasn’t going to make it any easier on him. Not even the welcome presence of Red’s wolf-boy could salvage the evening.

He’d protested when she suggested the outing. “Buffy,” he’d pled, “why don’t you go without me? You haven’t spent much time with your mates, lately. I’d just get in the way.” She hadn’t bought it.

“I barely know these people anymore, Spike,” she’d said, entreat ing him with limpid, hazel-gold eyes, “but they all think they know me. Before I came back, I hadn’t seen Oz or Xander in years, and Willow—well, I’d seen her, but I didn’t want to. It’s so hard to pretend. Please come. Please. Don’t leave me alone with them.” And so he had gone to the Bronze with Buffy.

The slayer, as it turned out, was entirely more at ease with her teen buddies than she had anticipated. At least, she seemed to be enjoying herself, and they seemed to have no idea that anything was amiss. By the time Willow began describing the club as her ‘big comfy blanky,’ Spike was scouring his mind for an excuse to leave—any excuse to leave. He was mightily relieved when Giles arrived, offering to buy coffee for the group. “I’ll help you carry,” he said, earning an amused grimace from the older man.

“Have the children been keeping you entertained?” Giles asked.

“Smarry git,” Spike shot back. “Been here near an hour, already. Buffy coerced me into comin’, or I’d be back over at Willy’s by now. Bit surprised to see you here. Wouldn’t’ve thought this was your scene, Watcher. What gives?”

The man shrugged disconsolately. “I’m afraid that since Buffy has been away at college—and Willow and Xander have taken over much of the research, as you yourself pointed out—I have been at loose ends much of the time. I didn’t realize how little I had going on in my life until you brought me the Moon Vine Prophecy this morning.”

The Moon Vine Prophecy? He liked the sound of that—very official. It sounded like it was important. “Good to get yourself out in the world, Rupert. Not questionin’ your motivation, mind. Just wonderin’ about your choice of venue.”

“And where would you have me go instead? Willy’s?” Giles sighed heavily. “There are limited options in this town.”

“Willy’s is a dive,” Spike said, “but not bad for what it is. Beer’s better than you think, and you get a good mix of folks. Humans that show up are in the Sunnydale know. Frankly, though—better a demon lover than a civilian, in your line of work, ‘less you don’t intend to get attached.”

“Well, now, that’s a better point than I’d like it to be,” the Watcher said glumly. “What kind of fool looks for romance on the Hellmouth?”

Spike smiled. “Not as rough as all that, is it?” The man’s expression was bleak. “There’s also that pub over by the university—place where your boy worked,” he offered. “Professor types mix it up with the students. You wouldn’t stand out in your tweeds and crisp creases. Might have some explainin’ to do, later, but you’d pass while you were there.”

“This whole endeavor is hopeless, isn’t it? A normal relationship is just not in the cards?”
“Don’t know I’d use the word ‘hopeless,’ but I gotta point out who you’re complainin’ to,” Spike said.

“Another sound point for the vampire,” Giles said, handing Spike two lattes to carry back to the table. As they arrived, the lights on the stage came up and the band started playing.

“Oh, yeah,” Willow said, misery crumpling her features. “Veruca’s playing tonight.” Spike cast a glance at the stage. A slightly dumpy bleach-blond mouthed the microphone in a crass imitation of sensuality. Spike knew the type. They were always convinced they were the hottest thing in the room when they were really just the easiest mark. There was, however, something interesting about this girl.

“Yeah. Every Wednesday. I told you,” Oz said, his attention fixed on the singer. He spared barely a glance at the little red witch. He didn’t seem to notice the look on Willow’s face or the awkward silence that descended on the table. For her part, the girl on stage stared, unblinking, at the wolf, sang directly at him. She lifted her face briefly, and the floor lights glinted silver-orange in her eyes. Another wolf—one who’d apparently set her sights on Red’s boyfriend. Spike sighed. That was going to make Buffy testy.

“So, Oz,” Buffy said loudly, trying to break the mood, “when’s Dingoes playing here again?”

“What?” Oz said, distracted. “Oh...we’re up next Friday....” His eyes didn’t move away from the stage.

“They’re good, aren’t they?” Willow said meekly, a little tremble in her lower lip.

Although he’d been completely oblivious up to that moment, Oz finally noticed Willow’s distress. Guiltily, he said, “Nothing special,” but he almost immediately turned his eyes back to the stage.

“Nothing special,” Buffy said, glaring at the obviously oblivious Oz. “Definitely nothing to get excited about.”

“Really?” Giles said. “I think she’s rather remarkable. Such a presence for someone her age.”

“You want me to take care of her?” Spike asked, wrinkling his nose at the girl onstage. He was actually surprised that neither Giles nor Oz had guessed the girl wasn’t human. “Be happy to snap her neck for you.” Oz was still so fixated on—Veruca was her name—that Spike was becoming angry on Willow’s behalf. He growled.

“I beg your pardon?” Giles almost knocked his coffee over in his consternation. Spike caught it before it spilled, set it back down upright, and handed Giles a napkin. He could see Xander fondling a stake under the table.

“I’m thinking about it,” Buffy said, and everyone at the table turned to stare at her, instead. “Whatever we decide to do, we have to do it pretty soon. Full moon is...when?”

“Day after tomorrow,” Oz said, as he swiveled slowly back around to look at the rest of the group. He was finally paying attention.

“Damn,” Buffy said, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. “That means we only have until tomorrow at sunset to decide what to do. I hate this.” His slayer was so far beyond tired that it made him ache for her. Spike put his arm around her shoulders, tried to tuck her in safely. “It’s not fair. She didn’t choose....”

Her mind flashed with images of Veruca, shifting into her wolf form, Willow’s terrified and tear-
stained face, Oz walking slowly away, shoulders slumped, his eyes contrite and miserable. This was the damage Veruca would do, not just to random bystanders but to the slayer’s own family. He couldn’t let her feel guilty about preventing it. “None of us choose, love,” he whispered. “That’s why you have to.”

“Am I missing something?” Oz asked.

“She’s a werewolf,” Willow said, her pretty green eyes alert in her pale face, “isn’t she? That’s why Oz was all...drooly faced?”

“I wasn’t...” Oz started.

“Yeah, actually,” Xander cut in, looking almost as irritated as Spike felt, “you kinda were.”

The young man looked at Giles for confirmation. “Yes, well,” Giles said, “although those wouldn’t be exactly the words I would use....”

Spike growled, “Kept up much longer, would’ve been your neck I offered to snap. Red deserves better than that, yeah?”

“And I am in complete agreement with you on that. I’m sorry,” Oz said to everyone at the table. He looked pale and a little panicky. “Really, really sorry,” he said to Willow. “I couldn’t look away and I didn’t know why. I was just...drawn. Is there,” he looked at Giles, “something...did she do something to me? I mean, she is a wolf, right? That’s why she’s affecting me like this?”

“Yeah, Oz,” Buffy said. Her disappointment in the boy was palpable. “That’s why she’s affecting you like that, but she’s not doing anything to you. She’s just a wolf.”

“I don’t understand,” Oz said.

“She wasn’t doin’ anythin’ special—just battin’ her light-reflectin’ eyes at you, Wolfboy,” Spike said, glaring at the clueless wolf, “an’ you were ignorin’ your girl to goggle at her. Stop makin’ excuses. You behaved like a cad. Apologize. Buy the girl flowers and take her someplace nice. Then don’t do it again.” Willow favored him with an incandescent smile. He patted her hand.

“Uh huh,” Xander said. “Not that I’m taking sides with Oz, here, but isn’t it a little weird to get relationship advice from the vampire?”

“No,” Buffy said, “it’s really not. He’s got a better romantic track record than all of us put together.” All Buffy’s Scooby friends looked down at their hands in a shared moment of demoralized silence. “He and Drusilla were together for a hundred years.”

“Confirmed,” Giles said, raising one finger. “I’ve seen pictures. So what do you propose we do about our second resident werewolf?”

“She and I,” Buffy answered, “are going to have a conversation. If we can’t come to some kind of agreement—well, maybe I’ll give her to Spike."
After the show, he and Buffy’d followed Veruca backstage, but she was gone by the time they got through the door. A couple of bruisers blocked them so the girl had time to slip away, which had not made his slayer happy. Buffy’d stomped her foot and let out with a credible, nearly vampiric snarl. “We’ll get to her,” he said soothingly. When he was the voice of reason, things had gone south. “I promise.”

He wasn’t sure how he’d make good on that promise. He didn’t know Veruca’s scent or where she lived. He might know enough about her to ask the right people the right questions, but that was time they didn’t have. “Oh, you better believe we will,” she said. “We’ll just have to wait until tomorrow night. That’s cutting it close, but it’s what we’ve got.”

That’s how they wound up outside the building that housed Oz’ cage just after sunset, while Willow and Xander kept the wolf company inside. Buffy’d convinced Xander to bring his tools along to repair the cage latch. “Just in case,” she said, all serious, like that statement made any bloody sense, but the boy seemed to buy it. How did these children survive on the Hellmouth with so little curiosity about the world around them? He understood the value of accepting strange things without struggle, but a plausibility check every now and again couldn’t hurt.

He’d never watched a werewolf change at close range before. It was violent. The wolf practically burst through the boy’s flesh, rending and tearing his human form away. Fur punctured skin, teeth pierced gums, claws thrust out from fingertips, and the whole process looked—smelled, sounded—excruciating.

This was a wholly different magic than the magic that made vampires, for which Spike was more than a little grateful. He, at least, was unified, the same being no matter which face he wore. The werewolf truly was what Angelus only pretended to be. Human Oz didn’t even recall the wolf’s actions in the clear light of day.

It’s human nature to believe that appearances reveal the inner self. That’s why storybooks were full up with beautiful princesses and hideous witches. If someone was pretty at some times and ugly at others, it must mean that there were two separate beings in the same body, fighting for preeminence—except that vampires weren’t like that. Perhaps that’s why the watchers always blathered on about the vampire’s “human mask,” as though the face they were born with was a lie.

“If you believe a demon has murdered and replaced someone you love—like taken over their body—it feels like a betrayal when they don’t look different,” Buffy said, simultaneously interrupting his thoughts and answering them. “You heard Giles. In his world, you aren’t actually William. You’re the thing that killed him. That’s what he believes, even now. He’s only just coming to terms with the idea that it might—just might—be more complicated than that.”

“Yeah,” Spike sighed. “He was dead set. Truth spell helped.”

“It did,” she said, squeezing his hand. “Hard to explain to anyone who hasn’t gone through it, especially if they’re really attached to the concept of the soul. I was Buffy before I was called, and I was still mostly Buffy after I was called. I know the difference is that my soul, whatever that is, was replaced with my slayer essence, whatever that is, so my human membership card was revoked.”

“Left my journals with him,” he said, “to explain. Not sure if it was a good idea, yet.”

“Wow,” she said, eyes wide. “That’s just...wow. Why did you...why would you...what made you
decide to do that?"

He shrugged and scratched at the nape of his neck. “You...dream.” That was as mild as he could make it sound. She had horrible, heart-wrenching nightmares about losing her watcher. Over and over again in her dreams, Giles left her, died, betrayed her, killed her, lied to her, and rejected her in one way or another. He didn’t know which were real memories and which were just worries, but they all tore her up inside. If he could prevent any one of them from happening, he would. “Figure I should make nice with the watcher, yeah?”

“You hear all that? Every night?” A sad little smile—for him. She was sorry for him. Sod all else—vampires, Aurelians, Heaven and Hell. He’d do anything for her. “Do you even get to have your own dreams anymore?”

“Lately, we’ve been sharin’. Swimmin’ in that cave, the other night? The warm water? Part of that was mine.” He opened his mind, let her see the deep cavern with the phosphorescent veins in the ceiling. He’d gone swimming there all by himself way back in the twenties, during one of Drusilla’s walkabouts. He’d immersed himself in the vent-heated sulfur-scented water, dove down deep where the white things without eyes fluttered their slippery fins against his fingertips. In the dream, Buffy swam with him.

She caught her breath as wonder overtook concern. “Okay, that’s cool. I didn’t know that place was real.”

“We should play with the claim more, yeah?” He had a thousand and one places to show her.

“Like lucid dreaming?” She looked delighted. “Oh, god, yes. I need to learn to use words, too.”

“You don’t say.” He smirked. She smacked him in the shoulder. All at once, the scent of wolf was overpowering. “Company, love.”

Inside the building, Oz went wild. Spike could hear him fling his body against the bars, desperate to reach the bitch outside. He was briefly grateful for Xander’s well-stocked toolbox. The little red witch skittered out of the building with a panicked gasp. “Is something happening out here?” she asked, clutching a tranquilizer gun with white knuckles.

Buffy pivoted until she and Spike stood together, shoulder to shoulder. She fought to his right so their weapon arms could both swing freely. With the reach their weapons gave them, this configuration allowed them to cut a swath of destruction approximately twelve feet across—a moving wall of death. She’d taught him this arrangement on their nightly patrols, worked with him until they fell into position on instinct. When he had admired the elegance of the technique and the obvious brilliance of its creator, one combat-heavy evening, she’d laughed at him until she couldn’t breathe. After a solid five minutes of listening to her wheeze and gasp, arms folded across his chest, he finally deciphered the words “You taught me that.”

With the connection the claim provided, they moved like one being, tossing weapons back and forth, changing opponents suddenly, dodging and ducking like their moves had been choreographed. Add the advantage that he’d been nourished on slayer blood, which made him almost as strong and fast as she was, and they were deeply dangerous. It was what kept him from feeling out of place in her world. If he had to be a white hat, he could at least be one of the most terrifying and unstoppable white hats the world had ever known.

And that was a very good thing. Right now, they had one extremely pissed off werewolf on their hands. Killing her would have been easy enough—she was certainly no tougher than the beasties they encountered in the dark of every Sunnydale night. The trouble was that they didn’t want her
dead. They had to avoid the snapping jaws and sharp claws and hold the wolf still while the little witch shot her with the tranquilizer gun.

They hovered between Veruca and Willow—her tranq gun wouldn’t help her if the wolf got too close—but they couldn’t get hold of her. She crouched low, circled just out of their reach, and keened mournfully into the night air. From his cage inside, Oz howled in answer. It was a standoff.

They could wait her out, of course. At sunrise, this wolf would become a human girl, much easier to manage. That would have been Spike’s strategy. He had all the time in the world, and he knew it. And if she’d gotten away, well, what of it? But Buffy counted the cost in human lives, and she was out of patience.

“Would you just shut up, already?” She lunged at Veruca, broke their line, and the wolf slipped between them. It should have been a minor mishap, easy to make up for, but at exactly that moment, Xander came barreling out of the building with Oz the wolf in close pursuit. Spike laughed. He didn’t waste his energy being surprised, anymore. In Sunnydale, things went pear-shaped with style.

“Gonna need some help with this!” Xander shouted. “Somebody? Anybody?” Before he could think about what he was doing, Spike sprinted to put himself between Xander and Oz.

“Good doggie,” he murmured, as the wolf shifted his gaze. “Good doggie. Keep watching me. That’s right. There’s a good boy. Xander,” he said, without changing his tone or looking away from Oz, “get out of here.”

“But there are wolves—two wolves!” Xander had stopped running not a dozen feet behind him. “Oz got loose! The lock snapped!”

“Stating the obvious,” he said evenly. “Get. Out. Of. Here.” He couldn’t make it any clearer, but Xander still didn’t move. That’s when he made his big mistake: He turned his head to yell at Xander. Freed from his eye-contact challenge for dominance, Oz shot past him, a russet blur in the darkness. Not vampire-quick, but what did that matter? He threw his hands in the air. “Oh, sodding...get lost, would you? Do you have a death wish?” Xander just stood there slack-jawed. With a roar, Spike spun on his heel and ran.

The wolf was warm and strong. Not vampire-strong—but, again, what did that matter? Strong enough to buck and kick with Spike on his back. Strong enough to make it hard to hang on, let alone hold him still, but he did it. He shoved his arms under the beast’s belly, and up around behind his head, like a canine full Nelson. Then he arched his back, lifting Oz’ chest up into Willow’s line of fire. “Red?” he yelled. “Any time now!” Willow nodded, bit her lower lip, took aim, and fired. She missed.

The dart lodged in the side of Spike’s neck, enough animal tranquilizer to take down a small elephant. Or a werewolf. Or, as it turned out, a vampire. He watched the next few seconds unfold in slow motion as he tumbled to the ground.
Willow dropped the gun, green eyes wide with shock, and covered her mouth with her hands. Buffy screamed his name, an anguished wail that knotted up his guts. She laid one palm on either side of Veruca’s shaggy skull and twisted. There was a cracking noise as the wolf’s body went limp, and then Buffy was next to Willow with the gun in her hand, and Oz stopped struggling.

“Thanks, love,” he tried to say, but even he didn’t recognize the words.
“He can’t be back, yet. There’s no way.”

“I’m telling you—I checked the attendance list. He’s here.”

Riley followed an insistent Graham to Sean’s Friday evening film processing class—the one he’d been walking home from when he was taken by the Initiative just last week. There was no way even a vampire could heal fast enough to be back up and running after the beating he’d taken.

But when they peered in the door, there he was, packing textbooks and pencils neatly away into a canvas backpack and chatting with one of his classmates. “Miserable flu,” he said, shaking his head. “Don’t know where I picked it up. Hope nobody else got sick.”

“I’ll be damned.”

“He’s just a kid!” Graham said, with more force than the statement warranted. “We can’t let him get taken again.” Now, in point of fact, Sean was not a kid. Even if you left everything supernatural out of it, he was only a year younger than Riley himself—an adult by every US statute. Like all vampires, he’d stopped aging when he was... ‘turned’ was the word they’d used. He would look nineteen no matter how many centuries passed. Graham knew that as well as Riley did. But Sean was a kid in the eyes of their new—extremely dangerous and centuries old—vampire allies, so that’s how they had to treat him. Graham’s idea was solid.

“You’re willing to walk him home from school? Twice a week?”

“To and from. It’s all after dark.”

“Well, it would have to be.” Riley grinned.

Graham rolled his eyes. “I mean, it takes place during our usual patrol, so I need you to sign off on it.”

“Patrol’s on hiatus. At your discretion, Soldier.”

“Finn—that doesn’t tell me if—.”

“Sean?” He raised his voice to carry above the end-of-class din. “Talk to you for a second?”

“Absolu—ah. Riley.” Sean slung his pack over one shoulder and walked toward them. It was not slow enough to seem hesitant, but it wasn’t relaxed, either. He was prepared to bolt. He smiled. It didn’t touch his eyes. “Who’s your friend?”

“Thought you’d still be home recuperating.” Sean was pale, dusky cream with no pinking, even on the apples of his cheeks—was that normal? Otherwise, he looked fine. He didn’t even walk with a limp.

Sean shrugged. “Buffy and Spike took care of me, and I recover fast. Am I in some kind of trouble, Riles?”

He shook his head. “Can you walk with me?”

“Will I get to go home afterward?”
“We’re trying to make sure you do,” Graham said. “Sean—please?”

Sean nodded slowly and walked with them to Maggie Walsh’s office. Once inside, they locked the door, closed the blinds, and scanned the room for bugs while Sean watched, wide-eyed and silent. “Clean,” Graham said. “Do you confirm?”

“Clean,” Riley responded. “Sean of Aurelius—this is Graham Miller, my second in command. Graham’s been briefed on your situation, and has volunteered to escort you to and from campus so you can safely attend classes. Regular patrols in the area are currently suspended due to the break-in at the Initiative facility, but will resume soon.”

“Oh,” Sean said. He didn’t elaborate, but he relaxed just a little.

“I’d like to offer my apologies. I’d have had something in place for you already if I’d known you were going to be back so soon.” Riley felt remiss—out of line and uncomfortable, like he’d made some major faux pas in front of a foreign dignitary. He tried to explain. “I thought I’d have a couple of weeks. Was it because of Buffy’s...?”

“Yeah,” Sean said. “Powerful stuff. He really knows?”

“I reviewed the footage from your time in the Initiative,” Graham said. “That’s why I volunteered.”

“So you know what I am?”

Graham’s jaw clenched. “I know who you are.”

“That’s an interesting distinction, but I’ll bite. Who am I?”

“You’re Sean Walden from Portland, Oregon, a junior at UC Sunnydale with a film production major. You’re a member of the Order of Aurelius, which includes William Pratt, an English literature tutor registered with UCS and, tangentially, Buffy Summers, also a UCS student.” Graham scrubbed a hand across his face. “Sean—what you are is someone who didn’t deserve to be kidnapped and beaten up. It doesn’t matter how fast you get better or whether you have a heartbeat.”

There was one long pause, and then Sean’s wariness fell away like it never was. He smiled. “It’s good to meet you, Graham.”

“So you two are okay?” Riley asked. “Do you need me for anything else?”

“We’ll be fine,” Sean said. “Thanks, Riles.”

“Don’t mention it. Stay safe.”

Riley didn’t get ten feet down the hallway before his beeper went off, flashing emergency code and coordinates in an unholy, evening-crushing string. So much for catching up on his sleep. He sighed and headed for the location, a wooded path at the edge of campus. When he got there, he found a squad of Initiative soldiers standing in a semi-circle facing outward like human police-line tape. The soldiers saluted as he approached.

“At ease,” he said. “What’s the story?”

For a moment, nobody answered, and then one of the soldiers—Porter, if he recalled correctly—said quietly, “Agent Finn. Sir—maybe you better see for yourself?”

The line parted to let him pass, all of them a touch too respectful. It made him nervous. Porter held a
light so he could make his way without stumbling, but he didn’t have to go very far. There, just off the path, nestled in the ferns at the edge of the trees, lay Forrest.

Or what was left of him.

He’d been beaten. Every single limb was broken in several places, legs laid out like candy canes smashed in their wrappers. His hands were crushed purple. And his face was a bloody, pulpy mess. The only reason Riley recognized him is because he was wearing his favorite off-duty shirt. He swallowed hard.

“When did you find him?”

“Right before we paged you, Sir,” Porter answered. “We didn’t wait.”

“Good. Has anyone touched the body?”

“No, Sir.”

That was also good. Riley glared at the band tee Forrest wore—what kind of name was *Dingoes Ate My Baby*, anyway? The shirt made everything one whole step more difficult. It was proof positive that Forrest was not killed in the line of duty, which meant that his was not the sort of death the Initiative was equipped to handle. “I’ll write up the paperwork and notify his family,” Riley said.

“Porter?”

“Yes, sir?”

“You stay. Everyone else is dismissed.”

They didn’t exactly run away, but they didn’t need to be asked twice, either. Riley didn’t blame them. He’d run away, too, if he could. Sometimes, it sucked to be the guy in charge.

Porter watched them go, expressionless. “So what do we do now?”

Riley sighed. “We call the police.”
Ignis Fatuus - Ethan

Ethan was done. Finished.

For weeks, he’d beaten his skull against metaphorical brick, drank deep of springs best left untasted, and netted nothing for his trouble but a headache. His hours of research dragged him to a single manifest conclusion: There was no such person as the Moon Vine.

He hadn’t wanted to believe it, of course. The finder’s fee was substantial on any scale, and more considering that he need not dispose of any bodies. He’d no clue where Dandelion’s fortune originated, but the boy had deep pockets. And so he’d chased every hint, every reference, every glimmer of rumor until it winked out and left him shivering alone in the dark, the footprint trail home swallowed up by the murk and the bog.

Well. That was dramatic imagery, wasn’t it? Overwrought, even. Perhaps some time away was in order, just to regain perspective. He would sleep on it, and deal with the contract in the morning. He stumbled through the doorway into his tower and collapsed in bed.

He woke to the smell of a breakfast fry-up. It routed childish nightmares of mockery and blistered toes. “Lstascht, my love, what would I do without you?” he murmured, pushing himself upright. Her eyes flickered, a barely perceptible shift of inner lids, and she set the tray on his lap. Then she disappeared through the curtain. When she returned, she carried his real-world things. His clothes had been cleaned and pressed, his shoes shined. Well, as shined as the battered paint and bloodstained leather could get. They had seen better days.

She put it all in the armoire and returned to stand next to his bed, ears lifting attentively.

“What’s this, then?”

One clawed fingertip tapped the edge of his plate clink! Dutifully, he bit into the sausage and chewed. It was fatty and tender, with an unfamiliar sweetness that lingered on the blade edge of his tongue. Not pork. Definitely not beef. Some unknown beast had died to make his meal. Best not to think too much about that. He was fairly certain she wouldn’t feed him anything sentient, in any case. Fairly certain. “Do I have plans today?” She set his cell phone on the edge of the tray. Frowning, he flipped it open.

There were fourteen missed calls.

It wouldn’t work here. His miniature world contained no cell towers, received no television or radio broadcasts, would support no listening devices, and he liked it that way. It was isolated by design—his to control. It was a hole he could climb into and pull in after him. The calls could not have come through if the phone had been here.

“I didn’t bring this with me,” he said. He’d left it on the counter in his L.A. hidey hole. “Did you bring this?” She tapped his plate again and hissed. “Yes, Mother.” Perhaps the Hsshthk would do his banking soon.

He ate hurriedly, washed, and dressed, all under Lstascht’s astute observation. When he finished, she shooed him back through the door into the real world, where he sat down at his new African ebony desk and listened to his voice mail.

The gates opened, the clouds parted, and choirs of angels sang their exultations, glory, hallalu, ìììù. Every last message was about the Moon Vine. Still no name—that would have been too easy—but
portents reverberated through the infernosphere, warnings in a dozen demon tongues. That was bad for the demons, but good for him. There was no question, now, that the Moon Vine existed, and no question where it might be found: Deep in the Sunnydale underground where humanity remained unwelcome despite the passing eons. It would be unwise to visit, and doubly so to go alone. He was looking forward to it.

While he was putting together his itinerary for the day, his phone rang.

“Rayne,” he answered.

“White walls,” the voice croaked.

“Yes, Chass. You told me.” He’d already spoken with the toad. White walls, white walls, she’d said, like half the demons in Sunnydale. No trouble tracking that one down—a military operation hunting monsters, of all things. Like the Nazis. They never did learn.

“Crack.”

Well, that was new. “The white walls have cracked?”


Even more interesting. “Someone has broken the white walls?”


“Do you mean to tell me you were in the white walls? The slayer broke you out?”


“Chass—I know they couldn’t hold you. Please don’t patronize.” Chass’s people weren’t like the Hsshtthk. They didn’t walk through worlds. They only walked through walls, becoming more or less substantial as their circumstances warranted. Also, their skin exuded a toxin that caused an adrenaline spike and vivid hallucinations in humans. Even inhaling around them could make you dizzy. They were hard to capture.


“The slayer—and others—came into the place with the white walls and broke some of the demons out. But not you?” Wheeze. “Do you think that was deliberate?”

“Knows us.” Gurgle. “Yeah.”

“Thank you, Chass. That’s quite helpful.”

“Gone. Bye.” There was a click and the line went dead.

Well, well. Such goings on in Sunnydale. He would have to pay a visit soon, but not today. Today he had other plans. Today was for indulgences, for luxuries. Today deserved a celebration.

He pulled his bag onto his shoulder and strode out into the morning sun.

“You can’t be here!” Blackberry hissed the moment she saw him, seizing his shirt sleeve and hauling
him to the door. Her nametag said Brandi in block letters. “How did you know I’d be here? Did you follow me?”

“I’m at a loss for words, I’m afraid.” Sometimes the gods of Chaos had a poignant sense of irony. At others, they leaned toward the absurd. This was more the latter. He wanted to laugh. Instead, he tugged his pant cuff up to display his battered footwear. “I came for new shoes.”

“What?” The girl raised her fist. He laid his palm against it.

“My attorney—Jason Stubbs—recommended this establishment.” A second passed. Two. “He recently purchased some—.”

“Russet calfskin. Size nine and a half.” She slumped against the wall. “You just want shoes?”

He smiled. “I know Dash by reputation, of course. In my circle—well. But I’ve never needed anything like that.” He waved the notion away, and the girl looked relieved. “I’d no idea the more mundane products were so well-made.”

“And you didn’t know I worked here?”

He schooled his face to innocence. “My dear girl, how on earth would I?” She’d said it aloud in front of him not one week previous, but that was neither here nor there. Her presence was incidental. She had mostly slipped his mind. “No, no. I’m looking for something in a charcoal suede. Do you think you might help me?”

She nodded, full lips pursed, dark eyes ringed with darker circles, and let him follow her back into the store. He sat on the little square stool while she measured his feet—separately—and recorded a complicated string of numbers. “For a perfect fit,” she said when he raised his eyebrows.

She looked over the numbers on her clipboard, frowned, and measured again. “You wore shoes that were too small,” she said, sliding his battered loafers back onto his feet. “When you were growing.” It wasn’t enough of a question to require a response—not really—but she was looking at him like she expected him to say something. He didn’t, and the silence stretched uncomfortably long. Fortunately, his ringing cell spared him further curiosity.

He held one finger in the air to ward her off, and answered. “Rayne.”

“It’s Chad Abbot, Doctor Rayne. What can you tell me about Ishtar?”
“And?” Joyce’s eyes sparkled with amusement over the edge of her teacup.

“I...uh...that is....” He took a deep breath. “I called him. Last night.”

“Rupert!” She set her tea down, leaned across the table, and hugged him. “I’m so proud of you!”

“Yes. Bully for me.” He felt sick.

She laughed. “So what did he say?”

“We’re meeting this evening. To jam.” He’d gotten through the phone call without stuttering. He even managed to flirt a little. The anxiety only settled in after he hung up. “He’s ordering pizza. I’m bringing beer.”

Joyce clapped her hands. “That’s a date!”

“I suppose it is, isn’t it?” If he’d had doubt about Raj’s interest before the call, the sliding suggestion in his tone had removed it once and for all. It was definitely a date. His pulse quickened. “What about Greg?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “He’s sweet, but there’s just no—.” A knock on the door interrupted her.

“Are you expecting someone?” she whispered.

He shook his head and stood. It was full daylight, so he doubted the threat would be demonic. He peered through the peephole. Willow, Xander, Anya, and Oz stood outside, fidgeting. Worry twisted Willow’s face. He looked over his shoulder at Joyce and mouthed the words, “It’s the children,” at her.

Her face drained white.

She wore one of Giles’ old band shirts and absolutely nothing else. It was soft and gray, no longer truly black, and thin from repeated washing. It covered her to mid-thigh, and clung to her slender curves. The fabric was translucent enough that the dark circles of her areolas were visible beneath it, and her hair was mussed like the morning after.

She and Greg had attended an art show the previous evening—some kind of gala. They took separate cars, since he worked in the morning and had to leave early. After he left, she’d stayed, socializing, networking, and drinking champagne. When she realized she was too tipsy to drive, she had—quite responsibly, to his way of thinking—called him to pick her up, and she’d slept on his couch to make it easier for him to drive her back to her car. It was all perfectly explainable, all perfectly innocent. They had nothing to be ashamed of.

Which wouldn’t make one jot of difference to the children if they discovered Buffy’s half-naked mother in his flat. He raised his eyebrows and pointed to the stairs.

Joyce nodded. She took the blankets from the couch and her teacup from the table and fled. When she was safely hidden behind the half wall that enclosed his sleeping loft, he opened the door.

“Hi, Giles,” Willow said. She pushed past him into the living room. The rest of the children followed her. “I think we have a problem.”
“Do come in,” he said, and closed the door.

“There’s something wrong with Buffy.” Xander launched into his complaint before he’d even turned around. “Giles, you gotta do something!”

He sighed and rubbed his temples. This conversation had been coming for some time, certainly, but it could not have come at a more awkward moment, with Joyce listening upstairs. “What is it you think is wrong with Buffy?”

“Everything!” Willow said. “She’s not her!”

“She is pretty different,” Oz said.

“There’s Spike, for one thing,” Xander said.

Anyá sat down on the couch and began paging through the book he’d left on the side table. It was written in medieval German. His translation had been slow going. “Anyá, can you read that?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

“Could we stay on topic? What are we going to do about Buffy?” Xander’s jaw was clenched, his lips a fine white line. Anyá went back to her reading.

“Again, I ask, ‘What’s wrong with her?’” He pointed at Xander. “I will not discuss her relationship with Spike.” He had to cut the boy off before he could work himself into a lather. Buffy’s relationship choices had never truly made sense to him, but Spike’s devotion was obvious, and he was a damned sight better than Angel. “What exactly is wrong?”

“She killed Veruca,” Willow said. Her voice was very small.

“The night before last, as I recall,” Giles said, as gently as he could. “To save you.”

“Uh...and Spike. I...it was my fault.” He was aware of that, too. Willow’s shaky aim had put her at risk, and Buffy had acted to compensate—decisively, lethally, and without remorse. It was unlike the old Buffy, but he approved. He’d called in a favor to make Veruca’s body disappear.

“You missed, Willow. That’s not your fault.” He pressed the girl down into a chair and brewed more tea.

“I was rattled, Giles. You should have seen her fighting. She wasn’t Buffy—she was...blurry!”

“She has been training with Spike.”

“Well...yeah...okay, but she also knows stuff. Like history and poetry and...and....” When he smiled at her, she took a shuddering breath. “Spike knows those things, doesn’t he?”

“Their minds are linked.”

Willow’s mouth dropped open. “So they don’t even have to study together. She just knows what he knows?” She wrinkled her forehead. “No wonder her grades are so good!”

“She smells different,” Oz said. He stepped up behind Willow and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Yeah,” Willow said. “And her aura is different, too. Way different.”

“You know what gets me?” Xander said. “It’s that she had me fix Oz’s cage door before he broke
“You’d rather fix it after?” Giles set a cup of tea on the table in front of Willow. She held it in trembling hands.

“No,” Xander said, dark eyes glinting. “She had me replace the hinges on the door. They were rusted out. If I hadn’t, that would have been what broke. Since I did, the lock broke.” He folded his arms across his chest. The corner of his mouth turned up. “She knew that was going to happen. So tell me. Is Spike psychic?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Giles said, “although the Aurelians do have something of a reputation for it.” He folded his arms across his chest, too, and smiled—ever so slightly—at Xander. A standoff. “But Buffy is.”

“Wha...huh?” Xander’s smirk dissolved in confusion.

“Slayer dreams.” Willow’s voice was small again.

“Exactly.” Giles said. He dropped into the chair next to Willow and put his hand over hers.

“Part of Buffy’s preoccupation, lately, has been administrative. Along with the Ring of Amara, Spike found a treasure trove.”

“Well, yeah. That’s why he’s rich.”

“Bosh. He’s rich because Buffy put it up for auction. He’d have left it there.”

From the couch, still absorbed in her reading, Anya snorted. “Vampires,” she said, and Giles had to agree.

“At any rate, she’s been working to deadline. She purchased the mansion on Crawford Street—do you remember it?” Willow nodded. “The renovations have already begun. We’ve hired a pair of witches from the coven at Devon and expedited the accreditation paperwork. Classes will begin at The Academy Arcanum on Monday afternoon.”

Her mouth opened and closed several times. With her bright hair and pale skin, she looked remarkably like a goldfish. “I’m going to magic school?”

“If that’s what you’d like.”

She launched herself at him and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. “I’m going to magic school!” She spun and hugged Oz. “I’m going to magic school!”

“I heard that somewhere,” he said, hugging her back.

“Xander, I’m going to magic school!”

“That’s great, Will.” When she turned to chatter at Oz, Xander continued on in a conversational tone. “So I noticed you didn’t really answer our questions.” Giles raised his eyebrows. “What are you hiding?”

“Why would I be hiding something?”
“See, that? Answering a question with a question? Very suspicious.” Xander leaned in close and spoke quietly. For just a moment, he sounded like an adult. “She’s not Buffy, is she? That’s why she’s acting weird.”

“She’s Buffy. I checked.”

“Her soul is—.”

“Right where it belongs. Neither is she possessed nor under any kind of external influence. I checked that, as well.”

“Right.” Xander narrowed his eyes. “Overnight, everything changes. She gets engaged to her nemesis, learns to cook, speaks French, and moves so fast you can’t focus your eyes on her. Nah. You know something’s off, or you wouldn’t have checked. But it’s okay.” Xander jammed his fists in his pockets. “We’ll figure it out.” He lifted his voice. “You guys ready to go? G-man’s got nothin’ for us.”

They all gathered together to herd out the door. To Willow he said, “I’ll see you Monday.” To Anya he said, “Are you taking my book?”

“Can I borrow it? Please? I just got to the part where they flay the interlopers.”

“Flay the....” He shook his head. “Yes, of course—on the condition that you’ll help me translate it when you finish.”

“Your terms are acceptable,” Anya said, and shook his hand.

When he’d ushered the children out the door and locked it behind him, Joyce appeared at the top of the stairs. She still wore his scandalous tee, but her hair had been tamed. “You know,” she said, smiling down at him, “I think they’re right.”

“How’s that?”

“She’s different. You’re hiding something.”
Chapter Summary

"If cats could talk, they wouldn't." ~Nan Porter

“Are you bigger?” she asked the cat. “You seem bigger.”

It blinked its golden eyes and butted its head into her outstretched hand like a kitten. She left her palm resting on its shoulders as they wound their way through a maze of crumbling columns and passed under the single remaining arch into a gallery of statues.

They were crumbling, too, but monumental, each several stories high. From either side of the corridor, they looked down on her, stone eyes implacable, stone mouths grave. Each was clad in the finery of their place and time. She recognized some of them—Aphrodite draped in revealing folds, Thor hefting his hammer, the many-armed Kali with her garland of skulls, and Ma’at in red, sans lab coat, with a feather in her hair—but most were unfamiliar. There were hundreds of them—thousands. More, maybe. The gallery stretched out as far as she could see.

“Where are we?” she asked. The cat looked up at her but didn’t answer. “Okay...yeah. We’re not anywhere. Got that. But what does all this represent?” She gestured broadly at the statues, at the ceiling-less corridor, at the stone block floor. “And why does it always look like Cibola?” The cat resumed its journey, so she did, too.

“You’re really not talking?” she said after a few moments had passed. The cat was really not talking. She’d have to figure it out herself. “Fine. Let’s see.”

Start with Cibola. The cat was part of her subconscious, and her subconscious always looked like Cibola. So what was it about Cibola that dominated her imagination?

She’d spent a lot of time there, sure, but she’d spent more in other worlds. It wasn’t the first world she’d traveled to, either. That had been the hell world she went to the summer after she stabbed Angel. Cibola was beautiful, but she’d been to heaven, and nothing compared to that. She’d visited many times, but there were other worlds like that, too, a dozen of them. She’d made friends in lots of places. The only difference she could think of....

She had a room in Cibola.

Her own room, peach walls with green trim. A green plaid comforter. A wardrobe file full of clothing configurations—nanotech program specs for a single garment that never had to be cleaned or repaired, that never wore out or got stains. A library where she could lose herself. A garden where she could wander. Wastelands and ruins to explore. And a family. Children. Willy’s nieces and nephews, at first, and then his kids, after he and Tola married, beautiful dark eyed babies with their mother’s round cheeks. Aunty Buffy.

She had almost stayed.

Even now, she missed them, got a bittersweet little ache in her chest whenever she talked to Willy. He was too pale, too frail—hardly recognizable as the bronzed and confident patriarch she’d seen...
barely a month before she died. She worried for him. That’s why she had to get him home.

She could take Spike, make a vacation of it. The sun there wouldn’t hurt him. He could lay naked in the garden, splash in the pools, and afterward they could go back to....

To the room that wasn’t hers, yet.

“That’s why it’s all falling apart.” She said the words out loud even though she was pretty sure the cat wouldn’t answer. “Cibola was almost home—or a possible home, anyway—and now it’s gone. Everything I change makes it less likely that it’ll be the same place I left.” Willy’s kids might even be different. Without her interference, Tola would come back sooner. Everything would happen earlier. Differently. “I can’t go back.”

The cat pressed against her and she twined her fingers in its fur. “I guess some part of me knew that.” She looked back at the statues. Sunlight glinted off their time-softened angles. “So why are there gods?” She stomped her foot. “This was a lot easier when you asked me questions. You know, ‘Who am I? What am I? Why am I here?’ Can’t we do some of that, now?” The cat did not answer.

That’s when she noticed the first block.

It was roughly the same size as the rest of the statues, but uncarved. A blank block of stone. “That’s weird. Was someone going to make another one? Get the whole set?” She didn’t recognize any of the surrounding statues, so she couldn’t tell if there was a god missing.

Further along, she saw others like it, some set in among other clusters, and some all by themselves. She saw one that was half carved, a human form emerging from the block, left fist in the air like....

“Is that Superman?” She moved closer. His legs were still trapped from the thigh down, and he seemed to be straining, stretching to pull himself free, but it was definitely Superman. “He’s not a god.” A beat passed. “Is he?”

The cat didn’t answer, of course. “So what’s the what? Did you forget how to talk?” She might’ve offended the cat, which served it right for being so difficult, but it stopped walking. She kept going, looking back over her shoulder at it. It would catch up. “Are you a different cat?” That was a dumb question. The cat was part of her mind. If she thought it was the same cat, it was the same cat.

“Yeah, that’s not it. I’m just curious why you—.”

She threw herself backward just in time to avoid falling into the...hole? Shaft? Well. Yeah. It looked like a well. Not one of the little shingle-roofed wells you see on post cards, but a real well, six feet across with a foot-high stone border. “You couldn’t have warned me?” The cat sat down and proceeded to wash its face, licking a paw and scrubbing it first over one ear and then over the other.

She crawled over to the well and peered in. “Whoa.”

Something gold-white and gleaming swirled in the depths of the well. It smelled like...something. Fresh baked bread or waffle cones or mulled wine or apple pie or roasted garlic or...or heaven. She didn’t know what it smelled like, but it made her mouth water. She found a bucket tethered to the stone with a rope and lowered it in. By the time she pulled it back up, got it in her hands, she was whimpering. There was a scoop, but she didn’t bother with it. She tipped the whole bucket up and drank until it was empty.

“Miss Summers?” She wanted to lie still, to let the warmth and joy spread over her in silence, but the voice was insistent. “Buffy?” She opened her eyes. “It is a beautiful day, isn’t it? I like to pull a chair into this hallway and read on my breaks. It’s the best spot.”
Jennifer from Sunnydale Martial Arts was five foot six and stocky, without an ounce of fat on her body. She wore gray sweatpants and a blue SMA tee. Buffy glanced out the floor-to-ceiling window at the bright winter day. “It’s nice here.”

Jennifer smiled. “Well, here’s your certification paperwork—both styles. Great job in there, by the way. You’re amazing.”

“Thanks, and,” she waved the paperwork, “thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She hesitated. “Uh...Buffy? Can I ask...um...where did you learn all of this?”

“I trained privately.”

“To be what?” Jennifer laughed like it was startled out of her. “A superhero?”

“Something like that.”
“Hi...uh, hello, Angel?”

“Yes?” If the call had come in on his office line, he would have let it go to the answering machine. The sun was just about to set, and his keys were in his hand. He was on his way to Sunnydale to work on his drawing of Sean, and he’d agreed to meet the kid for coffee first. But the call came in on his cell phone, and only a few people had that number.

“Um, hi, Angel...it’s...it’s Willow.”

His stomach knotted. “What’s wrong? Has something happened to Buffy?”

“Yes?” The heavy plastic of the cell phone cracked warningly in his hand and he relaxed his grip. “No...maybe? We don’t know. That’s what we wanted to talk to you about.” There was a funny little hitch in her voice. “Is there someplace we can meet to talk? Soon? Tomorrow, maybe? I know it’s short notice....”

He sighed. “Meet me at the Espresso Pump in two hours.”

“You’re...coming to Sunnydale? Right now?”

“On business. I was just leaving when you called.”

“Oh! Thank you, Angel. Thanks. We’ll see you then.”

They were already there when he arrived. Buffy’s high school friends perched on tall stools clustered around a tiny table, smiling too brightly. Conspicuously absent were Giles, Spike, and, of course, Buffy. This was an intervention.

“Angel! Over here!” Willow waved, and he threaded his way through the crowd to their table. “I didn’t know there was music, tonight. I’ve never heard of the band before, but they must be good—look at all these people!”

“They’re good,” Oz said.

Angel nodded. It was an unpublicized performance, all acoustic, with no cover. The people here were the trendy kids who always knew about these things—like Sean. Effortlessly social. The room buzzed with conversation.

“Buffy and Spike are together. There’s nothing I can do about it.” He figured he might as well get that out of the way right up front.

Xander glowered, and Willow shot him a warning look. “It’s not that,” she said, “or not just that. There’ve been...she’s been different.”

Angel grunted noncommittally. No way was he going to tell them anything Buffy hadn’t seen fit to tell them herself.

“Getting freaky with the undead? That’s different,” Xander said.

“No, it’s not,” his girlfriend—Anya was her name—said. She waited, arms folded, while Xander spluttered denials. “Buffy dated him.” She jerked her head at Angel. “A vampire boyfriend is totally in character. Plus, there’s the claim. I don’t know exactly what slayers are, Xander, but they’re not
human.”

“That’s true,” Angel said.

When Xander started to wind up again, Oz said, “Neither am I.”

Angel let his nostrils flare, taking in the scent of the group. None of them were completely human, but he decided not to say that out loud.

“But...do you know what’s going on with Buffy?” Willow’s eyebrows knitted anxiously. “She’s been sorta...scary.”

“Short fuse,” Anya said. “I think it’s the claim.”

“Have you asked Buffy?” he said, and Willow had grace enough to look guilty.

“Uh...not yet? She’s been hard to talk to, lately.”

“What about Giles?” She actually winced.

“He didn’t tell us anything—but we know there’s something going on, Angel! I checked for everything. Possession, mind control, psychic influence—I even checked to see if her soul was being drained away!”

“Is it?”

“No! It’s totally the opposite. She’s always been powerful—on account of she’s a slayer? But it’s like she was a bonfire, before, and now she’s Mount Vesuvius!”

“They followed her to try to figure out what she was up to.” Anya rolled her eyes. “Turns out she’s just taking a buttload of classes.”

Angel’s jaw clenched. Invasive, nattering brats....

“She killed someone,” Oz said.

That got his attention. “What happened?”

“Oh...that’s what we’ve been trying to say, Angel. First there was Spike, which...okay, lifestyle choice...not judging. But then she was all...weird and serious and...she can cook, all of a sudden. When did she learn to cook? ‘Cause she doesn’t hang out with us, anymore, but...but she got all dressed up for dinner with Giles.” Her face crumpled. “And then she killed Veruca....”

“Snapped her neck,” Anya said. She broke an imaginary stick in the air over the table—with sound effects.

Angel nodded. “Why?”

“She tried to kill Willow,” Oz said.

“Veruca’s a werewolf. She tried to get into Oz’s cage,” Anya said, “right before he changed. When that didn’t work, she went after Willow—some kind of werewolf love triangle thing. They had a tranquilizer gun, but those things aren’t magic. You can only point them one direction at a time, and there were two slavering werewolves. So Buffy—sensibly—killed Veruca and shot Oz.” She shrugged. “It’s what I would have done.”
“But you were a demon, An,” Xander said. “Humans don’t do things like that.”

Angel stared silently at Xander until the boy looked away. Then he said, “Yeah. They do.”

“And even if they didn’t,” Anya said, “Buffy isn’t human.”

“But Buffy...our Buffy...would have been...she wouldn’t.... She was so calm, Angel. Like killing someone was no big deal.” Willow picked her coffee cup up, moved it six inches to the left, and set it back down. “Like it’s something she does every day.”

Angel’s brow furrowed. Where had she been for the last four years? “It is.”

“Well...yeah, I guess...but those are demons and monsters and things, not people.” Willow’s lower lip trembled. “She doesn’t kill people!” He stared at her, utterly speechless.

And Anya gave up. She balanced a mug of steaming hot coffee against her lower lip with her fingertips and watched the band set up. They decorated the room with live plants, trailed ivy from floor to ceiling like partly opened curtains, ringed the stage in potted pinks, and marked stage left and stage right with massive emerald green ferns.

A young man whose short yellow hair spiked out in every direction tucked in a stray strand of ivy, adjusted a flower pot, and then turned to survey his work. He was joined by a very dark skinned girl with finely sculpted features and full lips—Ethiopian, maybe? She leaned in and whispered something in his ear. He nodded once, sharply, and walked into the back.

After one long moment of silence, Oz said, “I’m a person.”

“Well...yeah,” Willow said, “like Veruca. That’s kind of the point.”

“Angel’s a person,” Oz said.

“Of course. He has a soul.” Angel growled, too low for humans to hear. The werewolf raised an eyebrow.

“Spike’s a person,” Oz said.

“Well, okay, but I don’t see what that has to do with...oh. Oh dear.” Willow’s eyes practically bulged. “That’s horrible! Poor Buffy!”

“What? What did I miss?” Xander glanced around the table for an explanation.

“They’re all people,” Anya said. She sounded bored. “Oz, Angel, Spike—all people.”

“So...what?”

Anya sighed. “You decided Oz and Angel were exceptions to the demons-aren’t-people rule, because Oz is sometimes human and Angel has a soul, but now there’s Spike. He’s not an exception. He’s just a vampire.”

“Are you trying to tell me the man-shaped tick isn’t a person?”

“No, Xander. I’m trying to tell you they all are. Every demon. Every vampire. All of them.” She smiled, broad and false, and turned back to watch the stage.

“But that’s.... Oh, god.” The smirk died on his lips. “Willow, that’s...does Buffy know?”
“Yeah,” Angel said, and the world according to the new and improved Buffy shifted into place. If they were all people, every last monster she’d staked, pummeled, or beheaded each night since she was fifteen years old, she was as much a monster as they were. “Pretty sure she does.”

“But...why does she have to kill them, then?” She moved her coffee cup back to its original location with an adamant thump. Angel opened his mouth to answer. “Don’t—I know. It’s just not fair.” Her shoulders slumped.

Yellow Hair reappeared on the stage carrying a wooden stool with an embroidered cushion. He was followed closely by someone whose hair tufted up like the head of a thistle. She—Angel was pretty sure it was a she—stood with her back to the room, spine tense and jaw set. She said something he couldn’t make out, and Yellow Hair looked up, over her shoulder, into the crowd. Then he stepped past her and walked directly toward Angel.

He stopped at their table and raised his hands, palms outward. “Hey—I’m not looking for trouble.” His eyes lost focus for a moment, like he was looking through them, and he shuddered. “Not from anybody at this table.”

“We’re just here for the music, man.” Oz extended a hand. “Heard good things.”

“Huh,” Yellow Hair shook his hand. “Gotta love Sunnydale. Jordan Pauling.”

“Oz.”

“From Dingoes? No way!” Jordan and Oz bumped fists. “I’ve never seen you guys live. I didn’t know you....”

“For a couple of years, now. This is my girlfriend Willow, that’s Anya and Xander, and that’s Angel.”

“Great to meet you.” Jordan nodded at them and then turned to Xander. “The girls sent me over to bring you a message.”

“Uh...me?” Xander looked over each of his shoulders in turn, like Jordan might have been talking to someone behind him.

“Yeah. They see stuff that might happen. I...I don’t, so I don’t know what it’s about or if it’s good or bad or what, but I said I’d tell you.”

“Oh honey!” Anya patted Xander’s shoulder. “You get a prophecy! I hope it’s a good one. The bad ones can be so much trouble.”

“Oh...kay.” Jordan eyed Anya uncomfortably. “Here goes. They said, ‘Watch your footing, or you’ll fall into the tangle. The garden has escaped its beds.’”

“Oh!” Anya bounced in her seat, punching Xander happily in the arm. “A cryptic warning. This is exciting!”


“What do you see?” Angel asked.

“Huh?” The blood drained from Jordan’s face.

“Your friends see what might happen. What do you see?” He leaned toward the boy and smiled, not
quite letting the demon show. “What did you see?”

His eyes widened, but he didn’t flinch. “I see people the way they are.” He nodded at Angel. “I see what you are—and him.” He flicked his eyes to Oz and then to Willow. “And her. But those two?” He cocked his head, looking at Xander and Anya with unfocused eyes. “I see, but I don’t know. There’s something...something.” He shrugged. “I have to get back. It’s almost time to start. Good to meet you all. Oz—I’ll catch you at your next show.” And then he was off, threading back through the crowd.

“Well, that wasn’t disturbing at all,” Xander said.

“What did he mean about Xander and Anya?” Willow asked. “They’re human...right?”

Just as he opened his mouth to answer, Angel felt the approaching signature. He heard only one step behind him before cool fingers, spread wide, stroked the back of his head from the hairline upward. His jaw went slack. “You’ve got three hours to stop that.” Sean snickered. His powerful little fingers dug into Angel’s scalp with a force just shy of painful.

“You don’t mind if I mess up your hair?” At the top of each stroke, Sean grabbed a hank of hair in each fist and tugged gently. Angel swallowed hard.

“Not even a little.”

“Sean?” Willow said. “You know...Angel?”

“Hey, Willow. Yeah. He’s doing a drawing for me—a portrait. It’ll be a Christmas gift for my grandparents, if he ever gets it done. He’s kind of a perfectionist, but you can’t argue with talent.”

“Oh,” Willow breathed, the confusion falling away from her face. “You do draw. I remember.” The smile she flashed him was sincere. “You’re good. I mean, the way I found that out was...yeah. But you’re really good!”

Sean nodded. “He comes to my apartment a couple of times a week to work on it, which is really going to cost me.” He pulled an unused stool from the next table and sat down. “On the upside, now we’re buds, and I can convince him to come out with me, because....”

“Because I need to get out more.” Angel laid his arm across the back of Sean’s stool. The contact soothed both soul and demon, called a truce in the battlefield of his mind, and he felt his shoulders unknot.
“Five—well, six. There’s a bee flat at the end, but you can skip it.” Raj’s dark eyes creased at their edges and Giles smiled back. “Like this. Gee...dee...e minor, then eff...that’s a cee and this will be a dee. Got it?” His nervousness had evaporated as soon as he got his guitar in his hands. It gave him somewhere to focus other than inside his own head, where Joyce’s words still echoed: You’re hiding something.

“Got it.”

“And then back to the...oh, nice run.” The man’s slender fingers moved effortlessly over the strings—mesmerizing—and Giles began to sing. “...if I leave here tomorrow...would you still remember me....”

Then beedle bah bah beedle bah bah beedle bah bah bay rang out from somewhere near the door—in an entirely unrelated key. It chased the music from his mind, and he stilled his strings. Beedle bah bah beedle bah bah beedle bah bah bay sounded again.

“Ignore it,” Raj said, throwing a half-hearted glare in the direction of the interruption.

“You don’t think it’s important?”

“Might be.” The tiniest flick upward of his eyebrows, and he licked his lips. “What’s that next line?”

“Ah...yes. Well, the chords are the same through all but the last bit.” He cycled through them twice and then sang, “...for I must be traveling on now...’cause there’s too many places I’ve got to see....”

Beedle bah bah beedle bah bah beedle bah bah bay came again from near the door. Raj’s shoulders slumped. This time his glare carried more venom. Beedle bah bah beedle bah bah beedle bah bah bay.

“Do you need to take that?”

“I do.” He set his bass into its stand and stood, straight and precise. Then he strode to the coatrack near the door, fished in the pocket of his jacket, and retrieved his cell phone. ‘On Monday morning, when they’re paying me to take it,” he said, holding the button on the side of the phone until the screen went dark. “This job steals enough from me. It can’t have my weekends, too.” He turned, sloe eyed and smoky, and said, once more, “What’s that next line?”

So Giles played the next line and all the lines after it, over and over again, until they’d worked it into something performable. Raj’s pitch was strong, and his voice clear, but not showy, not smooth. He would never sing lead. Still, their harmonies weren’t half bad, and the bass added a lush low end that he’d missed playing solo. “You should join me for a few songs,” Giles said. “Next month at the Pump.”

“I’d like that.” He thumped the low fifth string on his bass, bent it into a half-muted growl, and said, “Do you know this?” Thump thump thump thump. E. Thump thump thump thump. A. Thump thump thump thump. Gee. Thump thump thump thump. Cee. And again.

“Tell no one,” Giles said, and sang, “...load up on guns...bring your friends....” Raj threw his head back and laughed, the line of his throat strong and lean, but he didn’t stop playing. Giles joined him.

“It’s a shame that’ll never make it to your set list,” Raj said when they took a break for pizza. “Gotta
say—for a forty-something academic, you keep a truly impressive anti-establishment snarl in your back pocket.”

“I may have some residual anger.” He patted the body of his guitar. “Better than therapy.” They sat together, knees touching, on the white leather couch. It looked new—rented, perhaps—as did the coffee table, square, spare, and Spartan. A bachelor’s flat. No treasures adorned the off-white walls save for Raj’s five string bass.

“No doubt. So what was it? Your standard PhD or prison offer?”

“You’re joking, but that’s not far from the truth.”

“When the smart ones go bad, they go bad big?” He chuckled and raked his fingers through his hair. His hand came to rest on Giles’ thigh. “So...what? Robbery? Grand theft auto? Did you kill someone?”

“Mmm.” Giles sipped his beer, waiting for the gates to go up over Raj’s gaze. They didn’t. “That record is sealed. What about you?” Slowly, subtly, the hand inched upward, kneaded the muscle at the top of his thigh.

“Me? No rap sheet. No bad boy youth to channel.” If there was regret in the cast of his eyes, it was gone before he blinked. “I was a nerd—into model planes. Good grades. Played standup bass in jazz band to round out my college applications. Made my parents proud.” That was charming, and utterly normal, so Giles asked normal questions.

“Are they nearby?”

He shook his head. “Korea. My dad’s military. I have a sister in New York, a brother in Houston. We’re all...kind of adrift, I guess. Not estranged, but we aren’t close. Married to our work. Do you have family here?”

“Yes and no.” He lifted Raj’s hand from his thigh, and pressed the back of it to his lips. “My father is still alive. He lives in Bath. My mother passed away last year, and I had a sister who died when she was a teenager. On this continent, there’s Buffy and the rest of the children, and Joyce.”

“You have...kids?” A criminal record didn’t alarm him, but children did?

“That does seem out of character, doesn’t it?” He slid his arm behind Raj’s back, and the man settled in against him, warm and solid. Yielding. “During a time of doubt about the direction my research should take, I took a job as a librarian at Sunnydale High. I figured it would keep me sane while I regrouped. That’s where I met Buffy.” They were half-truths, but half of Sunnydale was more than most people were prepared to accept.

“Buffy? Sounds like a cheerleader.” A momentary flash of Buffy in the red and gold getup she’d worn for the brief time she was on the cheerleading squad. Giles laughed.

“She was that. But also bright and quite troubled. Divorced parents. Anger issues. Burned down the gymnasium at her previous school. Sunnydale was her last chance.” That was less than half the truth, but still more than he’d told Willow and Xander. He swallowed the knot of guilt in his throat.

Raj grinned. “Identification.”

“Dear lord, yes.” And that was an understatement.

“So who are the children?”
“Buffy’s high school friends—although none of them are actually children any longer. Buffy herself is engaged.”

“Congratulations, Dad. Do you like the guy?”

“Strangely enough, I do.” He would think later about what that meant. Much later. With scotch.

“Well, what more could you ask for?” Raj laid the splayed fingers of his right hand on Giles’ chest. His eyes shone. “So...Joyce is....”

“Buffy’s mother.”

“Your friend from the club?” Giles nodded. “You did some fine distracting. Let me guess. Buffy’s the blond?” He nodded again. “The guy in black leather—he’s the fiancé? The one you like?”

He laid his hand over the top of Raj’s. “I’m afraid so.”

“Tell me about the others?”

So he did.

It wasn’t everything, of course. He omitted watchers and slayers, demons and magic, the mouth of hell, and every last apocalypse, but it was enough that Raj whispered, “I’m jealous,” when he finished.

“Of what? Of me?”

“Of your family. It’s been five years since I saw my parents. My brother and sister—longer. And longer than that since I stayed in one place for more than six months at a time. I stopped hanging pictures.” He waved at the white walls. “And you’ve got this great big, boisterous, high-drama clan, complete with in-laws, exes, and potential grandchildren. It’s amazing.”

Giles swallowed hard. “I have been lucky.”

“You’ve—” The phone rang. Not a cell phone in a pocket, but the one on the kitchen wall. The sound ricocheted off the empty walls and set his nerves jangling. “Damn it,” Raj said, but he didn’t pull away.

“Someone really wants to reach you.”

“Someone can wait,” he growled. “I’m busy.” Giles chuckled and leaned in to kiss him. The phone rang again.

“I’ll unplug it,” Raj said.

“No.” He put his hands into that thick, black hair and pulled the other man to him, pressed their lips together briefly. “No. I should go.” As if on cue, the phone rang once more. He stood and picked up his guitar case.

“Next week?” Raj asked. “Same time, same place?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Giles said, and left. When he arrived at his flat, his own phone was ringing. Eleven on a Sunday evening? He jogged to it and answered. “Giles, here.”

“Giles.” Xander’s voice was rough. “You have to come. We’re at the hospital. It’s Willow.”
“Was it an attack?” He held her slender body in his arms, soaked in the softness of her skin, her hair, pressed his human lips against her throat and felt the pulse beneath her skin. Had anyone told him before that a slayer—particularly this slayer—would be soft, he’d have laughed outright. Slayers were warriors, born, bred, and cultivated, the fiery fist of the almighty. They weren’t soft. But now? Now, he wanted to kneel before her, rest his head on her belly, and offer her his life. Or his death, should that be more to her liking. Whatever he had to give, it was hers.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

She brushed her fingertips over his cheekbone like he was made of spun glass, her touch so delicate he might have thought he’d imagined it if he hadn’t been looking, and the backs of his eyes grew warm. His lower lip trembled. *Touch has a memory.* He’d have growled if it wouldn’t have hurt her. Bloody Keats.

“I don’t think so. It feels like...like me. Like my own mind. So either it comes from inside me, or it’s the Powers That Be, you know...being.”

“And the cat?”

“The Observer,” she said. “Memory, maybe? But why’s it getting bigger?”

“Buffy, love.” He was afraid to ask the question. “How much do you remember? From before?” He knew there were gaps in her memory, recent red and ragged tears, and scars of older losses. He could feel them pulse behind her eyes, but she’d lost so much she might not even have noticed.

“It’s...” She shivered. “Some of it’s pretty foggy. Disjointed, like patchwork.”

“You seem to remember upcoming events clear enough.” It was strange how sharp she was about specifics a century in her past. Too sharp. It required explanation.

“I don’t. Not really. Not first hand.”

He frowned. “Not followin’.”

“My watcher,” she said, but she didn’t mean Rupert. The name in her head was the vivid green, singular *Dawn* who didn’t yet exist. “She and I—we memorized everything important. So I could be gone for a year or two or...five...without anybody catching on.” She raised her eyebrows. “To the fast dimensions where years equal this world’s seconds?”

“To Hell, you mean.”

“It’s all hell.” She shrugged. “We’re all demons to somebody.” She didn’t say it, but he heard it anyway: *Heaven is still water*. He didn’t know what it meant. “How are you feeling?” She smoothed a curl from his forehead. “Recovered from that dart, yet?”

He chuckled. “Ketamine? That’s a good time for a bloke like me.”

“I should have known.” She rolled her eyes. “At that dosage, though? You went right down. I’ve never seen a vampire just—.”

Three sharp raps sounded and the door cracked open. “You folks okay back here?” Willy stuck his
“We’re fine, Will. What’s up?”

He came all the way in and closed the door behind him. Then he extended his hand. One of the small golden security spheres he had placed around the building as deterrent to magical attacks lay on his palm in several pieces, its light extinguished and its edges charred. “Bloody hell.”

Willy nodded. “They’re all like that. You didn’t feel anything?”

“Not a whisper.”

“Good.” He smiled, grim and dangerous, and there was a glint of satisfaction in his eyes. “Good. But now my security is offline until I can get it repaired—all of it. The whole building. Wanted to let you guys know.”

“Best we make ourselves scarce, then?”

“I do not know that it is necessary. I’m bringing in extra physical security. They’ll be here in the next fifteen minutes.” He waved the shattered sphere. “This will be fixed by morning.”

Buffy winced. “How much is that going to cost you?”

“Not one red cent. Don’t you worry. After the last time? Got myself a lifetime guarantee.”

“You think the attack was aimed at us?” Willy stared at Buffy until her cheeks pinked. “Fine. And you’re sure we’re safe here? I mean, you blocked this attack, but the attacker’s still out there, and—.”

“You misunderstand,” Willy said, jaw clenched, eyebrows flat over deep-set eyes, fists practically shaking in anger. He was hardly recognizable. “You do not attack my home or the people under my roof. This?” He dropped the remains of the sphere into the wastebasket. “It’s not a blocker. It’s a rebounder.”

Buffy whistled. “Well, that’s one way.”

“What’s it do?”

“It hits back,” Buffy said, “psychically, powered by the force of the initial attack. The attacker can’t defend because they’re busy attacking. Instant karma.”

“Proportional response,” Willy said. “Like I was saying, it’s your call. Security’s down, and that might mean you feel safer spending the night someplace else. But with the amount of power that hit the rebounders? My guess is you have one less enemy to worry about.”

“Thanks, Will,” Buffy said.

Willy nodded. “You two have yourselves a good night, alright?” And then he was gone, out the door, down the hall, and away.

“He should be on both lists,” Buffy said.

“Yeah.” He’d lost the thread, somewhere. Willy’d changed when his back was turned. Sooner or later, he’d have to sort it, but not now.

“You wanna go clubbing?”
“In L.A.?”

She nodded. “I’ll wear my new sparkly dress.” He liked her new sparkly dress.

He curled his tongue behind his teeth, ran his hands down the length of her torso, and then kissed her so hard he tasted blood. She kissed him back, strong hands firm on the sides of his face, strong body pressed against him, one leg lifted to wrap around him, and he could...not...move. All the little hairs stood up on the back of his neck, screaming *slayer, danger, danger, dangerous, run, run away*, as though she’d ever hurt him, and maybe she wouldn’t, but she could. Oh, god, she could. “Long as we don’t have to see Angel.”

“It’s a deal.”
“He’s here,” Xander said. “This is him.”

“What’s happened?” His voice shattered the surreal hush of the hospital waiting room. He cleared his throat. “Xander? What’s going on?”

“Rupert Giles?” The woman behind the reception desk handed him a clipboard and a pen. There was a chip in the sky blue polish on her left thumbnail. He couldn’t focus on her face. “May I see some ID, please?”

“Yes, of course.” He extracted the card from his wallet and set it on the counter. Then he examined the papers on the clipboard. “What’s all this?”

“Consent to treat. You’re listed as Miss Rosenberg’s next of kin.”

“I beg your pardon?” His partly digested dinner threatened an unpleasant return.

“We all did that,” Xander explained, “as soon as we turned eighteen. It made more sense than....”

Than having the hospital call any of their parents—even Joyce. Even at his worst, he would be more useful than their parents. Had Buffy made that change before or after her Cruciammentum? While she believed him to be trustworthy or after she knew otherwise? He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“I suppose that’s true.” He signed the forms with shaking hands and passed them back to her.

“Now...what has happened to Willow?”

“The doctor will be with you shortly,” the receptionist said. “Please have a seat.”

They walked to the couch at the far end of the waiting room. Xander slumped into it with his head in his hands. “They think it’s a drug overdose.”

“What—Willow? That’s preposterous.”

“They assumed, and I didn’t—.” He shrugged listlessly. “What was I supposed to tell them?” He raised red-rimmed brown eyes to look at Giles. “There aren’t a lot of things that’ll put a healthy eighteen-year-old into a coma.”

“Xander.” He tried to keep his voice even, but he was fighting panic. “What in god’s name has happened?”

“She didn’t believe you, alright?” He closed his eyes. “We didn’t believe you. There’s something inside Buffy—something really powerful and really old. She’s not her anymore, and you wouldn’t see it. Angel wouldn’t see it.” A tear slipped down the boy’s cheek. He wiped it away with the back of his sleeve.

“Angel?” He took Xander by the shoulders and turned him, looked directly into his eyes. “Xander, what has happened?”

“Mister Giles?” The man wore scrubs, paper mask pulled down below his chin. “Doctor Framke.” Giles shook the hand he offered. “Willow’s tox screens are all negative. There’s no evidence of drugs or alcohol in her body, certainly no overdose, no signs of infection or exposure to toxins, and her blood glucose is normal. She has no obvious physical injuries, and her MRI does not indicate a
stroke or a tumor."

“That all sounds positive."

The doctor nodded, lips pursed. “Does she have a history of seizures?”

“No...no, nothing like that.”

A sharp exhalation of air, half sigh, half huff. “Alright.” His eyes fastened on Xander and narrowed suspiciously. “You were with her?”

“Yeah.” He sniffled.

“Were you...was Willow deprived of oxygen for any reason?” Xander stared at him in mute confusion. “Look, I understand your reluctance, but let me assure you that whatever you say will be kept confidential. Anything consensual—we just need to know so we can treat her.”

Xander’s eyes widened. “We’re talking about Willow,” he said hoarsely. “Willow.” He shook his head. “No.”

“What is her...condition?” Giles asked.

Doctor Framke’s brow furrowed. He couldn’t have been more than forty, but the expression aged him. He looked worn. “Mister Giles—how are you related to Miss Rosenberg?”

How was he related to any of them? He’d sent them into the dark to face creatures the rest of the world couldn’t acknowledge. He’d taught them things they were better off not knowing. He’d put them in danger, too many times to count, and now his silence had put them in danger again.

“I’m not, actually. She—.” He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “They were my students.”

“They?”

“Yes. Willow, Xander,” he nodded at Xander, who wouldn’t meet his eyes, “and one more. Buffy.”

“I see.” The doctor blew out a frustrated breath and tapped his fingers on the folder in his hands. “Does Willow have any biological relatives nearby?”

Giles shook his head. Although Willow’s family had lived in Sunnydale for six generations, just as Buffy said, the vast majority of the Rosenberg clan resided in Restfield Cemetery. “That’s how I came to be listed as next of kin. Her parents do live in town but—.”

“They’re at a conference in Utah,” Xander said.

“They travel frequently,” Giles said, his smile tight.

The doctor nodded. “If you can get them here, do it. I want blood and tissue samples. In the meantime, we’re admitting her. She’s unresponsive,” he said, “and we don’t know why. Please follow me—I’ll take you back to her.”

He led them through a labyrinth of hospital corridors, down too many twists and turns to keep track of, to Willow. The machinery dwarfed her, and the fluorescent light gave her pale skin a greenish cast. She had a tube down her throat. Giles stroked her hair, her cheek, lifted an eyelid with the pad of his thumb. The pupil did not contract.

“Xander,” he said when they were finally left alone, “what happened?”
“She said—.” He licked his lips. He hadn’t stopped crying. “She said there was something in Buffy. She kept saying it was old. And it wasn’t Spike, alright?” His fists clenched his hair into tufts. “We weren’t trying to get rid of Spike.”

Giles’ stomach lurched. “What did she do?”

“She tried to separate it—whatever it is—from Buffy.”

“Separate.”

“Yeah. Force it out. So only our Buffy was left.”

For a moment, nothing made sense. Then, “Buffy.” He punched Willy’s number into the phone on Willow’s bedside table.

“Alibi Room. Willy speaking.” The bartender pitched his voice up to carry over the background din.

“Ah...yes. This is Rupert Giles. I’m Buffy’s—.”

“Buffy’s watcher. What can I do for you, this evening?” The background noise changed shape and then abruptly ceased. He heard a door close.

“Is Buffy available?”

“Nah.” Willy’s voice was softer, now. Quiet. Not quite a whisper. “After the attack, she and Spike decided to make themselves hard to find for a while.”

“The attack—is she alright?”

“She’s fine. But whoever attacked her? Not so fine. Spread the word: Willy’s uses rebounder wards.”

“Dear lord.” Rebounders were complex, expensive, and extremely flexible. They were ideal for defense because they didn’t disrupt low energy spells. A locator or a guide light—harmless little things—could get through because they used a slow trickle of power. But a spell with any punch would hit the barrier and ricochet back at the caster without losing force.

A ward maker who mastered the creation of rebounders would be set for life, while a caster who was injured by one would be shunned, every move thereafter viewed with suspicion and distrust. A rebounder injury could destroy a career.

“Anything else I can help you with?” Willow’s form lay still beneath sterile white blankets, surrounded by machines that buzzed, beeped, and whirred with inhuman motion. He took her hand, and closed his eyes.

“No, thank you. That’s all.”
It was a relief to get away from Sunnydale.

She’d missed it so much for so long that the feeling surprised her. When it was nothing but a burned out crater somewhere north of Los Angeles, she’d have given her pinkie toes for another hour at The Bronze—and the rest of her life for a few more moments with Spike. She’d spent actual years rehearsing what she’d say to him if she ever got the chance.

Hey, it could happen. She had her vengeance demon wish picked out and everything, and Angel totally deserved it.

But now here he was. Here they were, not yelling at each other, this time, not fighting, but out together on a date, doing coupley things like a real couple, and she couldn’t even figure out how to —

“Buffy. Love. Why are you crying?” He smoothed a tear away with the pad of his thumb, concern clouding his deep blue eyes.

“It’s—Spike, it doesn’t...you don’t....” The room felt too small, the sound muted despite the thrumming music. Hundreds of human heartbeats pressed in upon her, loud in her own hyped hearing, louder in the echo from Spike’s senses. The smell of sweat, sex, and alcohol, cloying in combination, choked her. Her head spun.

He took her hand and pulled her from the dance floor.

They tumbled from the club into the night, through the darkness of the city. Her sparkly dress, a gleaming metallic the same red as his shirt, stood out like a lure. He led her away from the lights, down dark alleys, and into the deep shadows that pooled beneath building eaves, until they attracted the kind of attention that would cost other people their lives.

And then they fought.

Neither of them carried a weapon, not even a stake. They didn’t need to—not for the kinds of things that wandered the streets of Los Angeles at night. Vampires, fledgling or otherwise, were no more than a nuisance for the two of them together. It would take an organized demon attack to cause them real trouble. She didn’t know what it would take to kill them. This whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

And its parts were pretty damned deadly.

When they’d pulled four or five vampires to pieces between them, Spike brushed the dust from her dress and offered her his arm. “Gallantry,” she whispered as she took it. With a bashful smile, he dropped his eyes and nuzzled the Sweet Williams in her hair.

Another block and around the corner, and he opened a door. They entered a darkened bar with a softly lit stage. On it, a green skinned demon in a white suit crooned a slow jazz ballad to the mostly empty room. “Oh, thank god,” she said, and pulled his lips down to hers. “Thank you. I’m not used to spending so much time with....”

“Humans? Yeah.” He selected a table near the stage and pulled a chair out for her. “Wears a bit.”

They held hands and listened to the demon sing. He was good. She could feel Spike in her head,
sifting through her memories, trying to lay them out in order, to understand what was bothering her. Good. Maybe he could make more sense of it all than she had. “Some days happen three ways,” he said finally.

That was true. She had both the memories of this Buffy and her Othertime self, the originals without Dawn, as well as the ones the monks created. This world’s memories were brighter, more distinct, while the others were abstracted by the passage of time. Only the things with great emotional resonance stood out. “It gets confusing.”

She could also feel him worrying away at a scar. It was smooth and small. If he hadn’t touched it, she wouldn’t have known it was there. “No clue,” she said. Whatever it was, it wasn’t hidden or jumbled or blurred. It had been excised completely.

“The big gaps are all after—uh....” He waved the waitress over and ordered drinks, the muscle jumping along his jaw. When he looked at her again, his eyes were stricken.

“After I died,” she said.

“You did make a habit of it.”

So did you. “I’ll try to do better.” She batted her eyes, slid the skin of the girl she once was on like a costume, hoping to make him smile. It worked.

“See that you do,” he said. His words were William, cultured and precise.

“Why don’t you wear your ring anymore?” That look wasn’t William, but Spike—a very guilty Spike. Served him right for scaring her like that. When the dart gun dropped him, she’d lost it, fell into her calling right there in front of everybody, gold-eyed and wordless. Willow would be scarred for life. “Well?”

“I do!” She glared at him half-heartedly. “If I have to go out in daytime.” He sighed. “Sod it, Buffy. Feel like nothin’s at stake, yeah? Got all this extra with no challenge.”

Hard to argue with that. She felt it, too. It made them reckless. “Well, that’s what invulnerable gets you. Why’d you dig it up if you didn’t want it?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Wanted to beat you.” I have been half in love with easeful death. The words stood out from the patter of his thoughts. Had he been thinking poetry at her the whole time they were trying to kill each other? And it was Keats, of course. Damn, but Victorian poets were morbid.

“So you’re saying it’s all about me?”

“Always.”

He kissed her. “Oh,” she said. If she didn’t get up, right now, she’d have him splayed half-naked across their table, and then they’d never be allowed back. “Let’s dance.” She tugged him to the dance floor, slipped her arms around his waist, and laid her head against his chest. They swayed together while something with honey-colored spines sang a breathy love song on the blue-lit stage. “Is this a karaoke bar?”

“Looks like.” They were both breathing hard.

She let her eyes drift closed. “We can sing, if you want.” He rested his cheek on her hair, and sighed.

“We’re better at dancing.”
“Is it my turn to say, ‘That’s all we’ve ever done?’” She squinted up at him. The bright sunlight threw his features into shadow, so she couldn’t see the color of his eyes, but his curls framed his face with a bone-pale nimbus. “Oh, boy. Well, you did say you needed a challenge.”

“Uh...Buffy?” He nodded over her shoulder. “That’s a lion.”

She spun on her heel, reached for a weapon she wasn’t carrying, and then stopped. “That’s just the cat,” she said. “It’s always here.”

“No,” he said. “I saw the cat. It was a cat. That? That’s a lion. A bloody big lion, half a ton if it’s an ounce.”

He had a point. The cat stood an easy four and a half feet at the shoulder. When it approached Spike to sniff him, it lowered its head to meet his eyes. It didn’t have a mane. “Does that mean you’re a girl?” she asked, stroking the creature’s thick fur. It made a happy feline chuffing noise. “Why didn’t you say?” The cat lay down on the sand at her feet.

“Where are we?” Spike scanned the empty horizon. There were no walls or statues, this time, no deep wells of liquid light. The sky flickered, light to dark and back again, like inverted lightning.

“Near as I can tell? Cibola. Or...Egypt. Or maybe the Mojave Desert. Someplace with sand.”

“That’s specific.”

“Not sure it matters. Like the fur ball keeps telling me, this isn’t any....” It was the sound that stopped her, a long, low rattling growl plucked straight from her nightmares. “Oh god,” she whispered.

“Buffy.” There was something she rarely heard in Spike’s voice: fear. “What is that?”

It crept toward them, simultaneously spindly and powerful, ghastly skin obscene in the desert light. Its movements were sinuous, hypnotic, and it watched them with unblinking crimson eyes. Its fangs dripped spittle.

“That? Oh, that’s a vampire.” Spike raised a doubtful eyebrow. “A real vampire. You’re the domesticated version.” Only this creature was bigger and more bat-like than the Turok-Han she’d faced in the Hellmouth, its hunched shoulders thicker, its brow more brutish, and its eyes burned with feral intensity. It crouched, muscles bunching, and jumped.

“Bloody buggering—.” It soared thirty yards and landed just feet from them, snarling, weaving like a cobra. “Could really use that ax about now.”

“Uh...huh.” Why had it seemed like a good idea to go out unarmed? “I don’t know if it can hurt us,” she said, grabbing his arm and backing away. “In here, I mean, but—.”

“Let’s not find out.”

“My thought.”

They held hands and ran. Turned tail and scaredy-cat sprinted across the desert while the cat loped along beside them like a shadow. There was only one problem.

“Have we lost it?” Spike asked, and then, “Where are we going?” So maybe that was two problems.

“I don’t know!” She looked back over her shoulder. It was still right behind them. Effortless. Inexorable. No matter how fast or far they ran, it was there, like the monster in a dream.
“It’s a dream.” She stopped running. Spike skidded to a stop a few feet beyond her.

“She doesn’t have a weapon,” Buffy whispered as Spike slid to the ground beside her.

The Turok-Han flew backward, roaring in pain. The rain-softened earth gave beneath it, and it slid. The Slayer pressed her advantage, launched herself at the downed monster and hauled it up by its arm, bloodied its snarling maw with her bare fists. She flung it from her, face into the dirt, and pursued it again, relentless.

“She is a weapon,” Spike whispered back.

She rained a volley of brutal kicks into the vampire’s ribs, and they heard bone crack. It hissed desperately, extended one clawed hand, and seized her ankle. The Slayer went down.

They grappled, rolled, struggling, and then stilled in a heap a hundred yards away. The sky flickered.

“Come on,” Buffy said and ran.

“You’re running towards them?” Spike grinned. “That’s my girl.”

As they ran to cover distance, hands linked, the rain-soaked sand shifted under their feet and they fell, rolling to a stop. Spike raised a hand to wipe the mud from her face, but he only spread it further. She smeared it on his face, too, and pulled him down into a kiss.

“Why don’t you two lovebirds sing a little song for me?” Buffy blinked. The green demon stood next to them, smiling. He handed her a microphone. “Whaddya say?”
The children were trapped in a glowing blue bubble, their screams soundless as they pounded their fists against its impenetrable walls.

That was the first thing he noticed.

Vera and Mathilda Lane were sisters, cotton headed dowagers more than twenty years his senior. They wore floral print shifts and orthopedic shoes. They carried oversized handbags, well-stocked with candies and tissues, which were stowed next to one another on a chair in the corner of the room. They were, by all accounts, sweet little old ladies, perfect to teach magick theory to beginning practitioners.

Pink lipstick smudged Vera’s front teeth. He could see it there as she shrieked her pulsing chant in a language older than Latin.

When he’d gone looking for teachers for Buffy’s new school, theirs were the first names mentioned by everyone he’d asked. They were patient and kind, the sort of teachers who brought their pupils trinkets and treats, and who were remembered fondly years later. They were skilled and thorough enough to earn their continued membership in the coven at Devon as well as the more exacting approval of Agatha Harkness herself.

He couldn’t have hoped to find better people.

Mathilda barked one guttural syllable and sent a pulse of lavender-blue power down the length of her wand toward her adversary, who hit the wall with devastating force—and stood back up. It was Buffy.

“Stop!” he yelled. He might as well have said nothing at all.

He’d come to the partially renovated Crawford Street mansion directly from the hospital, where Willow still lay unconscious under the eye of a capable—and extremely suspicious—physician. They had yet to reach her parents. Oz arrived just after dawn, allowing Xander and Giles to catch a few fitful hours of sleep in a quiet corner of a hospital waiting room. The boys were sitting with her in shifts, today, for fear she’d wake alone.

Giles had little hope she’d wake at all.

He’d spent the night casting spells. They were all minor, all meant to assess the damage to Willow’s psyche, but he hadn’t used that much power in a great long while, and he’d drained himself dry to absolutely no avail. Willow’s rebounded casting had rent her in two. Only the thinnest silver thread kept her body and soul together. Even if he had known how to repair the damage, he hadn’t the power—not on an ordinary day, let alone this one.

And now Vera Lane had six of the seven students she’d been hired to teach encased in a protective sphere while Mathilda faced off against his slayer. It was a fitting cap to his day. “What’s going on?”

“And now Vera Lane had six of the seven students she’d been hired to teach encased in a protective sphere while Mathilda faced off against his slayer. It was a fitting cap to his day. “What’s going on?”

“Stay back, Rupert, for God’s sake. We don’t know what it can do!” Mathilda raised her wand again and Buffy growled. She paced back and forth in a three foot space, livid as a caged tiger. There was nothing human in the golden gaze she fixed upon the witch. “It is practically impervious to physical attacks!”

She was, at that. Her clothing was a good deal less so, however. He hoped her dress was not
irreplaceable. Its coral pink ruffles were marred by scorch marks. He counted eight hits.

“What happened?” He caught Buffy’s eyes, but they held no recognition.

“It just waltzed right in, neat as you please,” Vera said. “We’d wards set, of course, so the klaxons went.”

“Zappers, too,” Mathilda said, “for all the good it did us. Walked right through them.”

“And healed too fast for it to matter,” Vera put in. “I’d heard they were bold in Sunnydale, but bright Aphrodite! This was more than I imagined.”

It was more than they could possibly imagine, and it had to stop immediately, or it would get much, much worse. “Ladies, you’re in grave danger. Please—.” As if on cue, the door crashed open with such fury that it was knocked askew on its hinges and its doorknob buried in the drywall. “Dear lord.”

Spike hurtled into the room. His duster flared behind him, great black wings that blotted out the sunshine. In his left hand he carried a double-bladed ax. With his right, he seized Mathilda’s wrist and squeezed until her wand clattered to the floor. He bared his fangs and roared like a big cat, a basso rumble that made Giles’ blood run cold.

This was the Slayer of Slayers. This was the being of cold sweat and legend, the beast who laid waste to Prague to avenge his ruined lover.

This was his Slayer’s mate.

Quickly, before he could think better of it, he slipped between the vampire and the witch. He wrapped his own hand around Spike’s smaller one, and looked into the monster’s eyes. “I’ve got this, Spike. See to Buffy.”

For an instant, he thought he’d miscalculated, that he’d get his neck snapped for his trouble, but then Spike nodded and spun away. His ax fell as though he’d forgotten he held it.

Mathilda dropped to her knees and reached for her wand. Giles kicked it out of her reach. “Don’t,” he said. “I doubt I could save you if you did. Let’s look at your wrist, shall we?” Mathilda stared at the spectacle before them while he examined her. Her wrist was badly bruised, but not broken. For all his distress, Spike had pulled his punches.

A few feet from them, the vampire knelt with the slayer curled small in his arms. His eyes were closed, and his demon face wore an expression of relief and adoration. “I’m okay,” Buffy said. She stroked his cheek. “I’m okay.”

“What are they?” Mathilda asked, her voice unsteady. She looked back and forth between Spike and the sunlit doorway through which he’d entered.

Oh, where to start. “The owners of this building.” He helped Mathilda to her feet. “Mathilda and Vera Lane,” he said, “may I present my slayer, Buffy Summers and....” In for a penny, in for a pound. “William the Bloody.”

Spike raised his head, human features sliding into place. “Spike,” he said. “Fair met, better circumstances, yadda yadda.” He glared at Giles. “Sodding casters. Can’t meet a one without someone lobbing magic missiles at us.” He glanced over at Vera. “Nix the snow globe, Endora. Not gonna eat the kiddies.”
At Giles’ nod, Vera dropped the spell. Amy Madison stepped forward first. “Hey, Mr. Giles. Uh...hi, Buffy.” Her nose twitched. She’d been a rat the last time he saw her. She was joined by the Wells brothers, Tucker and Andrew, and Buffy’s classmate Jonathan Levinson, as well as Billy Palmer, the baby of the bunch. Giles recognized all of them but one, a doe-eyed blond girl. That must be Tara Maclay. He’d yet to meet her. Buffy’d extended her invitation personally.

“I’ve seen slayers,” Mathilda said. “That is not a slayer.” She glared daggers at Buffy.

“And that lacks the most basic weaknesses of a vampire,” Vera said. She pointed an accusatory finger at Spike.

“Oh, dear lord. Yes.” The throbbing behind his eyes intensified. “Yes. They are both quite unusual. And I’d be happy to discuss that at some future time. Right now, however, my priority is Willow.”

“I’m afraid we can’t help you with that,” Mathilda said. “Miss Rosenberg didn’t come to class, today.”

“We were expecting her,” Vera said.

Buffy’s eyes darted around the room. “Giles, where’s Willow?”

“Sunnydale Memorial.” There was a collective pause like they’d all decided to hold their breath at once. He threw his hands in the air. “I’d have told you sooner, if I hadn’t had to play referee. That’s where I was all night. I swear, I might as well be talking to the bloody—.”

“Watcher!” Spike snarled. “What’s happened to Red?”

“Forgive me.” He rubbed his eyes, trying to make his vision clear. He needed sleep. Days of sleep. “The spell that triggered the rebounders.”

“Oh, god,” Buffy said. “Willow—is she....” He shook his head.


“Class is dismissed,” Vera said. “See you tomorrow.”

“Miss Maclay?” Mathilda said. “To me, please. Now where is this hospital?”

“You’re bringing a student?”

“She’s a hereditary witch, Rupert. Earth magick. Hardly a beginner.” Mathilda’s tone was firm. “Let’s go.”
“Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”
~Søren Kierkegaard

“I hate hospitals,” Buffy said.

He couldn’t blame her. This modern institution, fluorescent, steel, and antiseptic, scraped his senses raw. It was not a place of fear, not the good kind that got the blood pumping, leastways, but the sick, slow scents of dread and grief—much too human. Much too mortal.

That wasn’t the rule, of course. Lots of vampires ventured in to snag bagged blood or drain the occasional trauma patient. Some of them even got off on that sort of thing, victims too weak to struggle, awake enough to contemplate their fate. But he wasn’t Angelus. He got bored when they didn’t fight back.

This trip was less fun than usual.

“And casters give me the shiverin’ willies.” He breathed in the fragrance of her, smoothed her golden hair beneath the collar of his coat. He’d draped it over her shoulders for decency’s sake when they left the mansion. That dress was done for, coral ruffles blasted into Swiss cheese by the witches, who peered at him with twin sets of sharp owl eyes. Predatory. It could be his paranoia talking, but he thought he felt a witchy tingle at the edges of his thoughts.

“You’re not imagining it,” Buffy said. “They’re fishing.”

“Wish they’d stick us in a circle and be done with it.”

“See—that? That’s creepy.” Xander looked half-drained, eyes like bruises.

“It’s a claim thing, honey,” Anya said without looking up from her magazine. She tapped her temple twice with her fingertip. “Like telepathy.”

“I know what it is. Our Buffy wouldn’t—.”

“Wouldn’t what?” He’d had about enough from Xander. Buffy’s heart thumped remembered misery, and damned if he knew why, but he’d happily twist the boy’s head off to make it stop, and to hell with their sodding treaty.

“Let you live,” Xander said, glaring back. “I don’t know what kind of game you think you’re playing—.”

“Don’t,” Oz said. He held his head in his hands, still as stone and less expressive. *Everlasting watch and moveless woe*, like Missus Browning wrote. His eyes were closed.

The five of them clustered in Willow’s room, while Giles whispered with the witches in the hall. There was too much noise for Spike to hear them clearly. He felt like a bug in a collector’s display, pin stuck through his center to hold him to the board. He didn’t like it. The young witch stood apart.
from her elders, contemplating the laces of her shoes, no more comfortable than he was. She smiled at him through the open doorway.

“Come on, Oz,” Xander said. “She’s gonna be okay.”

“You don’t know that,” Anya said, direct as any demon.

“An—.”

She smacked the magazine down with a too-loud thwack! “We all said we were going to stop, and then you two went off by yourselves and did...whatever you did. Now nobody knows how to fix Willow.”

“It’s their fault! They did something to her!” He stabbed a finger in Spike’s direction. Only Buffy’s hand on his arm kept him from ripping it off. A single tear trailed down her cheek.

“No, they didn’t,” Anya said. “Willow did. She threw a spell into rebounder wards and it did to her whatever she was trying to do to Buffy.”

“I’m telling you. That’s. Not. Buffy.” Buffy took each of Xander’s words like a punch to the gut. Spike tried to put his arm around her, but she shrugged him off and squared her shoulders.

“Xander...what is it you think you saw?”

“A demon!” Xander said. The whole group shushed him and peered furtively around. “A demon,” he repeated more quietly. “Something scary. Something old. I don’t even know if Buffy is still in there. There’s this creepy black mist with claws dug right into her—.”

“This wasn’t the first time,” Buffy said flatly, inscrutable as Oz if you couldn’t hear the howling that went up inside her head. Her hands shook. “You’ve done it before.”

Oz lifted his head. No whites showed in his eyes.

“You attacked Buffy before?” Anya glared at Xander. “That’s rude. And kind of stupid. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We didn’t attack Buffy!” Xander’s gaze jittered from person to person in their little Scooby circle, seeking accord. He didn’t find it. “We tried to save her!”

“Don’t growl,” Buffy said, but he hadn’t been. The wolf’s upper lip curled over extended canine teeth. “What if I didn’t need to be saved?” He knew better than to touch her, now, could feel shards of brittle rage perforate her composure, but Xander didn’t seem to recognize the danger he was in. “What if I didn’t want to?”

“You—whatever you are—you don’t get a say.” Xander leaned toward her stiffly. “Only Buffy gets —.”

“You have beautiful eyes.” She extended a hand to lay it alongside Xander’s face. “You need both of them.”

Xander recoiled like she’d smacked him. “Is that some kind of threat?”

“No,” she said. “I should have realized it was Willow. Willy’s wards—who else could do that?”

“What is with you?” Xander’s whispered snarl raised his hackles, and he felt the rumble start in his own chest. Buffy didn’t shush him, but Giles and the witches turned toward him with a look of
collective alarm.

“At least Oz didn’t kill Veruca.”

Xander threw his hands in the air. “No—you did.”

“It’s better that way,” Buffy said. The wolf stared at her for one long moment, nostrils flaring. His face was barely human.

“I was going to,” he said, “and you changed it.” Buffy nodded once, short and sharp. “Thanks.”

“I’m trying.” Her voice ached. “But I fix one thing, and it messes other things up, and now...” She let him hold her, finally, rested against him with her fingers spread over his heart. He covered her hand with his and pushed his face into her hair.

“Ah,” Anya said. She exchanged a glance with Oz and then they both looked away.


She rolled her eyes. “It’s prescience of some kind, obviously. That means a spell or a wish. Maybe a punishment. Since slayers are all about drama and destiny, it could even be a reward from the Powers That Be. A heart’s-desire kind of deal.”

“Spike is her heart’s desire?” The boy raked a doubtful glare up and down Spike’s body, but he hardly noticed. Buffy had no doubt. He hugged her tighter.

“I said that was a possibility, Xander. One among many. But really—would it be a surprise?” He squeezed his eyes closed. “I mean, look at them.”

“You can’t be serious,” Xander said. “He’s Spike. He’s—.”

Their bickering faded into background noise when Buffy kissed him, but it was still there at the periphery of his awareness, a fly buzzing at the windowpanes. The longer it went on, the better he understood why she’d kept the specifics of her travels from them. No one should be privy to their future, least of all these curiously incautious Scooby friends. For his part, the less he knew, the better. Buffy’s future past was full up with tragedy. Least wolf-boy had the sense to know he’d dodged a bullet.

“But is she even Buffy?” popped out of the general murmur. It pissed him off.

“Course she’s Buffy, you nit,” he said. “She’s just Buffy with a lot more—.”

“Information.” Giles spoke from right beside him. How long had he been standing there?

“Someone oughta check you for a pulse, Watcher.”

“Indeed.” Giles smiled faintly. “This is Doctor Framke, Willow’s attending physician.” The doctor was a good six inches shorter than Giles, which was how he’d gotten left behind long enough for Giles to put a stop to their conversation before he arrived. He hurried forward.

“This is quite the crowd,” Doctor Framke said. His sandy hair stuck up in hanks like he’d slept on it—or like he hadn’t slept. He smelled of concern and black coffee.

“Everybody’s pretty worried,” Buffy said.
“Miss Summers—good to see you again.” The doctor nodded. “How’s the arm?”

“I...uh...fine.” Buffy’s mind whirled through images of injuries, past and future. There were too many to sort. She’d no clue which one the doctor meant. “Good as new.”

“Great to hear. That was a nasty rotation fracture. Thought there might be some permanent damage.”

“I heal quickly?” She’d’ve done better without that uptick at the end. A hundred plus years and she still had tells. The man’s eyes narrowed.

“Well, we should still take a look at it. I’ll have my nurse schedule a follow-up.”

“How’s Red?” Spike asked as distraction, but the doctor turned that slitted gaze on him.

“She’s not breathing on her own, but her pulse is steady, which is a positive change. We still don’t have a cause. Did you—were you with her when she collapsed?” There was an accusation in that question. Sure bet the good doctor knew what went on in Sunnydale after dark. More than a passing chance he knew Spike played a part in it.

He smirked, and had the satisfaction of hearing the man’s heart race. “Buffy and I were out of town. We only just heard.”

The doctor nodded. “Well, I’ll come back around later. Try to keep the noise down in here, okay? You have neighbors.”

“Will do,” Buffy said, which made the doctor refocus on her.

“Stop at the front desk,” Framke said, “before you leave.” Then he tipped his head forward in a little half-bow and left the room.

The whole group goggled after him as he went, glancing uneasily back over his shoulder. “Oh, you lot are subtle.”

“Is it just me,” Xander said, “or did it seem like he knew—.”

“He knew,” Buffy said.

“Near as asked me if I bit Willow.”

“He’s an ER doctor in Sunnydale,” Giles said. “I’d be more surprised if he didn’t.”

“I’m never surprised by what people don’t see,” Buffy said. “I think the Hellmouth scrambles their brains.”

“If we could interrupt for just a moment?” one of the witches—Mathilda, if he had to guess—asked.

“We’ll take a look at Miss Rosenberg, now.” That one must be Vera. He’d really need to get them sorted, soon.

“Miss Maclay? If you’re ready?” The dutiful Miss Maclay stepped up.

“Thanks, Tara,” Buffy said. She ducked her head shyly. “Everybody out. Shoo!” They filed from the room. After a tense second, Oz followed them.

“Tara? From your list?” He didn’t know what he’d expected, but that wasn’t it. Such a colorless thing, she was, meek as a mouse.
“Yup!” Buffy smiled. “Spike? If you don’t mind—could Tara officiate at our wedding?”

“A Wiccan ceremony?” He hadn’t considered the mechanics of the thing. Anya and Joyce had the pieces under control, while Buffy managed the gestalt. It felt strange to be asked.

“Maybe? I figure with all the sun and moon symbolism we’ve got going on, not to mention the life and death stuff—.”

“The band is all love-the-earth, bean sprouts and granola,” Anya added, “so it wouldn’t break theme. I’m in.”

“Sounds right nice, pet.” And it would limit the number of crosses in the room.

“It does...sound lovely,” Giles said. “Tara is a gentle soul, isn’t she?”

“What the hell is wrong with you people?” Xander stalked toward them, fists balled. “Willow’s in a coma and you’re talking wedding plans?”

“Willow is in the best possible hands,” Giles said. “We’re doing everything we can.”

“Except you’re not doing anything about them.”

Giles cocked his head. “What is it you think I should be doing?”

“I don’t know!” Spike shifted minutely towards the angry boy, but the watcher raised a warning eyebrow. “But that’s not Buffy. That’s a demon.”

He felt her shatter. The thin glass shell fell away, exposing something honed and deadly with hollow yellow eyes. He shivered.


“No...I...uh....”

“I’ll live until something kills me, and I’m very hard to kill.” She advanced another step. “That darkness you saw? That’s my slayer essence. My soul.”

“No. That was evil—demon evil. Slayers aren’t evil.” Xander put his hands out to ward her off and looked at Giles. “Right?”

“We’re humanity’s weapons in the war for the world.” She lifted her chin. “That doesn’t make us good, exactly. Just necessary.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” At those words, you could have heard a pin drop.

“Why didn’t you ask?” She twined her fingers with Xander’s and held him there. “Instead of trying to peel my soul away?”

“That’s not what we—.” The boy wilted under her adamantine stare.

She pushed away from him. “I love you, Xander. I do. You’re my friend, and I tell you a lot. But I can’t tell you everything. Not this time. Nothing from The Powers comes without a price, and this one is pretty steep. The less you know—.”
“Aha!” Anya said. “It was a reward!”

Buffy nodded. “Void where prohibited. Some restrictions may apply.”

Xander blinked, slack jawed. “Does that mean you know the future?”

Buffy met Spike’s eyes, solemn and trembling. “No,” she said. “Not anymore.”
“We had a contract,” the man said quietly, “you son of a bitch.”

“And according to section fourteen, paragraph six, your organization is in breach of it.” Colonel McNamara flipped open the file in front of him. “Doctor Singh.”

“You’re dismantling my division because you couldn’t keep a leash on Maggie Walsh?” Singh pressed up onto his fists. “My people are techs,” he growled. “We build machines. We had nothing to do with whatever Franken-fucking bio-lab disaster Walsh was running.”

“I’m afraid it’s out of my hands,” McNamara said. “Are there any further questions?”

“Yes.” Singh raked nervous fingers through thick black hair, tense as a bow string. “What am I supposed to tell my people?”

The colonel looked around the table, made eye contact with each of the division heads one at a time. “You tell them that all research and development contracts for the Initiative—in Sunnydale and elsewhere—are terminated immediately due to unauthorized use of funds, materials, and facilities by your organization.” He stared Singh down. “Tell them they got off lightly. They’re not being charged with treason.”

McNamara scooped his papers up and marched out the door, which left Riley alone at the head of the table. “Your clearance was revoked as of oh eight hundred this morning. Turn your key cards in with me or at the desk as you leave the building. All equipment must be surrendered by eighteen hundred hours. Let me repeat. All military-owned equipment must be returned by eighteen hundred hours or it will be considered missing, and charges may be filed. That’s short notice, so you’re gonna have to hop to. Are there any questions?”

He faced stony silence and a dozen resentful glares. They pitched their key cards into a pile on the table—some of them with more force than necessary. He gathered them up and met Graham at the door. “Well, that’s done.”

Singh was the last to leave. He stopped in front of them and looked directly into Riley’s eyes. “Thanks a lot.” Then he turned with military precision and strode away. When he was half way down the hall, he muttered. “Asshole.”

“Oh, it’s good to be popular.”

Graham patted his shoulder not quite sympathetically. “You knew there’d be fallout.”

He had. Of course he had, but he hadn’t known it would be like this. Other than the guys on his squad, almost nobody was speaking to him—not even the higher ups. Every interaction that wasn’t fraught with suspicion or resentment was tainted by fear. They didn’t want to get caught in the crossfire. The Initiative no longer welcomed him. He didn’t belong here.

Damn, that galled. He’d enlisted straight out of high school, tested into Special Forces, and worked his way up the ranks. When the Initiative tapped him, he knew he’d found his purpose. He was a soldier to his bones.

Hell of a thing to give up for a few demons.

“It was the right thing to do.” They didn’t seem to hate Graham with the same fervor. Sure, there was
some tension. They got nervous, but mostly they just left him alone. The problem was that they
couldn’t get away from Riley. He had to give them orders, stand up in front of a whole room full of
people who’d prefer to pretend he didn’t exist and tell them how things were going to be. Whether
they liked it or not. Sometimes it really sucked to be the guy in charge.

“Maybe.”

“You know it was. He’s a—.”


“They’re in custody.”

He stopped abruptly in the middle of the hallway and someone called him names. He was getting
used to that. “That means—.”

“Human.”

“What the hell?” It went without saying that Forrest could be a jerk. Riley knew that better than
anyone. It wasn’t like he hadn’t pissed people off before, either. He’d seen his share of fist fights and
bar brawls, gotten drunk and rowdy with the worst of them, but there’d never been anything like this.
Never. His body was pulverized. “Who?” he asked, but then he shook his head. It almost didn’t
matter. “Why?” That was a better question.

“Guys,” Graham said. “I mean, football players, but just...guys. Four of them. Big. Strong. Not very
smart. They’re all pleading guilty because—get this. They said he deserved it.”

“Deserved it for...what?”

“That’s the part they didn’t say.” Graham stuffed his hands in his pockets and let his shoulders drop.
It was the least military stance Riley had ever seen him take. “They didn’t seem to know.”

“I’m sorry. Say that again?”

“They don’t know why. They don’t even know who he is. All they know is he deserved to be—.”
Graham swallowed hard. “It’s fucked up.”

“You got that right.” It was Sunnydale weird and then some. “I’ll need to question them myself. Call
our liaison with the Sunnydale police and—.”

“No.” There was a second where he couldn’t figure out what had just happened, and then the mad
rushed in.

“You gonna disobey my orders, now? Take up where Forrest left off?”

“No, Sir.”

“Good. So put in a call to the liaison—.”

“No,” Graham folded his arms across his chest. “Sir.”

Riley stared down at the bundle of key cards in his arms. Graham was right. They were suspended,
the whole organization put on pause until the mess with Maggie Walsh could be sorted out. They
weren’t even patrolling the campus, right now. He had no authority to issue that order. “I gotta turn
these in.”
Graham followed him. “It’s not ours, anyway. Forrest was killed off duty. You know that.”

“Yeah.” He was even the one who’d called the police in on it. “I’m jumping out of my skin, here.”

“Have you thought about leaving the building? Go out. Do something fun?”

“What? Like a frat party?” Packed with screaming eighteen-year-olds who mostly just made him feel old. No wonder he’d been attracted to Buffy. She couldn’t be more different than the rest of the freshman horde, no matter what she looked like. She was gorgeous, powerful, and a hundred years older than him—just like her fiancé.

Damn, he hated Sunnydale.

“Do you have to stay tonight?” Graham pointed at the key cards. “After you drop those off, do you have to stay?”

He shook his head. Walsh’s classes were cancelled, so he was caught up on his grading. Patrols were suspended. He had no reason to stay.

“Good. You’re coming with me.”

Alright.” He passed the cards to the admin at the desk. She checked the names off on a list and slid the cards into a drawer. It took all of three minutes. “So where are we going?”

“Drinks and darts. With Sean.”

“What—you’re escorting him to the bars, now?”

“Nah, man. It’s a group thing. The more the merrier. He invited me.”

“Really?” Graham shrugged. “I guess I just didn’t picture them doing things like...people.” Riley held a hand up. “I know—just an ordinary kid.”

They took the elevator up to Lowell House, walked out the doors and across campus through the chilly early evening. As usual, the more distance he put between himself and the Initiative, the clearer his thoughts became. “Graham?” he said. “It was the right thing to do.” Graham just nodded. They left the campus for a quiet neighborhood at its edge.

Something seemed familiar. He stopped in front of a house. “Is this the house...on Halloween, I mean....”

“Where we talked to that demon about the slayer? Yeah. But the house we’re headed for is three doors down. Different demons live in it. We’re not going to bother the ones who live here, right?”

“Is this a demon neighborhood?” Graham gave him a mocking little grin and saluted. “There are demon neighborhoods?”

But Graham had already left. Riley jogged to catch up with him. When they reached the house three doors down, they went around the back and down a flight of stairs to a dark green door and knocked.

When the door opened, they heard an irritating beeping noise. “Hey, Gray,” Sean said without actually looking at them. “Come in come in. I have to take things out of the oven. Be right back.”

Graham closed the door behind them and kicked off his shoes. “Shoes off. House rule,” he said, and slouched onto the couch. “God, I love this place.”
“I can see why.” There were no windows. Drapes covered the walls. Shades covered the lights. Once the oven timer stopped, everything was quiet and warm and peaceful. It smelled like heaven. “Is he making brownies?” Riley slipped his shoes off and sat down next to Graham.

Graham nodded. “Best guard detail ever.”

“I feel so used.” Sean came around the corner, wiping his hands on a dish towel. “They’re cooling. We can cut ‘em in ten.” He grinned at Graham. “Hey, Riles. You coming to darts?”

“Things are tense at work,” Graham said. “He needed to get away.”

Sean crouched and looked into his eyes. “Relax,” he said. “We have some time before we need to leave.” It was a good idea.

Riley leaned back into the cushions on the couch and listened to Sean and Graham talk while he contemplated a drawing in the corner of the room. It was Sean, accurate as a photo, life-sized, and half finished. It hadn’t been signed.

He couldn’t recall the last time he’d just sat still. He counted his heartbeats until they had real space between them, and then he slowed his breathing. By the time the brownies were sliced into squares, he’d slid into a boneless slump, only half conscious of his surroundings. His eyes were closed. “Is he asleep?” Graham asked.


“Riley.” Graham passed him a plate. “Feel better?”

He blinked and yawned. “Now I smell—is that cayenne?”

“Second batch is spicy. For vampires.” Spike tilted his head back and laid a jalapeño slice on the tip of his tongue, angular face alight with sensual bliss, while Buffy watched him with the same hungry expression in her eyes. Like she wanted to eat him up. Riley could have cried with envy. Nobody had ever looked at him like that.

“Hmm.” He bit into his own brownie. “Oh my god.” Rich and soft and chewy and wonderful. He hadn’t had anything this good in lifetimes. “Did you know about this when you volunteered?”

“Nope. Got lucky.” Graham set another brownie onto his own plate and patted his stomach. “Good thing I train hard.”

“Here’s coffee,” Sean said, setting a tray holding three mugs down on the side table. “Timer will go off in a few minutes. Then we can leave. Have you...what does he know?”

“No. Got lucky.” Graham set another brownie onto his own plate and patted his stomach. “Good thing I train hard.”

“Here’s coffee,” Sean said, setting a tray holding three mugs down on the side table. “Timer will go off in a few minutes. Then we can leave. Have you...what does he know?”

“Not a thing,” Graham said. “Figure we’ll surprise him.”

“He hurts anyone, I’ll bite you.”

Graham snickered. “He’s not armed.”

“Do I need to be armed?” Riley sat up straight and knocked his coffee back.

“No,” Sean said, glaring at Graham. “Specifically no.” The oven timer interrupted any further conflict and Sean left to pull the cayenne brownies from the oven. When he came back, he was holding a cordless phone. “Got it. Thanks.”

“Shoes on?” Graham asked.
“Ride’s here.” Sean raised an eyebrow. “Showtime.”

They walked back around the building. A purple station wagon idled in front of the house. There was a demon in the driver’s seat.

Like the other demon he’d seen in the neighborhood, this one also had spines on its face, but that was where the similarity ended. Where the other demon had been brightly colored—anemone blues and greens—this one was a burnished gold with steel gray spikes that only extended an inch from the skin. They looked embedded. Hard. The creature waved, and Sean and Graham opened the car doors.

Sean slid into the front seat. “That’s Graham Miller and the big guy is Riley Finn. Guys, this is Garuch Drallig.”

Riley blinked. “He’s a....”

“Brachen demon,” Garuch said, “who is gonna kick your squishy human ass in a game of darts.”

“As if.” Sean rolled his eyes. The two of them bickered happily all the way there. It took less than five minutes. They parked in front of a place called The Ambrose. “It’s a hotel,” Sean said. “There’s a bar.” They went in.

It was packed. Several dozen Brachen demons, as well as a smattering of other creatures, milled about, drinking and talking. Music played in the background, sung in a language he didn’t recognize. “Come on,” Sean said, and threaded his way through the crowd.

“Ohkay,” Riley said, sure for the first time since he signed on to bring the Initiative down. “It was definitely the right thing to do.”

Graham smiled and followed Sean into the demon throng.
“Angel.” Cordelia greeted him outside the office door with a smile like a mousetrap. “You’re late.”

“Did you need me for something?” He fumbled his phone from his pocket and snapped it open. “Why didn’t you call?” The power was off. He pressed the button to turn it on. Four missed calls. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Oh.” In one hand, she held a large wooden cross. In the other, a stake. She waved the stake in his face. “Where were you? Were you in Sunnydale? Are you seeing Buffy again? ‘Cause if you are, you better tell me pronto, buster, so I can get outta Dodge. Anya’s put a lot of work into this wedding. Did you know she used to be a vengeance demon? I don’t wanna be at ground zero if—.”

“I didn’t see Buffy. I was there on a family matter.” He wrapped his hand around the stake and tugged. She gave it to him. “Why are you here so late? Or...” It was two in the morning. He’d driven to Sunnydale to work on Sean’s drawing for a few hours and come back home. He hadn’t been gone that long. “Uh. Early, I guess.”

“I couldn’t leave your...guest...alone in the office, could I?”

“I have a...guest?” Already? He’d put the call out at sunset before he left town.

“Mmm hmm.” She nodded, lips tight. “I think he’s here on a family matter.”

He gripped the stake in his fist and opened the door.

“Hiya, Chief.” Sam Lawson closed the magazine he’d been reading and set it aside. A lock of neatly trimmed dark hair fell in slight disarray across his forehead. He looked tired. “You gonna kill me now?”

“Maybe,” Angel said. “Depends on what you do in the next few minutes.”

“That compulsion trick—that’s slick. I don’t like it.” He glanced at the stake. “Don’t like that much, either.”

“I don’t care.”

“You haven’t changed a bit. Gonna introduce me to your friend?”

“Surprised she hasn’t introduced herself.” Angel angled between the two of them. “She’s not shy.”

“Or friendly. I came in; she went out.” He stretched his legs out lazily and leaned back in the waiting room chair. Arrogant. Spike’s influence, it had to be. “Not scared, either. Knew what I was right off —started waving that cross around. How’d you know what I was?”

“Pssh. I’m from Sunnydale.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ve only been here an hour. Went out with friends—gotta get some mileage out of this dress.” She spread her arms to display the red scoop neck from her Spike-sponsored shopping spree, and Angel heard the catch of breath in the back of Lawson’s throat. Couldn’t blame him, really. It clung to her curves, exposed the delicate swell of breast and the steady pulse beneath the creamy skin of her neck. She wore it well. “Came back to finish up. How is there always so much filing? We don’t make enough money to have this much filing.”
“Cordelia Chase,” Angel said. “My office manager. Cordelia, this is Sam Lawson. He’s my...that is, I...uh....”

“He sired me.” Lawson stood to take her hand. “Charmed,” he said, and raised her fingers to his lips. She plucked her hand away.

“Slow your roll, Casanova. I’m not on the menu.” She turned to Angel. “Sired him when? I’ve never heard of this guy.”

“World War Two.” She nodded slowly with her jaw tight and then she smacked him in the chest. Hard.

“You hungry, Sam?” She slipped the cooler off Angel’s shoulder and headed for the microwave. “He’ll have something vampire-friendly in here.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Lawson chuckled at Cordelia’s retreating back. “She’s really not scared?”

“Not even a little.”

She pulled four plastic containers from the cooler and put three in the refrigerator. Then she poured two mugs full from the fourth container and popped them into the microwave on the express setting. “So are you here for the wedding?”

“Wedding?”

“Spike wants him to be a groomsman.”

“Good choice.” She nodded at Lawson. “You guys are gonna look great.”

“There’s a wedding?”

“Spike’s getting married.” He had to grit his teeth to get the words out, but he did it without choking. What more could anyone ask of him?

“What kind of blood is this, Angel? It smells good. To me, I mean.” She wrinkled her nose. “How weird is that?”

“I don’t know. Something Sean picked.” The blood Sean gave him was always better than pig, but this smelled especially good. Otter, maybe? With something in it. Curry and...rosemary?

“Sean’s the new guy, right? Spike’s...fledgling?” Angel nodded. “I haven’t met him yet.” The microwave beeped and she brought the mugs out. “Be careful. They’re full. And stay on the linoleum.” When Angel followed orders, Sam did, too. “That mirror thing sure sucks. I’ll have to take pictures so you guys can see how great you look.”

“Obliged,” Lawson said, confidence visibly dented. His nostrils flared as he sipped at his drink. “Is that why you called me? Spike and Dru are getting married?”

“Oh, you are out of the loop,” Cordelia said. “Dru’s history. Now it’s Buffy. And that is some drama, let me tell you.”

The office door swung open to reveal Harmony, dressed in an immaculate shell pink business suit, yellow hair spilling down her back in waves. Her shampoo smelled like peaches. Angel had a flash of her rocking atop him, face tilted upward, the ends of her hair painting bloody trails across his chest. He willed it away and averted his gaze, but his canines were still too sharp.
Par for the course, lately, his demon close to the surface, but well-behaved, like the tigers trained for movies. It could be the preparation to take a city...cities.... How much territory was he supposed to control, anyway? It might be calling his family together, touching the minds of other demons. It could even be that some part of him knew Harmony was his. Drusilla’s line. He could smell it.

Or maybe he’d just been spending too much time with Sean.

“Oh my god,” Harmony said. “Spike’s marrying Buffy?” She covered the shocked ‘o’ of her mouth with manicured fingertips. Both her nails and her lips were painted the same color as her suit.

“Kidding.” She grinned at Cordelia. “Buffy already called me. Too bad I don’t get to be a bridesmaid. I’d do sweet justice to that dress. But,” she singsonged, “groom’s side.” The deep pink tip of her tongue flicked briefly over her upper lip. “Is there any more of that? It smells amazing.” Angel passed her his mug and edged a few more inches away.

“You’re a vampire. Since when?” Cordelia moved, as usual, directly from confusion to anger. “And why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Since graduation. With the snake?” She sipped from the mug. “Mmm. Brian can’t come ‘til later, Angel. He’s stuck at work.” She pulled a mini tape recorder out of her purse and punched the record button. “I’m supposed to take notes.”

“God, Harmony,” Cordelia said. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“No big. It spun me for a while, but that’s done. Out of the desperation relationship, on to something better. I’m a career girl, now—thanks for that rec letter, Angel. They tapped me for Travel Arrangements. Love it!”

“Who turned her?” Cordelia pointed at Angel. “Did you turn her?”

“What? No!” How could she even ask that question? He’d been on their side at graduation.

“It was some low-level Aurelian mayor minion. He didn’t survive commencement.” Her smile dimmed. “I woke up alone in the burned out school, which—freaky.”

“High school graduation?” When everyone nodded, he said, “It must’ve changed since I was in school. Sam Lawson. A pleasure.” Harmony giggled when he kissed her hand.

“Harmony Kendall. It hasn’t changed that much.”

“It was a...uh...special circumstance,” Angel said.

“You might say,” Cordelia added. “There was a giant snake—that was the mayor.”

“The mayor was a giant snake?” Lawson asked.

“Human sorcerer. Rite of Ascension,” Angel said. “He became a giant snake. During graduation.”

“And he had minions!” Cordelia said.

“Right? But we had weapons under our gowns—the whole senior class.” Harmony set her mug down to wave her hands excitedly.

“The ritual came with an eclipse. That’s why the mayor’s vampire minions could come out. Also why Angel could help. But there was this big honkin’—.” Was Cordelia actually at a loss for words?
“Melee,” Angel supplied. “We had a lot of people, but they were mostly untrained.”

“That,” Cordelia said. “Then Buffy lured the snake into the school and kaboom!”

“I was in the basement,” Harmony said. “I kinda missed the explosion. Saw the snake pieces when I woke up.”

“Ew.” Cordelia patted her shoulder.

“Buffy.” Lawson looked back and forth between Cordelia and Harmony like he was trying to figure out if they were making fun of him. “Spike’s Buffy?”

He tried not to—he really tried—but he growled anyway.

Lawson took a step back. Cordelia and Harmony gave him pitying looks. “You gotta get over it, Angel. She moved on.”

He shook his head. “It’s not like that. Buffy and I were—.”

“Didn’t you dump her?” Harmony asked. “Word in the halls was that her creepy cradle-robber boyfriend dumped her and that’s why she ran away from home. Nobody knew you were a vampire, of course, but—.”

“She ran away?” She hadn’t told him that. Why hadn’t she told him that?

“Yeah. A month before the end of junior year. She didn’t get back until October. She missed a month of senior year. Nobody thought she’d graduate.”

“Her mom kicked her out and she was wanted for murder,” Cordelia said, “but they cleared it up over the summer.”

“Really?” Harmony leaned in, eyes wide. “That’s why she ran away?”

“Huh uh. She ran away ‘cause she sent Angel to Hell. It was a whole big thing.”

“Oh—oh. Spike told me about that. That’s when that happened?”

“Uh huh. So many issues a subscription would have been cheaper.”

“Why did Buffy blow up the school?” Lawson asked.

“To get rid of the snake,” Cordelia answered. She rolled her eyes.

“Do you think she has a vampire fetish?” Harmony asked. “That’s the rumor now. And I wonder, ‘cause first there was Angel and now Spike. Plus she’s been a lot nicer to me since I joined the team.”

“I don’t know if it’s a fetish or if they’re the only guys she meets. Her job is her life.”

“No doubt,” Harmony said. “It’s neat finding out what happened to people after high school. Your parents left the country, right?”

“It was that or prison for tax evasion.”

“Ew. Yeah. That sucks.” She picked her mug back up again, sipped at it contemplatively. “But you have a great job.”
“You too! And you’re a vampire...so who’s this Brian? Is he dishy?”

“Boyfriend! And totally.”

“I don’t understand,” Lawson said. “Are you saying it was Buffy’s job to blow up the school?”

“Well, yeah,” Cordelia said.

“Duh,” Harmony said. “She’s the slayer?”


“The not quite one and only,” Cordelia said.

“Huh.” Lawson nodded. “You know, he always had this slayer thing.”

“Tell me about it,” Harmony said. “Glad I got clear of that train wreck.”

“Oh my god,” Cordelia said. She gathered the empty mugs and headed back toward the little half kitchen. Harmony followed her. “You and Spike?”

“I was new,” Harmony said. “I needed someone. He wasn’t over Drusilla, but he was already obsessed with Buffy.” She huffed. “Like everyone couldn’t see this coming. So when Brian asked me to run away with him, well...” The girls’ voices were lost to the sound of running water.

Lawson tilted his head—Spike-like—to watch them walk away. “The office manager and the vampire career girl went to high school with the slayer?”

“Among others. There’s a witch, a vengeance demon, and...never mind.” A demon, a witch, and a slayer walk into a bar. “You’ll meet them.”

“Roger that. What am I doing here, Chief? Am I just here for a wedding?”

“It’s...a little more than that, but yeah. Spike wants you to be a groomsman—.” Angel held one finger up. “Don’t let me forget to get your measurements.”

“Spike chased slayers until he found one he could keep, like he was hunting for the right one.” Lawson stared into his folded hands. “Where does that leave us?”

“On the side of the angels.”

“You’re a laugh a minute.”

“I’m not kidding.” He squared his shoulders and pulled his demon forth. “I plan to ally the Order with the slayer. I’ve called my seconds to me. We’ll work from L.A. toward Sunnydale, eliminating rival families and putting our own people in power. When we control enough territory, I’ll call everyone else. They’ll either get on board or they’ll die.”

“Gonna give me a mission, Chief?” Lawson’s eyes held awe and disbelief and a little excitement.

Angel nodded. “How do you feel about Oxnard?”
The demon was lying.

That didn’t surprise him. Sunnydale distrusted strangers, as a rule, and he was stranger than most, but this reception was unusually chilly. The little gray creature stammered and fidgeted, evaded when it could, lied when it had to, and stole entreating glances over his shoulder.

Ethan followed its gaze to the shadowy back corner of the pub, where a Fyarl demon lounged on an overstuffed couch, a pint of Douge Lager balanced, delicate as a teacup, between two clawed fingers. One massive hoof tapped idly. When it caught him looking, it bared jagged canines in something as likely to be a growl as a grin. When he turned back to his table, the gray was gone.

That didn’t surprise him either, but it was damned inconvenient. He’d missed so many connections, seen so many averted eyes, heard so many conversations come to a stuttering halt when he arrived that it seemed the whole of the Underground conspired to avoid him. While that offered certain advantages—wandering the Market unmolested, for instance—it did nothing for his Moon Vine search.

He dropped a ten on the table, left the pub, and headed back out into the Market to look for Dash. Demons edged away as he passed, leaving a bubble of space a foot wide around him.

He bought cut hyacinths from a Laster girl who pushed a bright pink cart with yellow wheels. She couldn’t have been more than ten, but he had to look up to meet her placid eyes. Yes, she knew who Dash was, she told him, stripping the dead leaves from the flower stems and pushing them into their little plastic carrier. Yes, he was often here, just like she was. Funny that she hadn’t seen him today. Would he like a bag of rosebuds to snack on? They’re fresh.

He bought the rosebuds, too, and ate them as he walked. They were almost like food.

He bought a box of chocolates from a Brachen woman who didn’t speak much English. She tsked at him and wagged her finger when he asked about Dash, and then she laughed, but her raspberry truffles were delicious.

A friendly Clement demon hadn’t seen Dash either, but he spoke flawless English, wasn’t trapped in a market stall, and didn’t run away, which made him Ethan’s new best friend. “Say...are you human?”

“More or less.” Give or take a few potions and a contract or two. “Is that a problem?”

“Oh, pshhh. Course not.” The creature patted his shoulder with a robbery hand. “We just don’t get many of you down here.”

“How unfortunate. I keep meaning to visit, but....”
Clem nodded. “Things get busy, time gets away from you, and before you know it? Poof!”

“The whole blasted year is gone.” They shopped the Market together for the better part of an hour. Although they saw no sign of Dash, the Clement was surprisingly engaging, and Ethan actually enjoyed himself. By the time they’d finished, Clem sported a new fedora, while Ethan had new cufflinks, a hand-made blank book, and a miniature string of iridescent beads that would make a splendid gift for Lstascht. “Clem, I’m famished. Where can we find dinner?”

He waggled his jowls. “Trughud’s—if you’re willing to leave the Market.”

Trughud’s served the kind of American food commonly seen on television programs made in the eighties but set in the fifties, overlaid with a demonic sensibility of an unknown variety. There were milkshakes. They came in three flavors: green, orange, and blue. Ethan ordered blue. There were burgers, but they were not beef. His time with the Hsshthk served him well. He knew not to ask. All in all, it wasn’t bad.

“Clem,” he said, sprawling back in the candy pink booth, practically sedated from the oversized meal. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything about someone called the Moon Vine, have you?”

Clem slurped the last of his soda and eyed Ethan’s half-finished blue shake. “Are you gonna finish that?”

“Be my guest.”

He spooned the shake over his French fries and ate them with a fork. Ethan tried again. “Have you heard anything about the Moon Vine?”

Clem chewed in contemplative silence for a moment. “I’m sorry. Did you say something?”

“The Moon Vine?”

Clem shook his head. “I still didn’t catch that.”

“Rumplestiltskin,” Ethan said.

“Oh. Haha. I like that story.” Clem returned to his dinner.

Ethan sat up and leaned toward the demon’s ear. “Moon Vine,” he said clearly. Clem didn’t even blink. It wasn’t that Clem was ignoring him. He didn’t seem to hear the words.

“Macbeth,” Ethan said at the same volume. Clem dropped his fork and clutched at his chest.

“You tryin’ to give me a heart attack?” He grinned, panting. “Okay, yeah. It was funny. You got me.” He retrieved his fork and stabbed a blue shake covered fry. “I don’t think Macbeth is playing anywhere, right now. But if you’re after Shakespeare, you should come back in a couple of weeks. The Margas Theater—that’s a block over and one south—is doing a second run of ‘10 Things I Hate About You.’ It’s based on ‘The Taming of the Shrew.’”

“I may do that.” He could envision himself at leisure in this place, among hell’s more civilized legions. His answers were here—somewhere—and Clem was an excellent guide. Which raised a question. No variety of loose-skinned demon was dangerous, and Clements were the least among them. So why would someone go out of their way to put a magical block in a Clement demon’s mind?

The answer? Clem knew something—or someone—important.
“I don’t spend a lot of time in the Underground, anymore,” Clem said, jotting something down on a napkin and passing it over. “Surface adapted, maybe? They say it changes us. ‘Sides, my cell doesn’t work down here. That’s my number, but if I don’t pick up, try Willy’s.”

Yawning, he wished Clem a good morning and stumbled up the six flights of stairs to his hotel. As soon as he reached the surface, his phone buzzed madly with delayed notifications, every last one from the same familiar number.

Five in the morning California time made it a perfectly reasonable noon in London. Unfortunate, but it couldn’t be helped. Perhaps he could disrupt a lunch meeting?

No such luck. Barely half a ring and Chad Abbot picked up. “Rayne—I have questions about this last bit of research. Have you looked at the passages surrounding....”

“Please don’t be tedious. I told you: Scratch a warrior goddess, find a rogue slayer. I’ve seen enough of them, now. I don’t need to read every obscure prophetic verse to spot the pattern.”

“I understand that. It’s just....”

“Look. In the misty depths of long ago, your organization created superhuman demon hybrids, complete with a mandate to protect humanity from supernatural threat, and trained them to lead lives of selfless heroism. You can’t be surprised when they attract attention.”

“Rayne, could you please....”

“They gain followers, Chad. Worshippers. Songs and stories are written about them, passed down through generations until stories become legends, legends become traditions, and traditions become religions. It’s the reason—.”

“The reason the Cruciamentum was implemented. I know—I know. Sow the wind, and all that. I’d still like you to review one additional passage from the materials I sent.”

Ethan swallowed his impatience. However exhausted and frustrated he might be, the Council’s outrageous retainer was the reason this trip was spent directly above his destination, in the elegant Ambrose, rather than the tatty—and inconvenient—Sunnydale Arms. Besides, there was something strained in Abbot’s tone.

“As you like.” He kicked his shoes off and stretched out atop the king sized bed, settled with a sigh into the warmth of the thick down comforter. It wasn’t as soft as the bed in his Sanctum, but it was a close second. “Which prophesy?”

“Ereshkigal fourteen.”

He’d read every last prophecy Chad had given him. That wasn’t one of them. “Forgive me...fourteen?”

“Ah...yes. That is...well, it’s in another section.”

He sat up and fished his binder out of his bag. “Which other section?” He flipped through the binder and found it. “Here it is. It’s in.... Well, that’s strange.” He skimmed the page. “Chad, how does your prophecy come to be in the ‘Myths and Legends’ section of this collection?”

There was a long moment of real silence on the other end of the line—no breath, no distant voices, no office noises—then finally, “That’s not important. Review it as you did the others.”
“I’m simply trying to understand the parameters of my task. Are you asking me to evaluate this passage as though it were a prophecy? Or are you saying it is a prophecy?”

“Humor me, Rayne,” he said, and the line went dead.

Ethan wasn’t tired anymore.
“Oh, hospital food,” Buffy said. “Prepackaged processed cheese and shredded mystery meat. It’s a heart attack on a Styrofoam plate.”

“Gotta drum up business somehow.” Spike leaned around her to retrieve a bowl of butterscotch pudding. Buffy tossed him three packets of red pepper flakes which he caught without looking. “Thanks, love.” He shook the peppers onto the pudding and stirred them in. Then he covered it in chocolate syrup and topped the whole thing with a dollop of raspberry jam.

Giles stomach rebelled. He’d had nothing but strong black coffee since he arrived at the hospital two evenings previous. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to watch Spike eat that concoction. He poured yet another cup of coffee and dawdled on his way to the register. By the time he reached the table, the dispute had started up again. This time, it seemed to be between Xander and Anya.

“D’hoffryn is on the guest list, Xander,” Anya said, eyes wide and worried, “and now, because you and Willow pulled your little stunt, I missed my first class.”

“We had to know,” Xander said. “So we just looked and then—.”

“You lied.” Well, Oz didn’t pull his punches, did he?

“We didn’t lie,” Xander said. “We just didn’t tell you.”

“We call that a ‘sin of omission,’ Xander.” Giles slid onto a chair and rested his elbows on the table. He inhaled the steam from his cup, and made certain not to close his eyes. Whenever he did, an unspecified amount of time elapsed without his awareness. “You can’t possibly be surprised that we’re angry.”

Xander rounded on him with a belligerent glare. “It’s your fault. If you had told us....”

“Told you what? That she was Buffy, our Buffy, untainted by outside influence, but with knowledge of the future?” He raised his eyebrows. “I did.”

“Wait. You guys went to Giles?” Buffy stopped with a burrito half way to her mouth. “Without talking to me, first?”

“And Angel. Plus they had you followed at school,” Anya said. “Now that was a big fat waste of time. Your life is boring.”

“You followed me?” Buffy’s face hardened. “And you talked to Angel.”

Spike narrowed his eyes. “What’d Angelus have to say, then?”

“What?” Xander sat up straight, face draining a shade paler. “Angel. Not Angelus—unless there’s something else you’re not telling us.”

“He said we should ask Buffy,” Oz said.

“Which is what we agreed we were going to do.” Anya glared daggers at Xander and folded her arms across her chest. “But then you lied, and Willow got hurt, and I missed my class—I might have to withdraw, Xander. I don’t have time for this.”

“Which class are you taking, Anya? Not spellcasting, certainly.” She wasn’t on Buffy’s list for the
After more than a thousand years of life, he doubted there was anything a mortal witch could teach her.

“Hmm? It’s called ‘The Well-Armed Woman.’ It’s a women’s only introduction to handguns. Buffy suggested it.”

Giles blinked. “Well that’s...practical.” There were moments he didn’t recognize the way his slayer’s head worked, anymore. “I presume there’s some specific purpose?”

“Yeah,” Buffy said, and bit into her burrito.

“No,” Xander said, rising half to his feet and pointing an accusing finger at Buffy. “No way. You don’t get to do that.”

“Sit down, Monkey Boy.” Spike’s growl was barely louder than a whisper, but it rustled the fine hairs on the back of his neck.

“Anya is gonna need a gun.” Xander stood all the way up and put his fists on the table. “A gun—do you get that? Something is gonna happen to Anya, and she,” he snarled at Buffy, “knows what it is, but she isn’t gonna tell us.”

On the other side of the table, Spike stood up, too, and planted his own fists. He leaned toward Xander and shifted, with incremental menace, to his demon face. “I told you,” he said, “to sit down.”

“You gonna let him get away with this, Buff?” Xander met Spike’s yellow eyes without flinching. The boy did not lack for courage.

“I’m thinking about it,” Buffy said. “You had me followed.”

“Xander!” Anya batted at his shoulder. “I told you why!”

Xander shook her off. “I don’t buy it!”

“You could ask her.” Oz blew across the steaming surface of his ginseng tea.

“Fine,” Xander said. “Why does Anya need a gun?”

“Firearms are not allowed on the premises,” Doctor Framke said, his voice very small. His eyes were locked on Spike.

“It’s at home,” Anya said into the thundering silence. “I don’t know how to use it, yet. That’s why I need a class.”

The doctor swallowed hard and nodded. “I...uh...wanted to check in with you before I left. I’ve asked the nurses to let your people work. There was a complaint about the red chalk circle they drew on the floor of Miss Rosenberg’s room.”

“Good of you,” Giles said.

“I’m going to assume they know what they’re doing—because I’ve got nothing.” He wore a leather jacket over his scrubs. He pulled it tighter around his body and wrapped his arms over his chest. “I’m not going to find anything, am I? Nothing will show up on any test I run.”

“That’s likely.”
He sighed with resignation. “Miss Summers, what will I see when I x-ray your arm?”

“Probably nothing?” Buffy shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t remember the break you’re talking about. Maybe if you did a cat scan?”

“It was six months ago!”

“Like I said, I heal fast.”

“Should I cancel the appointment?” His eyes slid to Spike and then back to Buffy.

“You haven’t run away screaming, so no. Let’s keep it.” She nudged Spike and made a sweeping gesture over her own face. He shook off his demon.

“Right,” Framke said. His shoulders slumped. “I’m going home to get some sleep. You should, too.” With one last look at the group, he turned and walked out of the cafeteria.

“Was that good or bad?” Xander asked.

“I didn’t hear him come in,” Oz said.

“He wasn’t scared—except a little of Spike,” Buffy said, “so...good, I think. Xander, Anya’s delivering wedding invitations.”

“Ah,” Giles said. Anya had neither the mass nor the strength to fight the monsters hand to hand. She could cast spells, but she hadn’t Willow’s boundless talent. Sensible to train her with firearms. It’s what he would have suggested, had he given it any thought. “A gun is a great equalizer.”

“But why Anya?” Xander dropped back into his chair. “Why not me? Or Oz?”

“You already know how to use a gun.” She reached across the table and touched the back of Xander’s hand. He pulled away. “You need more training unarmed, but your teacher isn’t ready. And I don’t have plans for Oz. I’ll make some, now that I know he’s going to stay.”

Something crackled across Oz’ face, too rapid to discern, and disappeared, leaving him unruffled and unreadable. “Don’t,” he said. “Not yet.” This made Anya purse her lips and glare at Xander once more.

“On that note,” Giles said, and hauled himself to his feet. It was more difficult than he would have liked.

“We should all go.” Buffy stood up and pulled Spike with her. “Doctor’s orders.”

When he got to his car, he found Joyce sitting on the hood reading a paperback romance novel. She wore a pale yellow sweater and her hair was pulled back from her face with a fabric covered barrette. A soft-sided cooler rested beside her. “You look lovely,” he said. “Buffy called you?”

“It was Spike.” She smiled and it made her lovelier. “He said you shouldn’t drive.”

“That vampire is a mother hen. I’m fine,” he said, but when he tried to open the car door, his hands shook so badly he couldn’t get the key into the lock. Joyce took his keys and he went without further protest to the passenger side.

“Is there any news?” He shook his head and let his eyes drift closed. “Rupert? We’re here.”

“What?” They were parked in his driveway.
“You’re tired. Come inside.” She unlocked the door and let him into his own flat. “Sit down before you fall down. I mean it.” She pointed at the couch and he sat obediently. “I’ll heat this up.”

“You’re in league with the vampire, now?”

“Only when he’s right. You could nap while you’re waiting.”

He could not nap. His body ached, and his eyelids felt like sandpaper, but he’d guarded so well against sleep that it would have to take him unawares. He could not go to it willingly. A red light blinked with annoying insistence in his peripheral vision. He punched the button on his answering machine.

“You have...seven...new messages.”

Beep. “Giles—it’s Raj. Could you give me a call?”

Beep. “Giles—Raj, here. They fired us all. No warning. I need to get out of my head. Call me.”

Beep. “Mister Giles, it’s Maisie Dawson with the symposium. I’m calling to confirm the title of your presentation. If we don’t hear from you by Wednesday, November seventeenth, we’ll go ahead with the preliminary title you provided.”

Beep. “Giles—Raj, again. Would you call me back? Stuff is happening.”

Beep. “Giles. Raj. We’re transferring out in the morning. Call me.”

Beep. “Well...it was fun while it lasted. Sorry I didn’t get to say goodbye. I...they’re putting us under for a while. I don’t know when I’ll resurface. If you need to get a message to me, send it care of my parents. That’s Dev and Monica Singh, Camp Humphreys, South Korea.”

Beep. “Damn.”

“Don’t look at me like that.” He covered his eyes with his hands so he wouldn’t have to see the pity on her face. “I’m not some breathless teenager pinning all my hopes on....” He bit back a stupid, self-pitying sob. “Oh, I hate this bloody town.”

She sat beside him and pulled him into her arms. “Yeah. Me too.”
“I’m staying here.”

Oz’ face was made of strange angles. She’s never seen a wolf shift off-phase before, but that didn’t make it impossible. Heaven and Earth held jillions of things, and Horatio knew jack about werewolves. Plus, for Oz? This was *emoting*. “Do you need anything?”

“I packed for a road trip.” She reached out to hug him, but he stepped away and held a hand up. “Not now.” His nails extended in blunted arcs from his fingertips.

“Okey dokey.” *Please don’t eat anyone.* She thought those words at him with a force born of panic, but only Spike heard them. He squeezed her hand. “We’ll be back tomorrow. Try to...” Try to what? Sleep? On the lumpy cot next to Willow’s bed, inside a magic circle with a trio of chanting witches? As Spike would say, *not bloody likely.*

“Breathe,” Spike said. He’d taken to Oz the way he took to Dawn in the Othertime, as much for as despite her peripheral status. Like Dawn, Oz was a Scooby outsider, accepted but not really included, and William identified. “Wolf’s you; you’re not the wolf, right?” An important distinction. She hoped it would work. “There’s a path ‘round the back of the building. Run it off if you need to.”

“Yeah.” Oz breathed—in through the nose, out through the mouth—several times before he nodded. “Thanks, man.”

They exited the cafeteria in two somber pairs, leaving Oz alone, head bowed over the paper cup he held between clawed fingers. Buffy didn’t feel good about it. “Let him keep his vigil, love. We’ll start fresh in the morning.”

“Fine, but I still need to patrol.” He waggled his eyebrows at her shredded dress. “And this is why I shop.” Xander and Anya stood close together but not touching, shivering a little in the chill of the concrete parking garage. “Where are we dropping you guys?”

“Huh uh,” Xander said. “If you’re patrolling, we’re coming with you. You can’t just sideline us.” He grabbed Anya’s arm. It was an attempt at a show of solidarity, and it didn’t just fail; it crashed and burned.

“Xander, no!” She shook him off, and he seemed to shrink in on himself. “Sideline away, Buffy. Unlike *some* people, I have work to do.”

“Hey!” Xander’s face flushed. She’d forgotten how reactive he was, perpetually spoiling for a fight. In the field, it was great. In Scooby squabbles? Not so much. “I start Monday!”

“Okay—we’ll take Anya home and Xander can come with us.” Spike opened his mouth to argue, an outraged frown settling between his brows. She drew one arm up to point at him, aimed her best Slayer Prime glare down its length, and he subsided, eyes wide. She got an image of a young man, broad shouldered and pink cheeked. His features were rounder than Spike’s, but he had the same mop of curly brown hair. He extended one index finger in stern warning. William’s father, maybe?

“Charles.” Recollections of Charles roughhousing and laughing, wild curls windblown, swept across her mind. “Half-brother. Killed in Bhutan when I was a boy.” He cocked his head. “Haven’t thought of him in years.”


"Were you close?"

"Not so’s you’d notice. Too much older, yeah? Gave me hell.” His smile was more human than any she’d seen from him since she arrived. “I misbehaved.”

“Color me surprised,” Xander said, and the smile vanished. “Aren’t we supposed to be patrolling?"

“Yup. Clock’s a tickin’.” She tugged the DeSoto door open, but Xander and Spike still faced off over the hood. “We can measure them later, boys. Let’s go.”

They’d only driven a few blocks when they encountered the vampires.

Spike tromped on the brakes so hard that Xander, who hadn’t worn his seatbelt, slammed into the back of Buffy’s seat. “Watch it, deadb—holy what?” There were six of them arrayed in a semi-circle across the street, yellow eyes blazing. A graffiti covered school bus parked sideways behind them. “What’s happening?”

“A bloody roadblock.” The vampires advanced. They carried a variety of bludgeoning weapons—baseball bats, tire irons. One of them even had a spiked mace. “Fair fight?”

“Maybe.” They were awfully organized for a Sunnydale night shift. It made her suspicious. She slid Spike’s coat off her shoulders and nudged a sword out from under the seat with her toe. “Do we know them?”

“Think it’s the crew from Oxnard.”

“Did we piss them off already?” There was a click from the back seat, and Buffy glanced over her shoulder. Anya had locked her door and slid to the floorboards with her knees against her chest and her head tucked down. Xander, on the other hand, was craning his neck to look out the window. As he reached for the door handle, Buffy grabbed a fistful of denim at the knee of his jeans and yanked. He toppled down next to Anya. “I lost track.”

“Must’ve.” He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t see their fighters.”

The bus was the kind kindergarteners rode. It took up both lanes neatly without blocking the shoulder. If these were Oxnard’s B-listers, like Spike said, they were probably ambush hunters. A pack. They’d done this before.

“Does that mean we won?” They hadn’t heard word one from Angel. She’d thought he was exaggerating when he said he’d move the second Sam arrived, but nope. That second came, and he went conquistador on the California coast. Note to self: Angel gets way less broody when you point him at a target.

“Won the battle, maybe. Four shooters, by my count.” Four white faces peered from four black windows, each opened just wide enough for the barrel of a gun to poke out.

“Shooters?” Xander said. Anya hissed and he went silent again.

“Stay down.” She smacked the lock down on Xander’s door, just to be sure, and popped her own open. Spike’s opened at exactly the same instant, so that even she couldn’t tell who thought of it first.

“Oi!” They walked around to the front of the car. On the off chance the vampires had come to negotiate, neither of them brandished a weapon, although they each carried one. That was mostly for show. Oxnard was Sam’s territory, now. To do this right—vampire right—they had to be undusty
when their new master came to haul them home. “What’re you after?” The vampires raised their weapons and snarled.

Every question had an answer, and that was a doozy. Wordless, they darted outward, splitting the attention of their attackers. As a bonus, it changed the trajectory of fire. No stray bullets would hit the DeSoto or its vulnerable human cargo.

Or that’s what she thought, right up to the moment Xander opened the door.

All four barrels swiveled toward him, and Anya yelled something indecipherable. Germanic, maybe? A bullet ricocheted off the DeSoto’s reinforced frame with a metallic ping. “Damn it!” She should have sprung for keyless entry, even though it’d break the bank for another three or four years. She’d’ve been able to lock Xander in from a distance. Now he crouched behind the open rear door with a crossbow—useful, maybe, if he didn’t get his stupid head blown off. That was a great big if. They had to stop the shooters.

Hand to hand, ten vampires would have been a nice warm up for the two of them, even if they were supposed to leave them alive for Sam to scoop up later. But tossing guns into the mix upped the ante. Especially since they had the cover—and high ground—of the bus.

_So we take the bloody bus._ Spike sent the words into her head as clearly as if he’d spoken them out loud. She really had to learn to do that. _On three. One. Two. Three._

Good enough. They rushed the vehicle. She took a shot to her thigh and one to her shoulder, but they both went through clean, so she kept going. When one of the foot soldiers got too close, she picked him up by belt and collar and pitched him as hard as she could into the side of the bus. There was a noise like crumpled tin foil, and he slumped to the blacktop.

In tandem, she and Spike jumped. She had just enough time to see the gaping mouths and wide eyes of the shooters as she ran up the side of the bus and seized a barrel in each fist. Then she braced her feet against the window frames and pushed off into a backflip. The weapons came with her. When she landed, she spun and swung, spun and swung, until she’d beaten the remaining foot soldiers unconscious.

Spike took a different tack.

Although he, too, ran up the side of the bus and grabbed gun barrels, he used them to kick through a window and climb inside. He pitched vampires from the bus to the ground, one by one, through the shattered window. They bled. He didn’t. Invulnerability had its perks.

And, as they fell, Buffy smacked their skulls with the butt of a rifle.

“Ten of the buggers.” Spike jumped down and swaggered toward her, thumbs hooked in his belt loops. “Not too shabby. We still have those zip ties in the trunk?”

“Good thinking.” She slipped an arm around his waist and walked with him back to the car.

As they approached, Xander got to his feet. “Why didn’t you kill them?”

“Not mine to dust,” Spike said, and continued around to the trunk without slowing down.

“Hey!” The crossbow hung, forgotten, from Xander’s fingers. “I asked you a question.”

“He answered, Xander.” She tugged it away and unloaded it. “The next time I tell you to stay down, stay down.” She handed the weapon back to him. “We’ll get you in the field more after you start
training. It’s just a few weeks.”

“I don’t get it, Buff.” He slouched against the car. “I mean—great. You got teachers for all of us. I get why Willow needs special training. She’s special. Anya....” He dropped the bow on the back seat and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Okay, I get the gun thing. And I get why you’d take Spike patrolling instead of me. I’m not stupid. But—” He pled with eyes dark as chocolate and much sweeter. “You know how to fight. Why can’t you train me?”

“You’re way too tall.” She was seconds from caving when Xander’s posture changed, sweet to bitter. He sneered.

“That doesn’t even....”

“Sure it does.” Most of Anya’s attention was on Spike. He rolled their attackers onto their faces, zip tied their wrists and ankles, and looped both ties together with a third tie that functioned as a handle. Then he lined them up in a neat row next to the bus, using their handles to haul them around. Anya nodded with satisfaction. “She’s much smaller and stronger than you, Xander. If you try to fight like she does, you’ll get killed.”

“Fine. What about Giles?”

Buffy was losing patience. “You give him crap when he tries.”

“So do you, but that doesn’t stop him.” Xander straightened to loom over her, scowling. Was he trying to intimidate her? “And why do I need training now? I didn’t before.”

“Because I was young and stupid.” She thumped him in the chest, flat handed. “I know better, now. I’m not gonna let you—.”

“Oh my god.” Anya turned away from her observation of Spike, who was punching buttons on a cell phone fished from the pocket of a downed vampire. “It’s not prescience. They looped you.”

“What does that mean?” Xander glowered.

“They didn’t just give her knowledge of the future; they made her live it.” Her mouth crooked downward at the edges. “Are you sure it’s not a punishment?”

“No,” Buffy said, “but it’s what I asked for.” Anya shuddered.

Spike slid in next to her. “Angelus is ten minutes out. Chasin’ this lot.” He waved a hand at their captives. “Sam’s with him.”

“Was it bad?” Anya asked the question in a whisper. “Bad enough to make you do it all again?”

“And then some.”

“How did it happen?” Anya leaned in to look into Buffy’s eyes. “Was there a portal?” She didn’t actually know. It was over so quickly, and Spike’s memories were mostly about her pinning him to the grass.

“We were fightin’ and boom.” Spike brought his fists together and yanked them outward, fingers splayed as they moved, an explosion described in flesh and bone. “Like a soddin’ atom bomb, only...green.” He frowned. “Neon green.”

Buffy’s stomach flipped. “Dawn green?”
“Maybe.” He hadn’t put that together either.

“And that’s it? Buffy two point oh showed up and you rolled over like a schnauzer?” Xander’s lip curled.

Anya elbowed him. “What’s Dawn?”

Boy, now that was a question. “One of the Powers. She was...uh...trapped in human form.” Okay, Dawn wouldn’t have said ‘trapped,’ but she wasn’t here, so Buffy got to say. Besides, Dawn wouldn’t have said anything. She’d have rolled her eyes and let everybody wonder.

“Did you worship her?” Anya sounded so serious that Buffy almost laughed. “Did she owe you a favor? Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know if she did. I didn’t see her, at the end.” She hadn’t seen her for months. Dawn often disappeared for months at a time. “I got permission from...” Ma’at. Duat. Did you know you can call on the Egyptian underworld to resurrect a slayer? “From another Power. If Dawn was involved, it’s because she got sick of my moping.”

“You moped?” Spike’s mouth softened.

“For thirty years solid, and then intermittently for decades.” She poked him in the belly. “I even went looking for you—for another you, I mean, in another dimension. But it wasn’t the really real you.”

“I don’t wanna hear this,” Xander said.

“Shh,” Anya said. “I do. So you’re old. For a slayer, that’s old.”

“I guess. It’s not like I didn’t die.” The words on the stone were etched into her memory: Buffy Anne Summers, 1981 – 2001, Beloved Sister, Devoted Friend, She saved the world a lot. During the months after her resurrection, she ended patrols there, traced the letters with her fingertips and cried. “I just kept coming back.”

“Huh. Did you die again? To get here, I mean?” She nodded. “And it really is a time loop? Everything’s exactly the same?”

She scooped her purse from the floor of the DeSoto and pulled her wallet out, flipping it open to display her ID: Summers, Elizabeth Anne DOB 01-19-1981. But she remembered something else.

You’re my little punkin’ belly. The childish nickname made Dawn squirm, but Buffy ached with resentment. You ever have names for me? No, her mother said. I think you were always just...Buffy.

“Exactly.”
Blood Calls - Angel

When Angel found them, he almost turned around and drove away.

Buffy and Spike stood side by side while Anya machine-gunned questions at them. They only answered every third or fourth question, and kept their replies brief, but discomfort wept from their posture. A few feet distant, head bowed and shoulders hunched, stood Xander. He looked like he might be sick.

“That’s a slayer?” Sam’s tone was puzzled. “She’s...small. The way Spike told it, I thought....”

“I expected something more intimidating, as well,” Brian said.

“That dress is completely trashed,” Harmony said, “but her hair looks super cute.” She popped the car door open and waved. “Buffy?”

Buffy turned, relief lighting her face. “Harm?” The two girls bounded toward each other and embraced, chittering happy greetings. Anya joined them, leaving Xander to stare sullenly after her.

“Hail Angelus, Master of Aurelius! Sunnydale offers respite from your travels!” Spike called, raising one hand in greeting, and Angel sighed. While it was technically correct, it would work a lot better if he didn’t sound sarcastic. At least he’d shifted to demon face. Angel shifted, too, and got out of the car. Sam and Brian followed, noses twitching. Buffy was hurt.

“Blood of my blood, I accept respite.” He recited the words by rote, which kept the annoyance out of his voice. It seemed to catch Spike off guard, too. There was something to be said for the old rites. They were so specific about who could say what, when, and to whom that there was not much room left for Spike to piss him off.

“Welcome, Sire.” He still smirked, but that tone was gone. An improvement. “And to Oxnard’s new master, a token of our alliance.”

At that, the Oxnard vampires began writhing on the ground and yelling curses. “We offer thanks to Sunnydale’s master. Oxnard is in your debt.” Sam stepped forward and took Spike’s hand in a handshake that turned into a masculine, back-thumping hug. “Sire,” he said, broad smile revealing very straight, white fangs.

“‘Lo, Sam. It’s been a bit.” His gaze flicked upward. “Brian.”

Brian practically cowered. “Sire, I...uh...that is...Harmony....” His attention was glued to the ring on Spike’s left hand.

“No hard feelings, mate.” Spike didn’t lose the fangs, but his eyes shifted blue. That had to mean something, although Angel couldn’t fathom what. He had less insight into the workings of Spike’s mind now than he’d had a hundred years ago, and he was at a loss even then. “Worked out for the best. You got your take?”

“Yes, Sire.” Brian actually bowed, that gracious little forward tip so common in Darla’s generation. Had Spike taught him that? Given how thorough he’d been with Sean, it shouldn’t surprise him, but it brought him up short anyway. Was the bleached brat an obedient Aurelian with everyone but him?

“Sire?” The word dragged Angel’s attention to Xander.
The kid shouldn’t be here. Not that they were hiding anything, but he was bound to say something stupid, and then Angel would have to defend him. It would be a whole big thing, and he didn’t have the energy. “Yes?” he said, and he couldn’t help the rumble in his voice. He’d been fighting for the better part of the last twenty-four hours, and Buffy was soaked in blood. It didn’t seem to bother Spike, but he—and everyone else—trembled.

Xander glanced around the circle of demon faces. The fearscent wafted up so fresh and potent that it overwhelmed even the smell of slayer blood. That was right and proper. He was human, prey by his nature. He should be afraid. “Did you have a question?” Xander shook his head. “Good.”

“Spike?” Buffy approached, small and fearless. A bow wave of power ruptured the air before her, and his head spun with her scent. It wasn’t like this the last time he saw her. Was it? It couldn’t have been. He could look at her, then. Now, he didn’t flinch, but only barely. Brian and Sam drew back a step. “Hi guys.” She laid her hand on Spike’s arm, and his demon face melted away. He bent to press a kiss to her cheek. “Do you need us for anything else, right now? We’ve got to get Xander and Anya home.”

“That’s fine.” Please go. Please go now. He swallowed the knot of terror in his throat. “We need to deal with—.”

“The guestages? Sooner is better. Before someone calls the cops.” She took a step forward. For one alarming second, he thought she might hug him. Sam and Brian covered their faces. He held her gaze by force of will alone.

“Buffy, please don’t come any closer.” She stopped. “Catch up to us at Willy’s?”

She grinned. “After I get a shower?”

“Good plan.” Very good plan. He put his shaking hands in his pockets where nobody could see them. “Oh, and Spike?”

“Retrieve the boy?” He curled his tongue behind his teeth. “Will do.” Angel didn’t want to be grateful.

Harmony hugged Buffy and Anya, this time, and waved goodbye as they drove off before rejoining the group. “You can’t feel that?” Brian asked, which only confused her. Of course she could, but it didn’t matter. She was so new that they all overwhelmed her. Buffy wasn’t any scarier than the rest of them.

“And that smell.” Sam shook his head. “I don’t know how he does it.”

“What’s wrong with the way she smells?” She pouted. “I think it’s kind of sexy.”

“It is, at that,” Brian said. “Slayer blood is an aphrodisiac.”

“The question stands,” Sam said. “How can Spike stand to be around that?”

That was not the right question. Not if you knew Spike at all. Better to ask ‘How could he walk away?’ Buffy—this Buffy, at any rate—was sex and pain, heat and life and oblivion all spun together in a tangle of quips and pop-culture references that was virtually guaranteed to fascinate Spike. If she crooked her finger, he would follow, sure as sunrise. Angel rubbed his temples. “He likes it.”

“That’s perverse,” Brian said.
“That’s Spike,” Angel said.

“Sour grapes.” Harmony giggled. “She’s his ex.”

He glared at her, but she didn’t seem intimidated. “Let’s get this done.”

He walked Sam and the Oxnard captives through the Rite of Submission. All but two rolled without a struggle. ‘My life from your hand,’ clean and simple. It wasn’t as touching as Sean’s devotion to Spike, but most accepted Sam’s dominance with something like relief. They were the fledglings of fledglings. They lacked history, culture, and direction. A master would provide security. Not a one of them had to be dusted.

That’s how fourteen vampires arrived, more or less intact, at Willy’s bar. Sam’s new pack hung back a little, grateful to be standing but unsure of their place. That would come in time. Willy greeted them at the door.

“Angelus.” He raised his voice just enough for everyone in the Alibi Room to hear. A handful of demons left abruptly. “Good to see you. These friends of the groom?”

“Yeah—feeling a little conspicuous, Willy. Just let us go.”

Willy smiled, tight and steely. “I have my instructions. You have the banquet room.” Willy’s had a banquet room? “Right this way?” He gestured to a door with his open hand.

The banquet room flickered with candlelight. Chime music—distant and delicate—served as baffle to the noise of the bar. Deep red silk covered a table set for twenty with large ceramic tumblers shaped like the bowls of Bordeaux glasses. A sideboard draped in the same deep red held a flame-heated tureen bubbling with seasoned blood. It made his fangs itch. As he entered the room, Sean dropped to one knee before him and bowed his head. “Sunnydale welcomes the Master of Aurelius. I am offered as host.”

What were the words? “Rise, Sean.” Sean tilted his perfect kitten face upward and smiled, the barest lift of parted lips, the faintest glimpse of fang tips, and Angel’s mouth went dry. “Rise.” Stand up, Sean. Right. Fecking. Now. Sean stood, but not before Sam turned away to hide a grin.

“I’ll provide for your needs, Master.” He licked his lips, plump, pink, and freshly fed. Angel couldn’t look away. “Whatever they might be. You have only to make them known.” A chonách san ort, Liam. Nách mór an diabhal thú.

There was a proper way to thank the host. He’d known it when he walked in, but it had gone, now, fled for reasons he didn’t care to think on. He took half a step away from Sean. “Ah...thanks. Where are Spike and Buffy?”

“In their room. They’ll be here soon.”

“They were delayed?”

“Buffy came in covered in blood, Angelus.” Sean touched a fingertip to the back of his hand. He had mischief in his eyes. “It’ll be a minute.”

“Oh.” He shouldn’t have asked. “Oh.”

“In the meantime, I’m supposed to get you all seated and fed. I’ve even got helper minions.” He pointed at two unfamiliar vampires standing, still as stone, in the shadow of the sideboard. “Sandy and Mark.”
It was all under control. Angel shook his head. “You really took to this.”

“What, the Aurelian stuff? Protocols, rites, and traditions?” He nodded. “God, yes. First vampire-ish thing I feel good about. I love it.” He turned to the room at large and raised his voice. “Please be seated. We’ll begin as soon as everyone has eaten.” Angel took the head of the table. He left the space at his right for Sean.

Buffy and Spike arrived ten minutes later, fairly floating to their seats on a scentcloud of endorphins and sex. They wore black, and their hair was wet. Willy followed on their heels, set a highball glass of lime-garnished kshikle’un on the table in front of Buffy, and left, closing the door behind him with a reassuring thump.

She stirred the drink with a pair of hot pink straws and looked languidly around the room. That awful, righteous power he’d felt on the battlefield was gone, leaving a Buffy who, though stronger and more slender than the one he remembered, at least bore some resemblance to the girl he’d known. At first, they watched her watching them—she was still The Slayer, after all—and conversation quieted, but gradually they grew accustomed to her presence, and it resumed. When she’d regained the cover of babble, she nodded at the single empty seat.

“Angel,” she asked, “where is Drusilla?”
“So which is it?”

Midnight had come and gone, and the festivities at Lowell House showed no sign of flagging. It was the first party they’d hosted that wasn’t a bust. “Which is what?”

“You miss him? Or you feel bad ‘cause you don’t.”

Riley sighed. Graham was the kind of guy who noticed things, whether you wanted him to or not. He didn’t always tell you about it. Sometimes he just filed it away for later. But he always noticed. “Little of both.”

“Me too.” Graham kicked off his shoes and slouched against the headboard next to him. “Forrest was a dick, but he was one of us.”

He was more than a dick. “He was dangerous.”

Graham nodded. “It always felt like he was about to start something we couldn’t step back from.” A beat of silence. “Remember that bar in Denver?”

“The stripper in the Viking helmet.”

“Forrest in the Viking helmet. With the apples?”

“Oh, jeez. And the ukulele. We couldn’t make him stop.”

“Howling that Toni Braxton song in his screech-owl falsetto? Man could not sing to save his life,” Graham grinned. “But we were good until he took her shoe. You can’t step back from that.”

“No, you can’t step back from that.” He tried to laugh but the sound that came out was not much like laughter at all. His shoulders shook. “Helmet’s in my closet. When I packed up his room, I...I couldn’t send it back to his folks.” Instead, he’d sent them the trappings of a young man’s success and achievement: medals and awards, group photos and souvenir t-shirts. He didn’t send them Forrest’s favorite shirt, though. The bloodstains would never come out.

Graham didn’t meet his eyes. “Least they caught the guys.”

The brain-trusts in lockup at the city jail? They were tools. He was as sure of that as he was of Sunnydale. Somebody else was behind Forrest’s murder, pulling the strings, somehow, and he was pretty sure Graham knew it, too. “There’s that.”

“Doesn’t sit right with me, either, man, but there’s nothing we can do. Civilian authorities.”

The civilian authorities were not equipped to deal with Sunnydale kinds of crimes. They lacked the framework they’d need to recognize them, let alone solve them. Perps in custody; case closed. Like it was that simple. Like there weren’t vampires and Clement demons and talking toads roaming the streets at night. He’d take his grievance to the master of the city if he wasn’t sure that would be worse.

He didn’t know how it could be worse.

But what did he know, anyway? Those videos...maybe Forrest deserved what he got, like the guys who killed him said. And it was out of his hands. The civilian authorities had it, for better or worse.
He needed to let it go.

“I wish I had more to do.” They were supposed to stay on campus during the day. In theory, they might be called in to answer questions at any time. In practice? The higher-ups handled everything while he and his squad sat on their thumbs. Patrols were suspended, too, so he didn’t even go out, most nights. He was losing his mind.

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Go for a drive.” Take the freeway until he ran out of road, until he found some nameless little town so far away that nobody knew who he used to be. “Or a swim.” Straight out from shore, past the California breakers, until the open ocean swallowed him whole. “I’d settle for training Buffy’s friend.” What was his name, again? Common name; weird nickname. Alex...no. “Xander.”

“The bartender? From the pub. He’s part of Buffy’s crew?” Riley nodded. “Training him how?”

“Hand to hand. She wants him to be able to take care of himself.”

Graham raised his eyebrows. “And he needs Special Forces training to do that?”

“He’s been fighting vampires.”

“Hand to hand?”

“Since he was fifteen.”

“The fuck?”

“Why she’s worried.”

Graham stared at him for a moment longer, jaw slack, and then he shook his head. “If you want to go out during the day to train Xander, I’ll cover your ass. Just don’t slip off to get laid on my time.”

Riley smacked him with a pillow. “Thanks. So how’ve you been keeping busy? Besides babysitting.”

“Not even much of that. Sean’s been tied up with some big to-do—there’s a family reunion or something? Not sure of the details. It’s big.”

“A vampire family reunion?” He’d been half-asleep, before. Now he was awake. “In Sunnydale? And we didn’t notice?”

“I guess they’re keeping a low profile.”

“I guess. You should’ve invited him to the party.” Tell him to bring his whole family. Mommy vampires. Daddy vampires. All the vampires. With patrols suspended and the Initiative in chaos, a pack of them could waltz right in to Lowell House and make hors d’oeuvres of the party goers. Nobody would notice until morning.

“I did. He had plans. He’s meeting a friend for drinks.” Something must have shown in his face. Graham’s smile was stiff.

“Yeah, sorry.” That was unfair to Sean, as well as Spike and Angelus. Those vampires would save your life, he’d learned, even though others might kill you. That so hard to figure out, Finn? Use your head. He still wasn’t clear on how to sort out one kind from the other. “I’m sorry. Just an ordinary kid, right? I keep forgetting.” He pulled himself up and stretched. His neck was stiff. He needed to
work out more. “A friend? Like a date?” That seemed more than usually unfair. Why were demons going on dates while he was sulking in his bedroom listening to a party through the walls?

Graham paled. “Man, I hope not. I’ve met this friend, and I wouldn’t want to run into him alone.”

Not a date. Well, that was something, at least.

“Do you ever think about later? After Sunnydale, I mean—once the Initiative packs it in, where do we end up?” Buffy had actually offered him a job at her Academy, training teenagers to fight demons. The idea was repugnant. He’d turned it down. But Xander was an adult, and he was going to fight whether he knew how or not. Riley had no qualms about taking that job.

“I’ll wager the army keeps a skeleton crew here after the Initiative pulls out. And I’m staying even if they don’t.” He’d end his career for whatever he had going on in Sunnydale?

“I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“Good.” Graham smacked him on the thigh. “Now, drag your ass out of bed and go to the party. Have some fun. Forrest would want you to.”

He was right, damn it. Riley swung his legs over the edge of the bed and slid his shoes on. Then he stood up, pulled his shirt off, and replaced it with one that had no ketchup stains. Already a new man. And the big effort? He ran a comb through his hair. He held his arms out and waited for approval. “Presentable?”

“Riley—just get down there.”

When he opened the door, a wall of noise hit him. He might have turned around if Graham hadn’t grabbed his shoulder at the top of the stairs and pushed. If he walked, he got to stay on his feet. If he didn’t, he was going down face first. “Thank you. I can do this myself.” Graham nodded, but he didn’t let go.

At the bottom of the stairs, someone yelled, “Finn! Heads up!” and pitched a bottle of beer at his head. He caught it, but his shoulder twinged when he lifted his arm. Maybe he was coming down with something?

Great.

He twisted the cap off and wandered into the crowd.

The problem with arriving to a good party three hours in is that everyone is much further along in their celebration than you, even if you sprint to catch up, and he wasn’t much of a sprinter. He preferred picnics to parties, and a game of hoops to a game of shots. Every time. Drunk people were never as entertaining—or as coordinated—as they thought they were.

So he found a quiet spot near the buffet table and listened to the band. They were pretty good. People were dancing.

When he’d been standing there for half an hour, Graham appeared. “Riley,” he said. “Riley, Riley, Riley. I’m disappointed, man.”


“Well, as long as you’re okay.”

“Yeah, I’ll....”
She moved like a curl of smoke. Her slender hips swayed in time to the music as she spun in slow circles, arms above her head, dark hair cascading over smooth, white shoulders that had never been touched by sunlight. She seemed untroubled by mundane things like physical form or gravity. It left her frictionless, as though her feet didn’t quite touch the floor.

Next to her, the other dancers were crude stick figures, knees and elbows clacking, necks jutting from their torsos at graceless angles. Human and flawed, while she was flawless.

In another world—or another life—he could pretend he didn’t know what that meant, but he’d watched Buffy and Spike move together through the darkened corridors of the Initiative, inhuman and unreal, watched them blur when they fought like the laws of physics did not apply to them, and he knew what she was.

Which side of that dividing line did she fall on? On the side of safety, with those monsters who were also people—the ones you could trust? Or on the other side, with the nameless mounds of dust they’d left behind? He didn’t know. He had no way to know.

He didn’t care.

“What? What’s up?” Graham turned to follow his gaze. Then he laughed. He took Riley’s plate. “Go get her, tiger.” Riley barely noticed when he left, transfixed as he was by the way the light reflected off the crimson satin of her dress.

As though she felt him staring, she turned to look at him, her eyes luminous as moonlight. She paused in her dance, but only for a moment. Then, red lips parted, she spun away. He watched for the rest of the set, but only caught glimpses of her, here and there, as the other dancers moved aside.

In the lull after the musicians left the stage and before someone blasted canned music, the crowd trickled away from the dance floor, and she was there, like she’d materialized in front of him. She smiled.

“What wild storm tossed this handsome sailor ashore so far from home?”
“Willow sired her?”

“Sort of? During one of her early forays into magic, she opened an interdimensional doorway and her fangy twin from another reality slipped through. She spent a whole day terrorizing Sunnydale before we caught her and sent her back. Sandy was a casualty. I didn’t know she was still alive...or dead...or—you know what I mean.”

Spike shivered. “Red’s a bleedin’ menace.”

“You’re telling me. So where’d you dig her up?”

“Boy’s been sniffin’ around the fringes—bite houses, blood banks, anyplace one of us might fall through the cracks. Lookin’ for blood kin.”

“Huh. How’s he doing?”

“So far? Mark and Sandy. Doesn’t feature bein’ my sole heir, so he’ll keep at it. Angelus is responsibility enough for him.”

She flinched. “And that is one whole big bucket of weirdness.”

“If it helps, they’re not actually—.”

“Well, they look like they’re actually.” Her giggle transformed midway through into a discomfited huff. “Everyone was talking.” By ‘everyone’ she meant all the vampires at Angel’s little shindig.

He grinned. “You a prude, Slayer?”

She lifted her chin, looked him dead in the eye, and rolled over him like a tidal wave.

The spray pounded his skin until it reddened with borrowed blood, pulsed against him like a heartbeat. Its rush muted sound, left them cocooned together in the dark and warm, skin on skin. He steadied himself against her body, against the slippery walls, felt the fiberglass give not quite to cracking. Steam seared his lungs when he drew breath to whisper her name. She smelled like salt and blood and peach shampoo. She tasted like heaven.

When the wave receded, he was shaking. “You know I’m not,” she said. He laid his face against her shoulder and closed his eyes, inhaled the clean peach oh god scent of her hair, wracked by post-coital aftershocks amid a crowd of coeds while Dean something-or-other droned on about his shiny new cultural center.

She could do all that, but she couldn’t manage a sodding sentence? “So it’s Angelus should wear the chastity belt, then?” His voice was nearly steady.

“No. Of course not. Angel’s...he can...it just...not....” Not Sean.

“Right.” Slayer wasn’t squeamish about Sean’s preference for men. The two of them had spent three sodding hours rating glossies of half-naked fitness models with nary a blush. He’d left for Willy’s when they talked about rating him. “He’s not a baby.”

“Mmm...no.” Her shoulders hunched. “But Angel’s jones for innocence gives me a wiggins.” A thousand nights with Dru crumpled and crying, a thousand more with her catatonic in his arms—all
of them flashed through his memory, stills coming so fast they danced like cartoons in Cracker Jack flip books.

“Never liked it much, myself.” Did she think he’d hurt Sean?

“He wouldn’t mean to.” There were many things in that well-deep gaze that he could not fathom, but that wasn’t one of them. Souled or unsouled, Angelus did spread the misery about. He couldn’t help himself.

He lifted his hand to stroke a thumb across her furred cheekbone, ran his fingers through the golden ruff at the nape of her neck. She slow-blinked her amber eyes and butted his shoulder with her skull. The force of the blow knocked him sprawling onto the sun-warmed sand.

“Oh, bloody—.” The cat crouched and licked his face. He scratched its ear. “So are you Buffy or did you eat her?” The chuffing noise it made sounded so much like his slayer that he laughed. “Well, here we are, pet. What’s the lesson of the day?”

They lay next to a narrow dirt road. It led to a gateway in a stone wall that shimmered gold with the sunlight. Cibola, then, or whatever passed for it in Buffy’s imagination, but this wasn’t the ruined wall of previous visits. It stood, straight and tall, surrounding a lushly landscaped garden. He heard the muted sound of falling water. A fountain in the garden?

The cat chuffed again. “Yeah, yeah. Hold your horses.” He stood up and brushed off the seat of his pants. It didn’t stand. “What?” It stared down the length of its spine at him, Buffy-like. He raised an eyebrow. “You want me to ride you, kitten?” A warning growl. “Right. Shutting up.” He threw a leg over the beast’s massive back, and it stood. She stood. He gripped tawny fur in handfuls and tightened his legs around her body. With one powerful leap, she rushed forward, not in the direction of the gate, as he’d expected, but away from it into open desert.

Riding a lion. He was riding a bloody lion.

With a whoop, he settled low against her and tipped his face up to catch the wind. She bounded over the scrub with terrible speed, leaping rocks and small gullies, huge paws barely scuffing the sand. Her forequarters bunched and relaxed with every spring. The desert spun by in a blur. He wanted it to go on forever.

Until he saw the city, of course. Then he wanted it to stop. “Buffy?” He tugged on her fur. “Buffy—you can’t!” A sunken plaza stretched before them, circular and three stories deep on this edge. If they’d approached from another direction, it might have been only one or two, but this edge was three. “Sod it, Slayer! Stop!”

She didn’t stop. She leapt.

He wrapped his arms around her neck and held on, whispering half-forgotten prayers to any god who’d hear him. He couldn’t close his eyes, though. Not as they sailed through the air, all twelve feet of the cat’s body stretched out in an elegant arc. Not as they landed on the packed-earth floor of the plaza with a bone-shattering whump. Not when she used the momentum of the jump to pick up speed yet again. He couldn’t look away.

It felt like an eternity before she slowed, although it couldn’t have been more than a few seconds. “Warn a fella next time?” he said as soon as he could speak.

Unlike the garden wall, the city was crumbling. It had been adobe or near enough, but squared up and perfect—like pueblos built by modern means. At various spots around its perimeter, staircases
descended into darkness. He couldn’t tell how deep they went.

Near the center of the plaza, in a neat circle, stood thirteen rectangles drawn in the air with green light, like a neon Stonehenge. The cat padded up to each one in turn and sniffed it.

“Find one you like?” He couldn’t tell if this was memory or metaphor. In Buffy’s mindscape, they folded together, complex and indistinguishable. If he had to guess, that was why she couldn’t just talk through the claim. She had a demon’s heightened senses laid over a broader human awareness. Every thought contained so much that it wouldn’t reduce to words.

“When we get back to the real world, you’ll explain what I’m lookin’ at, yeah?” She stepped into the ring of quasi-obelisks. From inside the circle, he could see they were doors. Each opened onto a landscape, similar to but clearly different—worlds different—than the one they stood in.

“That’s it,” he said when the cat hesitated in front of one of the doors. He couldn’t explain how he knew, but she seemed to agree. She entered. They emerged in a gully beneath an expansive black sky stippled with stars. A tiny stream ran along the gully’s floor, and the air fairly hummed with life. They followed the stream until the trail zigzagged to climb the rock wall.

When they reached the top, he was struck near as wordless as Buffy herself.

On either side of the path before him, a multitude of stone statues, each roughly thirty feet high, stretched out as far as he could see. He could feel their stone eyes watching as he passed. “Not crazy about the honor guard, love.” She let out a clicking growl that set his teeth on edge and began to run again.

The sandy scrub of the surrounding desert became steadily greener, lusher, until the edges of the trail were crowded with foliage. Soon, the trail contracted to a slender ribbon amid dense green dotted with flowers.

When it was barely wide enough for the lion to put one foot in front of the other, it ended abruptly at a well beneath a massive stone arch. The greenery spilled over the well’s edge and spiraled up both legs of the arch. The lion crouched at the well and lowered her head to lap at the gleaming liquid that swirled within.

“Buffy?” She didn’t seem to hear him. He dismounted and crawled through the vines until he rested on his belly next to her. “Love?” When she still didn’t respond, he stretched downward and reached into the well. He felt the pain before his fingertips made contact.

With a hiss, he yanked his hand up and scrambled away. “Distilled bloody sunlight, that is.” And blessed by a sodding saint, no doubt. If he fell in, not even the ring would save him. “Got used to havin’ you in my head, Slayer. Don’t like to be alone ordinarily, an’ this is worse.” He patted the lion’s flank. “So what do—.”

Her hindquarters were wound about with moon vine.

He shook the lion, yelled her name, but she lapped away at the liquid, tranquil and impervious. When he pulled on the vines, they wound tighter about her, coiling up like snakes. The only weapon he carried was his knife. He extended the blade with a snick and sliced at the plant’s woody stems. Every one he cut was replaced with another, thicker vine. He needed a better blade. “Don’ know how to cut you free, love.” Behind him, the statues stared in silence. “An’ you’re no use at all!” he snapped at them.

He stood up. There was nothing helpful back the way they’d come, so he moved forward. He
stepped carefully around the well, through the vines, beneath the arch, and over the little rise beyond it, where he stopped, staring in disbelief. In front of him, the earth dropped away to a nothingness filled with stars.

He let out a string of invective and spun to level a kick at the hill behind him—a bit of useless violence that left him unsatisfied and unsettled. He shifted faces to give it more force and roared, “Enough with the bloody games!” A short jog returned him to Buffy-the-lion, who still lay at the well’s edge, almost completely wrapped in moon vine.

“You.” He clenched his fists and stalked to the statues. “This is your fault.” His eyes narrowed. “There’s somethin’ you want from me—I’m s’posed to prove I’m worthy or some such.” He wanted to scale them, one at a time, knock their heads from their bodies, and kick them to slag. Cover the landscape in rubble and open up the view. “Let’s save everyone the trouble, shall we?” Rage roughened his voice, but he wanted to cry. “I’m not.”

He lifted his hands to the heavens, in supplication or surrender. “An’ I never will be.” Some days, frat party zombies still screamed torment and despair into his dreams. It always woke him. Buffy soothed him back to sleep with words like Champion and Hero, but he knew what fate awaited when that reckoning came due. He was damned. He would be dragged to hell to suffer. “I’m a monster.”

He stepped in front of the nearest statue, gazed imploringly into its bearded face. It stared back with Nordic indifference. “But she’s not. She’s worthy—worth everything. Only luck she thinks I am, too.” His arms dropped. “An’ she needs me. Help me save her. Please.”

The statues remained statues. Their silence stretched to cover the horizon.

“Bugger off, then, the lot of you.” He flipped the assembled gods the bird and stormed back to the end of the world. “I’ll figure it myself.” And maybe he would. Maybe. But he didn’t know how. He stuffed his fists in his pockets and glowered into the void.

Stars began to fall from the sky.

“You cannot be serious.” He paced back and forth along the edge, eyes on the light show overhead, which was, all things considered, better than looking down. One misstep, and he’d tumble into the abyss. “I need something big and sharp.” He’d left his ax back in their room at Willy’s because Buffy said it would be too conspicuous, and he’d agreed because it was Buffy and heaven knows he’d crawl naked over shattered glass if she asked him to. But right now? He didn’t much care how conspicuous he’d be. He wanted his bloody ax. “I don’t need this. I....”

Where the stars no longer shone, a shape emerged. It had wings, like a butterfly. He reached toward it and his fingers settled around a haft made of darkness and emptiness and cold. He drew the ax out of the sky. Starlight glittered on the sharp edge of each blade. “Thank you,” he whispered, and ran.

Only the lion’s snout was visible when he got there. She struggled in her bonds. “Hang on, love.” He brought the ax down on the vines again and again. They recoiled like they’d been burned. When she was finally able to stand, she laid her chin on his shoulder and whoofed softly.

“...imagining having sex with him again.”

That was Anya drooling over her boy. In the wake of their longer-than-usual visit to Buffy’s mental landscape, the invading moon vine, and the inexplicable night-sky labrys, he’d forgotten she was there.
“Labrys.” Buffy nodded. “I think...I remember....” There was a sound like an avalanche. “We’re up!”

They sprinted together to where Xander had fallen into the buried mission. “I’m okay!” he called up. “I’m...okay....” He coughed. “Uh...help?”

They peered into the hole. There was nothing left of the mission but ash, like someone had taken a flamethrower to its walls. Dust particles hung suspended in the air.

“Well,” Buffy said. “That’s new.”
“Gods, Giles. Lots of them.”

“All of ‘em. All I know of, leastways, lined up like toy soldiers.”

“And some of them aren’t done—like, not carved, yet.”

“Blocks of stone, yeah? An’ the well....”

“Filled with glowing...I dunno...nectar? Made of everything that was ever wonderful in the whole world. Ever.”

“Melt me to vapor if I laid a finger on it. But Buffy—she was a lion? Drank it.”

“I drank it before, too, even when I was still me. When I was person me, I mean. Lion me was me, too.”

“And that was where you became entangled in moon vine?” Giles glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes—at best—until Joyce arrived for their trip to Los Angeles, and he was still trying to sort out Buffy and Spike’s waking dream. To hurry the process along, he’d resorted to writing the component pieces on index cards that he could reorder to their specifications. It hadn’t helped.

“In...Cibola?”

Spike shook his head. “Through the green door.”

He shifted the card. “To the other world?”

“To this world,” Buffy said. “Our world.”

“This world?” The vampire could not be still. He’d raked his curls into cottonwood fluff. Joyce’s impending arrival was the only thing that kept Giles’ fingers from his own neatly parted hair. The symbolism had him baffled. He’d half a mind to cancel their evening out in favor of research and scotch. “Then where’d the gaping void come from?”

“I don’t know. That’s—Spike, it didn’t come from me. It has to be yours. Do you have, like, vampire dreams?”

One cocked eyebrow. “You’d know if I did, Slayer.”

“Then this is the first time we’ve seen something from your side. Unless....” Her eyes grew very round. Spike’s jaw went slack.

Giles cleared his throat. “Unless what, Buffy?”

“The Turok-Han.”

“Bloody hell.”

“I don’t have a Turok-Han.” He flipped through the cards. “Did I miss something?”

Anya shrugged. “I’m more confused now than when they started.” He had some sympathy for that position. Half of any conversation with Buffy and Spike was conducted inside their heads.
“It’s been happening,” Buffy said, “since I got back.”

“I see.” He retrieved the remainder of the pack of index cards and uncapped his pen. “I suppose it’s pointless to ask why you’ve kept this from me.” His slayer squirmed.

“I’m...uh...not used to sharing information with...uh....”

“Watchers?” He had neither the time nor the patience for her evasions. Joyce could wait for a few minutes, but they had a hard departure time. “Authority figures? What, Buffy?”

“Humans.”

It was only one of a thousand times since she’d returned that he’d felt extraneous. Worse than useless. He lacked not just the means to help but a basic grasp of the problem. He capped his pen. “I cannot comprehend the world you’ve come from.”

“And I don’t want you to.” She tilted her chin up, no less stubborn than she’d been at sixteen. “The idea is to keep it from happening.”

Spike kneaded her shoulders with hands strong enough to crush brick. The tendons stood out on his forearms. “Don’t look at me, Watcher. Not used to humans, either. Barmy lot.”

“I almost think I get it,” Anya said, “and then they do something crazy. Poof! Back to square one.”

She curled in the corner of his couch with her chin on her knees, waifish, the outline of bone visible through the skin of her nervous hands. Although the patchwork slacks suited her, he couldn’t imagine them on anyone else. Despite her changes, she retained an oddly demonic sensibility. “You don’t consider yourself human?”

“I’m eleven hundred and twenty years old,” she said, which was a fair point. Appearances to the contrary, he was the baby of the group. “Oh! Your book!” She tugged a satchel from the floor and retrieved the book, smiling broadly.

“I take it the interlopers were suitably flayed?” He took it from her and caressed its worn leather binding. There had to be some way aside from simple translation that he could make use of her experience.

“To the bone.” Her eyes sparkled. “I’ll come by to help you translate it—are you and Joyce going out tonight?” Joyce had mentioned that she and Anya were working closely. He hadn’t realized it was quite that closely.

“That’s the plan, yes.” Buffy raised her eyebrows. He did his best to ignore her. “We’ll be out late.”

“Tomorrow afternoon, then? Wednesday is the auction; Thursday is Thanksgiving—.” She pulled a slender datebook from the satchel and flipped pages. “I’m meeting the caterer Friday; Saturday, Joyce is catching me up on what I missed before we go to gun class; and Sunday I have to deliver an invitation to the Hsshthk.” She wilted. “There will be a lot of power at this wedding.”

“Yeah,” Buffy said quietly. “There will be.”

“This whole dimension is going to shake—all those singular entities coming in from outside.” Anya pursed her lips. “How do you plan to lock it down without Willow?”

“I’m working on that.” Buffy leaned back into the circle of Spike’s arms.
“Singular entities?” Something about the emphasis she placed on the term made him uneasy.

“What?”

“Beings without a counterpart in another dimension—because they predate dimensions.” Anya shrugged. “Like the Hshthk.”

“Or because they’ve eliminated their counterparts,” Buffy added, “like D’Hoffryn or any of the Lower Beings. And ‘outside’ is another dimension, like Arashmaharr or Cibola or...or the World Without Shrimp.”

“You aren’t planning to invite any of the Old Ones, are you?” She aimed a glare at Buffy. “‘Cause that would be bad.”

“No,” Buffy said. “Hell no. Not waking anybody up.” She hesitated. “I could ask Vera and Mathilda to take point on security. If Willow doesn’t wake up in time.”

Anya cocked her head. “You’re going to loan power, right?” Buffy nodded. “Then whoever does it doesn’t have to be a great talent. They just need really good control.”

“I could do it.” His magical knack, from childhood onward, was directing borrowed power. A watcher’s gift, his father said, which only made him angry. It was the larger part of what made him so compatible with Ethan. He could take Ethan’s wild energy, constrict its focus, and point it at a target. It made them a force to be reckoned with. It made them deadly.

Buffy’s eyes held ages. “You could. Would you?” He nodded. She’d asked him to do precious little, so far. She wasn’t rude about it, of course. She’d merely made certain he was out of her way.


“Maybe?” Buffy shrugged. “I didn’t hunt the rest of them down. I’m not D’Hoffryn. But I have...diverged...so maybe.”

“Does it make a difference?” He did feel like the baby, now, intruding on the adults’ conversation. He had a sudden deep yearning for human company, and no one else in the room qualified. “Metaphysically?”

“Not unless it does,” Anya said. “Did Dawn do something? What was your relationship with her?”

“Complicated,” Buffy said. Spike snorted, and she elbowed him in the ribs—gently, by their standards. Their affection for one another seemed to come with a certain amount of bruising. “Dawn was one of the Powers That Be, trapped in mortal form. She wouldn’t have control over my soul, but she could be—.”

“She could be driving,” Spike said.

“She does doorways,” Buffy said.

“They’re green,” Spike said.

“Hmm.” Anya uncurled from her spot on the couch. “She was trapped in this dimension?” Buffy nodded. “Where did she come from?” Buffy shook her head. “She never told you? Or...”

“I don’t think there was a where,” Buffy said. Anya’s face went white.
“What does that mean?” Giles glanced back and forth between the two girls. Spike’s closed his eyes, pressed his lips against Buffy’s hair.

“Oh, nothing to worry about.” Anya’s jaw tightened. “She’s just older than reality—like the Hsshthk. I need alcohol.”

Buffy folded her arms. “The Hsshthk aren’t that—.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.” Anya glared around the room. “Alcohol?”

“Right.” He got out the scotch, poured four glasses, and passed it around. It seemed he was always pouring scotch after some world-altering disclosure from Buffy. “Out of curiosity, Buffy, how is...Dawn...associated with you?”

“I...uh...mentioned her. She’s the Key the Hell God—Glorificus—came looking for.” She lowered her eyes. “She’s my sister.”

Anya knocked her drink back and held out her glass. “Keep ‘em coming,” she said. He poured more scotch.

He was beginning to feel as though Buffy had withheld a great deal, despite the truth spell. Glorificus, she’d assured him, would not be a problem. “You don’t have a sister.”

She held her glass out, too. “Not yet.”

He uncapped his pen again. “Tell me about the rest of the dreams.” Buffy’s lower lip jutted out in a pout.

“Somebody’s in trouble,” Spike singsonged, a tiny smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“She’s not the only one,” he said, and the vampire’s smile died. How was it possible for something that dangerous to look sheepish? “The dreams? From the beginning.”

“Fine,” she said. She scooped her purse from the floor and fished a small tan book from its depths. “Let me find them.” He extended his hand for the book. “Not in a million years, Giles.” She flipped pages. “Dream one. Are you ready?”

He took them all down. They were more alarming in the aggregate. Turning to the shelf behind him, he chose a book and opened it to the entry. “Is this the beast?”

“Twenty-five percent larger than the modern African lion,” Buffy read. “That’s about the size of it.” She poked Spike. “I’m an American lion.”

“Never a doubt.” Spike spoke softly. He didn’t meet her eyes.

“So you’re working to a deadline—unspecified—with specific goals: To prevent your resurrection.” The word tightened his chest. “Ideally by preventing your death, and to ensure that Spike becomes....”

“A hero,” she said, her voice suffused with pride. The vampire himself looked ragged.

“You’re that sure?” Anya set her feet on the floor for the first time since she arrived, slid them back into loafers the same tan as her vest. “If you’re wrong, you’re going to hell.”

“I’m sure.”
“You’ve a plan in place to prevent your death, I take it?”

“That’ll be me,” Spike said. The words were steady but thick with—was that regret? Grief? Some unnamable vampiric emotion?

“Glory uses a spell to mask her presence.” She stroked his cheek. “Spike is immune.”

“But what is your—.”

“Giles.” A tiny smile bent the grim line of her lips. “Don’t ask this. I said she wouldn’t be a problem. She won’t.”

“Right.” He swallowed hard. “Moving on, then. I see a number of recurring elements. The first is the desert. Cibola, you said?”

“Yeah. And the part that’s this world is on the border between Arizona and New Mexico—where a portal to Cibola appears every sixty-something years.”

Now that was interesting. “It’s cyclical.”

“That’s what the green doors were about. It touches a bunch of dimensions one at a time, in sequence. That’s why it drove the Spanish explorers buggy. ‘Cause you could stumble upon the actual city of gold out in the desert, but when you came back the next day with your buddies?”

“Ride, boldly ride,’” Spike said.

“Yes, that’s.... Next is the...ah...field of statues.”

“The Forest of Watching Gods.” Anya paced across the room and poured her own scotch.

“I beg your pardon?”

“That’s what they called it in the car on the way here. It was creepy.”

“Creepier in person,” Buffy said. “Next? There’s the well. That’s—.” A car horn blared from the street outside. Anya downed her drink and scooped up her bag. “Is that Xander?” When Anya nodded, Buffy made an irritated noise. “You can’t let him just honk for you. Soon—after Thanksgiving? We need to get together and talk about boys. We’ll have a spa day or something.”

Anya’s smile was radiant and a little lopsided. “Ooh! That warm clay thing?”

“Perfect.” The girls embraced. “Anya—if Xander asks—.”

“I’m not going to tell him anything. I think I’ll pretend I don’t know. Because this?” She gestured broadly at the world around her and shook her head. “Call me.”

When Buffy opened the door, Joyce stood on his step, her fist raised to knock. Anya hugged her, too, and swayed toward Xander’s waiting car. “Hey, pretty lady.” Buffy kissed her mother’s cheek. “You’re going out with my watcher?”

“A meet and greet. I hate going to those things alone.” Joyce peered into the fading light. “Is something wrong with Anya?”

“Demon girl needs to dial it back. Worked her way through half Rupert’s Glenfiddich.”

“She forgets she’s human.” Buffy sighed. “I’ll talk to her.”
“Ah.” Joyce looked from face to conspicuously blank face and to the spread of cards on the counter. There was little he could tell her without betraying Buffy’s confidence, so he said nothing. It left an unbreachable distance between them. “Am I interrupting?”

“I believe I have everything I need.” He paper clipped the cards into their proper sequences and wrapped the whole stack in a rubber band. “It will take me some time to work out the—.”

Anyá’s body smacked the outside of his half-closed door with a resounding *thonk.* “Let me in let me in!” She skittered over the threshold, panting. “There are *vampires* outside.”

“Again?” Buffy pulled her mother and Anyá all the way inside and opened the door wide. Roughly a dozen vampires strode through the courtyard outside his flat, demon faces fierce.

“S a bloody siege.”

“Who is it this time?” She wrinkled her nose. “And how are they finding us?”

“We’re not hard to find, Slayer.”

“I s’pose. Hey, Spike?” She slid a short sword from the umbrella stand next to the door and took a few steps out onto the walk before turning back to him. “I am the weapon.”

“That you are.” With a manic grin, he cleared the doorway, crouched, and linked his hands the way you would to give someone a boost over a fence. Buffy took two running steps toward him and jumped, planting both feet in his palms as he lunged upward and threw her over the heads of the oncoming vampires. She tucked, tumbled through the air in a backward spin, and landed behind them. Before they could even turn to face her, she swung. Two fell, headless, to dust.

Spike hooked his thumbs into his belt loops and slouched against the door jamb, observing the action with interest but not alarm, as though it were a football match.

“You’re not planning to help her?” To be fair, outnumbered though she was, Buffy seemed to be handling the situation. Spin, kick, slash, and another attacker fell.

Spike curled his tongue behind his teeth and shook his head. “Rome shall perish.”

“It took him a moment to unearth the reference. “You’re comparing Buffy to Boadicea?”

“Warrior queen, doomed to die? ‘S what a slayer is, yeah?” His eyes were fixed on Buffy, and there was a catch in his breath. Buffy spun again, and only six attackers remained. One tried to break away and run, but she caught him by the belt and slung him into the others. They went down like bowling pins. Without shifting faces, Spike growled, a profane amalgam of desire and ferocity. “Might even be inclined to agree with Rudra.”

“I don’t believe I....” He winced in unexpected sympathy as Buffy stomped one of the vampires unconscious and beheaded him where he lay. It was not Faith’s gratuitous violence, by any means, but he understood now why the children were unsettled. The sword was secondary. She fought like a demon. “Rudra?”

“New minion. One of the Oxnard crew. Keeps callin’ her ‘Kali Ma.’”

Giles watched her. Her absolute surety, the sheer lethality in each movement, made that comparison more apt than he’d like—particularly if he considered it from the point of view of a vampire. Did that put Spike in the role of Shiva? Did they hope he could he stop her from ending the world? “She has them somewhat awestruck, I take it?”
“She has me awestruck, Rupert. The minions worship her.” He licked his lips and turned back to the fight.

Buffy crushed an attacker’s jaw with the pommel of her sword, cleaved another’s torso diagonally from the crook of his neck to his hip bone, and bisected a third from the groin upward. As far as he could tell, she’d taken no injuries. That left three attackers, only two of which were conscious. As she raised the sword to finish the downed vampire, one of them got in a lucky blow.

The vampire launched himself at the back of her knees. She fell, the movement so graceful it looked deliberate. The sword flew from her hand and clattered to a stop beneath his patio table. Behind him, Joyce let out a breathless little gasp.

Giles started forward to retrieve it. Without looking away from her, Spike lay an open hand in the center of his chest. “Dear lord, Spike. She’s unarmed.”

He rolled his eyes. “Bloody watchers.”

Buffy jumped to her feet in one clean arc. She delivered a roundhouse punch to one of the attackers, who stumbled into his compatriot, snarling. That bought her a moment, which she used to brush off the seat of her jeans. Her fingers settled into a tri-corner tear and her eyes widened. “I just bought these!” She kicked the vampire in the chest as he regained his feet. “Tag.”

Spike grinned gleefully, shifted to demon face, and leapt into the fray. Still fuming over the damage to her wardrobe, Buffy returned to the door. She jerked her chin at Spike. “He doesn’t cut in until I say. This isn’t enough, but we’ll find him something else to kill later.”

Spike immobilized a vampire in a headlock, put his booted foot against its shoulder for leverage, and pulled its head off, roaring as his foe gave way to dust. Only one remained standing. “It’s safe for you to go—this is pretty much over. We’ll be back tomorrow—evening? After Sunset.”

He nodded mutely and she hugged him. “Have fun. Drive safe, okay?” Behind her, Spike drove his fist through a vampire’s chest, snuffling a little to clear his sinuses of dust. Then he scooped the sword from beneath the patio table and used it to behead the last downed attacker. He sauntered up and passed the blade to Buffy, who returned it to the umbrella stand. “I appreciate vampires. No mess.”

“Yes. Well.” Half the soil in Sunnydale had to be made of vampire dust. “We’ll be on our way. Joyce?” He ushered Joyce and Anya out of his flat and locked the door.

“No wonder you’re bored,” Joyce said as she pulled away from the curb.

“They have matters well in hand.” He tried not to sound resentful.

“They live in a couple bubble, Rupert. There’s no room for anyone else. It’s strange, but....”

“Enviable?” She nodded.

“I’m sorry Raj didn’t work out.”

He closed his eyes. “Me too.”

“What about Andi?”

She’d introduced him to Andi at another meet and greet. Andi ran a gallery of seventies-era kitsch and nostalgia. She spoke in a pretentious patois of slang from her adopted decade, and she was
twenty years his junior. “I’m not interested in being a gallery piece.”

Joyce snickered. “And Marina is still—.”

“Out of the question.”

She reminded him too much of Jenny.
He wasn’t supposed to knock.

Knocking was for fledglings and minions, not the Master of the Order. He wasn’t supposed to ask permission. He was supposed to enter as his due, stride in boldly, and watch them scatter. He knew that. He’d lived these last few weeks in the skin of the beast he used to be, pulled it from the closet, slipped it on, and buttoned it closed at the chin. To his shame, it still fit perfectly.

It wouldn’t have mattered if Sean were alone. He’d always treated the boy as a peer, despite the difference in their ages. They were of the same generation, after all. By lineage, Sean had as much right to lead the Order as he did. When he’d said that, though, Sean had laughed. “Sure. And then someone would kill me, and you’d get stuck with it, anyway. Can we just skip the part where I’m dead?”

But Sean wasn’t alone. There were vampires on the other side of that door. Spike’s minions—Mark and Sandy. He could smell them, along with an assortment of other demons. Sean made friends in the strangest places. He rested his forehead on the doorframe and raised a half-closed fist. He wasn’t supposed to doubt like this, either.

“You made it!” Sean flung the door open before he had the chance to decide. “I didn’t think you were coming.” His nose twitched. “Are you bleeding?”

He nodded. “Just... give me a minute.”

At the sight of the stain spreading across his belly, Sean swore firmly and grabbed his arm. “Jesus, Angelus. Sit down. Tilk?” A Fyarl brought him a folding chair. The big demon had to step around people and nudge cushions away with his toe to get to him. Sean’s apartment was crowded, the furniture all pushed back and turned to face a projector screen. The floor was littered with cushions, blankets, and bowls of snack foods. “We were about to start the movie.”

Movie night. He’d forgotten.

The Fyarl nudged the backs of his knees with the chair, and he slumped into it, grateful.

A creature—it had to be a demon, although he’d never seen anything like it—shaped like an apple cheeked woman less than three feet tall, her snow white hair bound in two tiny braids, folded a richly embroidered red vest and set it aside before approaching him. From where she stood next to his chair, her face was level with his belly. Arctic eyes steady, she began cutting the fabric away from the wound with a pair of miniature sewing scissors. Everyone in the room watched. He felt conspicuous.

A shadow fell across him, and Sean squeezed his hand. “What is it, Tilk?”

The Fyarl thumped his chest twice with a closed fist and spoke.

“I... only got a little bit of that.” Sean bit his lower lip in puzzled concentration. “I think he’s offering to murder someone for you.”

He was. He’d offered to find the person responsible and hang him from a rooftop by his entrails. It was a more colorful end than he’d given his attacker, and it held its attractions, although he knew better than to say that out loud. He shrugged, winced as the little demon pulled cloth fibers from the hole in his gut. “He’s dust.” The Fyarl roared victoriously and thumped his chest again. That had to
mean something, but he didn’t know what.

“He owes you a favor,” Sean said. “I know like eighty words in Fyarl and maybe twice as many hand signals—they’re like a visual pidgin? Used by demon mercenaries. So yeah. Communication is pretty sketchy from my end, but he understands me. Have you two been officially introduced?” Angel shook his head. “This is Tilk. He’s one of my Initiative buds.” The Fyarl knelt and held a hand out for him to shake. He shook it.

“A favor—why?” The words came out through clenched teeth. The little demon had finished cleaning his wound and begun stitching it closed.

“Because you helped get him out of that cell.”

“That wasn’t—.” He hissed. Whatever she was using to stitch him up burned. She murmured something soothing in a voice like winter, and the sound of it cooled his skin. “He should thank Buffy.”

Tilk bowed his head and laid his hands on the floor, palms upward. “He will. They’re all calling in favors to help Buffy.” Sean licked his lips. “Um...Berit? Will those stitches cause trouble when he heals?”

Her eyes crinkled merrily, and she shook her head. Then she patted Angel’s hand, scooped up her vest, and made her way back to a cushion in front of the couch. She took a seat next to a demon not much taller than she was, but stumpy and broad with a wide, toothy mouth beneath a tuft of straight black hair. The skin of its—his, probably—eggplant colored face folded into a thousand tiny creases.

“You ready to move?” Sean asked. Angel shook his head. It had been a routine attack, part and parcel of his move to take the California coast, but it was the most recent of a dozen or so over half as many days. He was just too tired. “Okay...well, we’ll get you over to the couch after you’ve eaten. Introductions?” He pointed at the two vampires. “You remember Sandy and Mark, right?” They were holding hands. They gave him a courteous almost-bow without letting go of each other. “They’re officially a thing, now. I think we can expect a formal announcement...soon?”

“Soon,” Sandy said, although she sounded doubtful.

“Soon as we’re sleeping again,” Mark said. He shuddered. They leaned into each other.

“Nightmares,” Sean said. “Daymares?” He shook his head. “All three of us. Have you been having bad dreams, Angelus? Like...really scary dreams?”

How would he even know? “No more than usual.”


“What is....”

“Nisse. She’s a member of the Artists’ Guild, which you should join, by the way. Get listed.” Berit glanced over at his drawing, still on its easel in the corner, a respectful expanse of bare floor around it. She smiled at him and nodded. So did everyone else in the room. “Berit made my bedspread.”

Sean’s bedspread was covered, hem to hem, in a world tree embroidered in shades of gray and green, so detailed it looked as though it had been drawn, each curving line of stitches no thicker than a pen stroke. “It’s beautiful...beautiful work.”
Someone tapped him on the shoulder. A woman, easily six feet tall, with skin the color of soot, held a ceramic tumbler filled with blood. As she passed it to him, it began to steam. Heat radiated from her fingertips, and flames danced behind her eyes. “Show off.” Sean stuck his tongue out at her. “Angelus, this is Hasna Div, also a member of the Guild. She made these.” He tapped one fingertip against the tumbler. “As well as the ones at Willy’s.”

These were not Willy’s tumblers. Although they had the same Bordeaux-glass shape, they weren’t restaurant-basic white ceramic, but a translucent bone china in Sean’s signature pale green, spiral fluted from base to rim.

He was beginning to feel outclassed as an artist.

“Don’t let her mess with you,” Sean said. “She thinks it’s funny to singe vampires. She’s an—.”

“Ifrit. I know.” He nodded at Hasna. “I haven’t seen one of your people since the nineteenth century.”

“Perhaps that’s because we saw you first.” Her smile didn’t soften the insult. “I remember when your people were civilized. I’m told there’s a chance it’ll happen again.”

“I’ll do my best.”

She tipped her head forward. “It is good to meet you, Angelus of Aurelius. I wish you success in your endeavors.”

“And...that’s not uncomfortable at all,” Sean said. “Moving on. Garuch Drallig.” An adolescent Brachen deep in conversation with a Clement demon gave him a half-hearted wave. “Clem.” The Clement demon was called Clem? Tacky. “Dash.” The stubby purple guy exposed his teeth. It was probably meant to be a smile. “A Cobbler. Part of the Guild. He’ll try to sell you a pair of boots—maybe more than once. Don’t buy them.” Dash glared at Sean who pointed an accusing finger at him. “Don’t test me, Dash. Next there’s Chilge, also Guild.” Chilge was small and gray, with long, slender fingers and round, frightened eyes. “Do you know what he is?”

He shook his head, and Sean grinned. “A Dreamer.”

It took him a minute. “Wait. A Dreamwine Dreamer? One of the Kyglhks?” He’d never seen one in person.

“Yup. He runs a microbrewery.”

Sean made the most interesting friends. “Does he wholesale?”

Chilge passed a business card across the room to him, hand to demon hand. “Apparently,” Sean said, “that’s a yes. Last, but definitely not least, we have Gray.” Gray was a young man, early twenties, perhaps, with eyes as light as Sean’s and one slim shade bluer, like a Siberian Husky. At Sean’s nod, he made his way over and offered his hand.

Angie shook it. “Heard a lot about you, Angelus. Good to meet you.” He smelled human, mostly, but there was that touch of something else that a lot of the humans in Sunnydale carried. “Let’s get you over to the couch.” Sean plucked the tumbler from his hand while Gray slid an arm around his back and lifted him to his feet.

By the time Gray eased him back onto comfortable cushions, the heat of Berit’s stitches had subsided to a gentle warmth, and Hasna had refilled and replaced the tumbler. Sean nestled in next to him, rested cool fingers on the bare skin of his abdomen, and sighed. “Was it important? The fight, I
mean. Was it significant?” Angel shook his head. “Damn. Sucks to get gutted over it, then.”

He snorted. “Sucks to get gutted over anything.” He laid his hand over Sean’s and met his eyes. At that contact, pain retreated and worry fell away, to be replaced by safety and serenity and a deep sense of rightness he’d have been hard pressed to explain. Where they touched, his skin tingled like life. “What’s the movie?”

“The Fox and the Hound. It’s about natural enemies who become best friends. I figured it was in theme.”
It was better if he focused on the pain.

“Would you like some coffee?” She wore a shabby pink bathrobe held closed with a mismatched belt. Bare legs dusted with ginger stubble stuck out beneath it. Although she’d gathered most of her hair into a knot on the top of her head, auburn wisps, gray at the root, escaped at her temples and the nape of her neck. A faceful of makeup, immaculately applied, did not entirely conceal the bruise around her left eye.

Damn it.

“No, Ma’am. Thank you.” He tried to smile as he reached across the table for his glass, tried to look without seeing, but he couldn’t. At least he didn’t wince. “The juice is plenty.” The smile she returned was wistful.

“Am I being too much? I don’t mean—.” She wrung her hands. “It’s just that Xander never has male friends over anymore—not since Jesse.” She filled a mug with coffee and clutched it like she needed the warmth. “Did you know Jesse?”

He shook his head, which was a mistake. The world lurched, and the half glass of apple juice he’d already drunk roiled in his stomach. He pressed his fingertips to the puncture marks just above his collar bone. Even through the fabric of his t-shirt and the bandage beneath it, it hurt. The pain settled the nausea, but it did nothing to diminish the ever-present ache that radiated from his jaw down his neck to his left shoulder. Was he grinding his teeth while he slept? “I’ve only been in Sunnydale for a few months. I came here for graduate school.”

“Oh.” She pursed her lips. “So where did you meet Xander?”

“At the pub on campus.” A little bit of the light went out of her eyes.

“I suppose he spends a lot of time there?” The words were carefully neutral, but the skin between her eyebrows creased. Worry or fear—for Xander or of him? He couldn’t tell. Maybe both, and that was just one more goddamned mess he couldn’t fix.

There were a lot of those, lately.

“No more than he has to, Ma’am.” Words of reassurance from a stranger were completely inadequate, but they were all he had to offer. “It’s like any job, I guess. You don’t stick around after you clock out or they’ll put you back to work.”

“Reason number one to stay away from that place,” Xander said. “Got a better job, now.” He let the door to the basement fall closed behind him with a creak and a crash and slouched forward to kiss his mother on the cheek.

“I saw you at the ground breaking ceremony, yesterday.” Riley shook Xander’s hand. “You guys should get hazard pay. You ready?”

“Sweat socks and everything.” Xander grimaced and pulled his arms forward, hunching his shoulders. “Little sore still.”

“We’ll take it slow, first day out.” He wouldn’t have any choice, really. He’d slept maybe three hours in as many days, and he was running on borrowed time. The crash would come soon, and not
even the stabbing pain from an unhealed vampire bite would keep him on his feet. 

He’d been dancing with her when it all went wrong. 

“What wild storm tossed this handsome sailor ashore so far from home?” she’d said, and laid the back of one cool hand against his cheek. If he’d had any doubt before, that dispelled it. Her skin did not feel human. “Dance with me?” The words lifted up at the end, but they weren’t really a question. She lifted his hands and set them on her hips. Then she held his face still and stared into his eyes.

“I...uh...” Canned music—local groups, mostly, a familiar and overplayed mixtape—blasted over the PA with raucous enthusiasm. “I can’t dance.” And even if he could, he couldn’t dance to this.

The corners of her painted lips turned up. “We all dance.” Her eyes were a clear silver blue, almost the same color as his own, but where his had human flaws, specks of green and brown, bits of gold, hers were perfect concentric circles with spokes radiating outward from a center as deep and dark as a starless night. “Be in me,” she said, and he felt the blood rise to his cheeks and shock outward until he was sure he glowed in the dark.

“Uh...maybe we should dance first.” He chuckled nervously. “We just met.” For an instant, she looked awkward, her expression half formed, and then she shook her head and turned to the guitarist from the band. He crouched on the floor with his guitar in his hand, its case open in front of him. His spiky yellow hair no longer stood up, but hung listlessly into his eyes.

“This will not do,” she said, stomping one delicate foot. “Play something lovely.” The guy glanced around.

“I’m the only one here. Everybody else left.” She just looked at him. He took in her form fitting dress, the way she pressed her body against Riley’s, and the impatient expression on her strange, beautiful face, and licked his lips. “Fine. Give me a minute.” He plugged his guitar back in, silenced the tape, and began playing some alt rock ballad Riley didn’t recognize.

“No,” she said. “Something lovely.”

He tried another one, softer, this time, more melodic. “No!” she said. “No no no!” She turned and hid her face in Riley’s chest. The guy’s eyes widened and he stilled his strings.

“What does she want?”

“I really don’t know.”

“Alright...how about we try a little...oh...Mister J Brahms?”

He launched into a cascade of notes that fell like rain into the quiet of the party’s end. The piece was completely unlike anything the band had played. The girl lifted her head and her eyes widened. A delighted smile spread across her face and she clapped her hands. “A waltz! We shall have a waltz!”

She took one of his hands in hers, pushed the other to the small of her back, and spent the next five minutes teaching him how to waltz. With barely a pause, the guitarist launched into a faster piece, and the dance sped up. The third piece was slow and lingering. They swayed together, rather than dancing. That’s when Riley noticed that most of the lights were off. The last stragglers had wandered away, leaving them alone in the dark. When she lifted her face to look at him, she’d changed.

Yellow eyes as clear and bright as her blue eyes had been, perfect golden radial spokes, pupils huge and dilated. Brutish and brutal brow, an inverted triangle that extended midway down her blunted nose. Mouth prognathic with concealed fangs. “You aren’t frightened,” she said. He shook his head.
and lifted his fingers to touch her brow bone, grazed them down her cheek. He was fascinated.

“Can I see?” Her lips parted and he touched the tip of one fang. It was sharp. Blood welled up, and something low in his belly tightened. She stood on tiptoes and breathed against the skin of his throat. He twined his fingers into the back of her hair and crushed her to him. “Please,” he whispered. Distantly, he heard the music falter.

Her fangs slid into his flesh with the ease of long practice. They didn’t rip or rend. The marks they left would be no bigger than the fang tips themselves. “Oh god.” He ground against her, arched his back, and squeezed his eyes shut. “Oh god, please.” He panted the words, breathless, but she pulled back, shifted, showed him startled blue eyes.

“You’re full of monsters,” she said, and then—right then, when his hands were shaking and his mouth was too dry to talk—that’s when the sprinklers went off.

Nearby, the guitarist swore and yanked the plug from his instrument. He crammed the guitar into its case as fast as he could, shielding it with his body, and sprinted out into the night.

Red emergency lights flickered and came on, and the fire alarm sounded. A thunder of footsteps on the stairs. “Riley?” Graham yelled. “Finn! We gotta go.” He looked away for a second, just a second, but when he looked back, the vampire girl was gone. He sprinted up the stairs to join the rest of the soldiers.

Someone had torched the Initiative.

They were supposed to salvage what they could, but there was nothing left. All that remained was ash and rubble, like a flamethrower had been taken to the walls, stripping them to charred black concrete. There were no demon bodies in the cells. Their bullet proof plexiglass doors lay in melted heaps along both sides of the corridor, electronic locks reduced to slag, although the walls inside the cells were untouched, clean and white.

So they did what they could. They shut down the elevators, locked the entrances, and left the building. It was the end of something. Afterward, the squad leaders met in Ward’s—previously Walsh’s—office on campus for questioning that lasted until dawn. Nobody knew a thing.

It was somewhere around hour four that he spotted the folder, two thirds of the way down a stack eight inches thick. He recognized the technician’s handwriting, and his heart skipped a beat. He knew what was in that folder. He’d passed it off to Forrest himself.

It contained a half dozen stills of some new kind of hostile, two of them, the taller one white blond with fangs like a vampire, but standing in full sunlight in the university quad. Obvious, now, who they were. He should have recognized them at the time. He had to get that folder. There it was, no more than an arm’s length away, but completely out of his reach. He was powerless.

“Riley?” Xander’s voice shook him out of his reverie. “You okay, man? You look sorta out of it.”

“Just tired.” He rubbed his eyes. “A lot to get done before the holiday. I fly home this afternoon. I’ll sleep on the plane.” He pushed his chair back and stood, downed the rest of his apple juice before his stomach had a chance to protest, and set his glass in the sink. “Thanks for the juice, Mrs. Harris.”

“You boys have a good time, alright?”

They waved their goodbyes and headed out the door. Riley stumbled on the walk and Xander caught him. “You know, we can do this some other time.”
He shook his head. Xander had been fighting vampires since he was a kid. Hand to hand. *Scrappy,* Buffy’d said, *but undisciplined.* The longer they waited, the more likely he was to get himself killed. And training him was something Riley had control over, which made a nice change. “We’ll save the rough stuff for later. We’ll make a plan today.”

“You’re the boss, boss.”

“Yeah. I’m the boss.” He squared his shoulders and shook away the exhaustion. Here and now, this was all he could do. “Let’s go practice killing monsters.”
“Running.” The word bent into a yawn. Six shots of espresso and she could barely keep her eyes open. “All night, just running. I was useless in class.”

Spike slumped forward in the waiting room chair, elbows resting on spread knees, chin on the heels of his hands. His curls were rumpled, which was usually of the good, but this rumple was less well-bedded-sex-god and more hobo-on-the-late-bus. It messed up the sleek-and-deadly-creature-of-the-night look he worked so hard to maintain, but he didn’t seem to care. He was at least as tired as she was. “If they’re tryin’ to tell us somethin’, I wish they’d get to the bloody point.”

“Stuff from the Powers is always like that. They don’t speak mortal.”

“Not mortal, last I checked.” One raised eyebrow. “Neither are you.”

“Mmm...kinda?”

A muscle jumped along his jaw. “This more Slayer Theosophy, then?” Theosophy. Now there was a Victorian mouthful of a word. That must have been what William sounded like—well, except for that subsonic vampirey rumble. She turned his face and pressed a kiss to the tip of his nose. His whole body softened.

“’Fraid so. There’s immortal, like us. We live until something kills us. But then there’s immortal. Eternal. Unending.”

A little spark of interest in his eyes, swamped by exhaustion. “Powers are unkillable?” She nodded. “Noted.”

“It’s not just that. They’re...unlimited.” She had to come up with the words—real words, out here in the real world, damn it. She couldn’t just emote and let Spike interpret. They’d decided to close their link until they both got a good night’s sleep. It turned out that cranky slayer plus snarly vampire plus magical mindshare made for a fight a dozen layers deep. Until that morning, she had known for sure that Spike was a hothead—she and Dawn joked, bittersweet, about his tantrums for decades. He got mad, said things he didn’t mean, and regretted it later, predicable as death and demons.

Boy howdy, was she wrong.

He was the picture of British restraint. An emotional iceberg, even. No matter what vicious invective came out of his mouth, what he didn’t say was much, much worse. Blistering. Her psyche still stung with it.

“Unlimited?” He squinted in the bright sunlight pouring through the waiting room window. It didn’t burn his skin because of the ring, but it hurt him. She could see it in the set of his jaw, in the tilt of his eyebrows. She wanted to take back every awful thing she’d said, too, just to make him hurt less.

“We’re linear—our consciousness is a pinpoint anchored in time, pulled along by the current. We can’t control our speed or direction. We can’t go back to where we’ve been. We’re limited. They’re not.”

He made an odd little noise, like a scoff that turned into a whimper half way through. “If they’re so soddin’ powerful, why can’t they just tell us what they want?”

“They are.” She slid her arm around his waist, tucked her head into his shoulder. Whatever it was
they were trying to say, the Powers were trying really hard to say it. The dreams...hallucinations...aetheric jaunts...whatever they were, they were crammed full of big, important things. Things she was supposed to remember and figure out. “But it’s like trying to tell an ant how to cross a busy street.” He worried at his lower lip with his teeth, nodding slowly. “For bugs, ants are smart. They’re organized and social, but they can’t see all the way across the street, and even if they could, they wouldn’t know what it meant. They don’t understand traffic lights or crosswalks. They can’t predict what the drivers will do. Drivers can’t see them—and wouldn’t stop even if they could. They’re just ants. Who stops for ants?”

“Don’t feature bein’ an ant.”

“Welcome to my life.” Funny—or not—how having some power just made you more aware of its limits. It was one of many things the slayers whispered about when they thought she couldn’t hear. Before they were called, they felt strong, trained by careful watchers. Powerful. Invincible, even. After, when they were strong? They felt small. They knew how big the power they touched really was. They could feel it, and they knew it could crush them. But they always acted confident when they saw her watching. “What movie did we miss?”

“The Fox and The Hound.”

“Noo...” Now she was whimpering. They’d intended to run a quick patrol and head over to Sean’s movie night. Work off some of Spike’s excess energy and finish the evening eating popcorn with a bunch of friendly demons. But after they left Giles’ place, there was an onslaught of vampires. They just kept coming. Four entirely separate packs, one right after the other, and then a smattering of twos and threes. Counting the ones before they left Giles’, they must have dusted seventy vampires in the space of two hours. Even they had limits, so they bagged the party and went home to sleep.

Where they ran, terrified, across an imaginary desert until her alarm went off for school. When she woke up, the muscles in her thighs ached, and the air felt strange on her naked skin. She missed having fur.

She stuck her lower lip out. “I love that movie.”

He pressed a fingertip into the center of her lip and softened still further. “Could borrow it, I s’pose—or get the boy to throw a rewatch party. Bet he’d find a whole new slate of party guests.”

“I bet he would.” Sean’s guest lists included every species of harmless demon she’d ever encountered and a few she hadn’t, as well as a couple of varieties she dealt with on a case by case basis. Hardly any vampires, though. He didn’t like them. “He knows absolutely every—.”

“Miss Summers?”

She blinked up at the man standing in the doorway. “You’re the doctor.” The reception window was closed, its light turned off. They were the only patients in the waiting room. “Where’s the nurse?”

“I let my staff go early.” Doctor Framke smiled tightly. “They can get a head start on their holiday weekend. Let’s go back to the examination room.” Without another word, he turned on his heel and stalked down the hall, stiff legged, leaving them to follow.

In the exam room, Framke patted the table. “Up here, please, Miss Summers.” When she climbed up, he turned to Spike. “Am I safe with you here?” Spike gave him a withering glare and slumped into the chair in the corner.

The doctor turned worried eyes on her. She sighed. “You’ll be fine.”
He took her blood pressure, listened to her heart and lungs with a stethoscope, and looked into her throat and her ears. Then he leaned against the counter tapping her chart absently on his knee. “Your blood pressure,” he said finally, “is one hundred over seventy. Your heart rate is forty beats a minute.”

“That sounds good. Is it good?”

“It’s unreal. What are you?”

“In excellent shape?” She batted her eyelashes. Spike snorted.

“Yes, and you have been since you were about fifteen. I know this because I pulled your medical records—all of them. Harder than it should have been since they were under three different birthdates. And two names.” He patted a stack of files sixteen inches high. “Do you have an explanation for that?”

“I really don’t.” She didn’t know what the Powers did to get her here, but it was clearly something big. Something world-altering. She’d already found the name thing, but why did she have different birthdates?

“Are you human?”

“Now that’s a question.”

“I’m from Sunnydale, Miss Summers.” Irritation sparked like an electrical storm around him. It made the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. “Born and raised.”

“Whoa kay. First of all, it’s Buffy. If you call me Miss Summers, you have to give me detention, and neither of us has time for that. Second, I wouldn’t give you a different answer if you were from out of town, but it’s not that simple—it’s not an either-or thing.”

“The good doctor himself is not entirely human, Slayer.” Spike slouched down in the chair with his arms folded across his chest. He’d popped the collar on his coat so it shaded his face, and his eyes were closed. “Something...” His nose twitched. “Subtle. Way back.”

“Like Xander?”

Spike shook his head. “Further back.”

“Peachy.” She turned on Framke and grinned. “There you have it. You’re not simple, either.”

“I’m what, now?” His eyes were wide, but with curiosity rather than panic.

“Zero clue, but let me guess: You grew up hearing stories about how great aunt Ethel was a witch, or had fairy blood, or green skin, or whatever. Something magical.”

“Stories.” He shrugged. “Just stories. Every family has them.”

“Maybe. But yours are true.”

“That’s...good to know.” There was a long pause, and she watched the world reorganize behind his eyes. “You’re the slayer?”

“That’s me.”

“That explains....” He flipped one of the file folders open and jotted a note down before turning back
to her. “Okay. And he’s a vampire, right?”

“Yup.”

“But he was in direct sunlight....”

“There’s not a chance we’re gonna tell you about that.”

He opened his mouth like he was going to argue and she shook her head. “Fine.” He flipped a file folder open on the desk and pointed to an x-ray image of her shoulder. “So when were you shot?”

They spent the next two hours going through her medical history while Spike snored softly in the background. There were injuries that couldn’t have happened, major breaks that didn’t show up on x-rays taken days later. Even she didn’t heal that fast, and this should have been pre-loop Buffy.

But that was in doubt, too. Was she Elizabeth-nicknamed-Buffy? Or always-just-Buffy? If she thought about it, she could remember being both of those people. Neither one seemed more real or right than the other.

And then there was her birthdate. According to the files, it was May 6, 1979. Or October 24, 1980. Or January 19, 1981. Like the names, she remembered all of them. How old was she, anyway?

When they sorted the records by birthdate, the inconsistencies disappeared. It looked like the medical history of three separate but similar individuals. 1979 and 1980 were both Elizabeth-nicknamed-Buffy, while 1981 was always-just-Buffy—right up to the moment she arrived in a flash of green light. Then 1981 was Elizabeth and there were no further records for the other birthdates. It was like someone had shuffled three Buffys together.

When they finished, Framke sat back and raised his eyebrows. “You need a doctor who knows what you are. That’s why you’re here.”

“Partly, yeah. I’ve set a lot of my own bones just so I wouldn’t have to explain.” He winced. “It’s no fun, believe me, but also...do you want a job?”

“Doing what?”

“Doctoring people who aren’t human.”

“Oh.” He let his gaze rest, unfocused, on the sleeping vampire in the corner. “I’m...uh...not trained for that.”

“Nobody is. You’d have to do what you just did for me, patient by patient. Figure out everybody’s baseline and work from there.”

“I see. Would I have to give up my practice?”

“Not unless you wanted to. It’s for a school. You know the old mansion on Crawford? We’re converting it. Just give us clinic hours—one day a week? And help us figure out what to put in the clinic.”

“Yes,” he whispered, and then stronger, “Yes. I’ll do it. What...who will I be treating?”

“Ghoulies, ghosties, long-leggedy beasties, and things that get bumpy at night?”

“Very funny.”
“I wasn’t joking. There’ll be me and other girls kind of like me. We have a bunch of vampires. Witches. One werewolf—.”

“Now you are joking.”

“Not even a little. You can pretty much count on having to patch up anything that’s ever starred in a fairy tale.”

“And you’ll explain the circle in Miss Rosenberg’s room?”

“Well, I won’t, but somebody will. And call her Willow. Please. We all have detention trauma. We had this principal who—.”

Spike screamed.

She was kneeling in front of him holding his hands before she was even aware she’d moved. “Open the link, Buffy. Please. Please. Please open the link.” He rolled to the floor and wrapped her in his arms, buried his face in her hair. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry.” The words trailed off into a broken sob.

His head was full of desert skies so blue they looked purple, and she could feel the lingering heat of the sand. It couldn’t be. Could it?

“Spike—did you go without me?”
The sun scalded his shoulders through the thin fabric of his linen shirt, and his tie choked him. He tore it off and hurled it to the sand without stopping. He’d been wearing vest and jacket when he arrived, but he’d dropped those, too. A hank of sweat soaked, honey brown hair flopped forward into his eyes, and his heart battered the inside of his ribcage. He wheezed with every limping step.

That wasn’t right. He hadn’t worn shoes like these in a hundred years: narrow heels, pointed toes, and spats. Brown felt spats, of all the bloody indignity. The blisters on the backs of his heels wept pus, but he couldn’t stop. The slayers were after him.

Hundreds of them. Thousands, maybe. A roar of angry voices in a multitude of tongues. From a distance, they sounded like a swarm of bees. Up close, a jet engine. All of them were armed.

And some of them remembered him.

He heard his name—names—bubble up out of the din from someplace too close behind him. He squinted back over his shoulder, across the open desert, through blinding sunlight, and tripped. The rough sand bloodied his palms and tore the knees of his trousers. The sound grew nearer.

“What are you doing here, Spike?” One voice rose above the others. “There’s no point in running.” His heart beat even faster and he scrambled to his feet. His breath came hot and fast, ripped his throat raw.

Gradually, the sand gave way to foliage, and soon the green was dotted with pale blooms. Moon Vine. He barreled through it. It tangled and tripped him, slowed him to creeping, but it did not twine around him. The slayers got closer. He could see them, now, each one, each face. There were so many.

“Give it up, Spike!” A voice he’d last heard more than twenty years ago, on a New York City subway. “She’s not here to protect you.” He gasped and lurched forward in a burst of panic-driven speed, and then he was among the gods.

The great stones gave him cover, but they also slowed him down. As he wove among them, the slayers fanned out, until they weren’t a mob but a regiment—a hundred regiments—lined up, driving him forward. The gods watched him run, watched him falter and fall to his knees, watched with their pitiless stone eyes. They made no move to help him. He hauled himself up and pressed onward.

The line of slayers became an arc, which became a half-circle, until they were driving him, herding him like a stray sheep. Every avenue of escape was blocked.

When he reached the well, he nearly fell in.

He tottered at its edge, arms outstretched, windmilling to stay on his feet. A hand—small, strong, and very warm—seized his shoulder and pulled him back. He turned to face his savior. He knew her, too. From China. Her dark eyes held no malice, just an ancient, implacable judgment. She wanted him to die.

They all did.

The other slayers moved in until those closest were just a few feet away. When they stopped, they stood motionless as the watching gods, and waited. A row of stone goddesses loomed behind them, different from the slayers in degree rather than kind. Some of those were familiar to him, too: Lion-headed Sekhmet, whose breath formed the desert; Freya, who gathers mortal souls; many-armed
Kali; Morrigan the battle crow. All warriors. All slayers?

He took in their faces, flesh mirrored in stone, each locked in a pose of righteous ferocity, and knew the answer to that question: All slayers. Of course they were. Old slayers, like Buffy.

The ranks of living slayers rippled. Someone strode through them and they parted. Or she pushed them aside? He had no way to tell. When the front line opened, they revealed not a slayer, but the slayer. The one, singular, First Slayer, face painted with a white clay skull. She carried a rough stake in the slender fingers of her clenched right fist.

“Choose!” she growled.

“What?” He glanced around the circle of faces. “Choose what?”

“Life,” the Chinese slayer said, waving a hand at the well behind him.

“Or death.” The New York slayer smirked and raised her stake.

“Choose!” the First Slayer said again and advanced on him. The other slayers followed. He stepped backward until his heel met the well’s raised rim.

“Oh...bloody....” There was no sympathetic Norse god to grant him an ax, this time, no single enemy to fight—no weapon that would save him. His foot slipped and he righted himself in time, but only barely. The slayers edged forward again until he and the First Slayer stood toe to toe.

“Choose!”

They were packed so close together that he would not be able to force himself through them. That way lay certain death. But the well was death, too, wasn’t it? Liquid sunlight, anathema to his kind. Maybe, but he’d survived sunlight before.

He peered into its swirling depths. Was that movement? Did that mean there was a way out? Another maybe. But maybe was better odds than certain death. “Right, then.” He turned and dove.

It was deep. He couldn’t tell how deep. Embedded in its walls at irregular intervals were cabochons of colored light like polished stones. Here, onyx. There, carnelian. Beneath that, topaz. Each pulsed with its own heartbeat, and the golden light of the well coiled around it. To his surprise, he did not burn. His pulse raced.

Down and down and further down, he swam. Kicked hard and drove himself deeper. There were more colored lights, and a current that spun the waters counterclockwise. Widdershins. It was after a minute or so, when his lungs started to ache, that he realized one very important thing: He needed to breathe.

That was wrong. It shouldn’t be true. It couldn’t be, but it was.

He tried to halt his downward progress, make his way back to the surface, but the spiral current sucked him down. He could not fight against it, so he kicked again and followed it.

The deeper he got, the stronger it became. He was moving very fast. The colored lights blurred as he passed them—and more when his vision began to blur, too. His head pounded. He could hear nothing but the roar of water in his ears. He needed to breathe.

He sped up until the walls of the well looked iridescent, glimmering with rainbow colors folded into white. It couldn’t have lasted more than a minute, but it felt like it went on forever. He needed to
breathe.

Finally, the chamber opened outward into three curving passages. Water rushed inward from each passage, creating a whirling vortex centered on something. He tried to get a good look at it, but black spots hung before his eyes, and he couldn’t think through his mounting panic. He needed needed to breathe.

It was green. It glowed green, still and tranquil in the center of the tripartite whirlpool, shielded by its howling current. Safe. He was going to pass out. He needed to breathe.

He could not kick up. He could not kick further down. He kicked toward the center, toward the green light. He could do that. He needed to breathe. His lungs burned.

He hung in the stillness of the whirlpool’s center, listening to the frantic pounding of his heart. Was this death, then? Real death? He needed to breathe. Something slithered past him, brushed against the back of his neck, the same gold as the water and nearly invisible. Every muscle in his body seized, driving the remaining air from his lungs, and he screamed. Green light pulsed once, and everything went dark.

Buffy knelt in front of him holding his hands. “Open the link, Buffy. Please. Please.” He sucked air desperately into lungs that did not need it. “Please open the link.” He would never give her cause to close it again. Never. He could not do this alone. He slid from the chair and folded her slender body into his arms, held on so tight he thought her ribs would crack, and pressed his nose into her hair. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry.”

He felt the link open and sobbed with relief.

“Spike.” Her voice tensed with worry. “Did you go without me?”
“No, see? It’s right here. The Guardian of the Abyss and her Blade.”

He flipped pages. “But that refers to a weapon of some kind, certainly.”

She shook her head and pointed again with emphasis. “Okay, but it’s also an appellation. Appellations are big in the demon world.” She smiled proudly and nodded at Joyce. “They called me ‘Patron Saint of the Women Scorned.’” Joyce frowned.

“Look at the context here,” Anya tapped the page, “and here. The Blade has a weapon and is a weapon. If the Guardian of the Abyss is the slayer—and from this, here,” she flipped the pages and tapped again, “it sounds like Buffy, specifically—I bet the Blade of the Abyss is Spike.”

“We.” Joyce pursed her lips. “You’re a vengeance demon?”

“Any, I did not smash your amulet.”

She rolled her eyes and continued on. “I’m eleven hundred and twenty years old.”

“See,” Joyce said. “That explains a lot.”

“Anyway, slayers are powerful enough to attract prophecies, and Buffy is way more powerful than a regular slayer, with her time-loop, reward-from-the-Powers deal. I’m afraid to ask what that’s about.”

“Time loop.” Joyce’s jaw hardened. “Rupert,” she said very softly, “tell me about the time loop.”

Something hit his door with great force and it rattled on its hinges. He rushed to the window and moved the drapes aside to peer out.

Buffy stood a few feet distant with her arms folded across her chest watching with satisfaction while Spike pounded a struggling vampire against the door frame.

“I am sick,” whomp, “to death,” crunch, “of all,” smack, “the bloody,” thonk, “vampires!” And then a whooshing sound as the vampire’s head was bludgeoned from his body and he fell away to dust. Spike’s shoulders slumped. He staggered toward Buffy and wrapped his arms around her, rested his head on her shoulder. “Buffy,” he said just loud enough to be audible through the glass, “we’re going to need more fighters.”
Giles pulled the short sword from the umbrella stand by the entryway and opened the door. “Is that all of them? Are they gone?”

“Dusted,” Spike said. He looked older, if that was possible. “It’s as bad as when I first found the soddin’ ring.”

“Except there’s a lot more of them,” Buffy said. “Angel’s pissed off the whole west coast. They’re coming from everywhere.”

“Startin’ to agree with Sean.”

“Sean. Your fledgling?”

“Yeah,” Buffy said. “He doesn’t like vampires. Can we come in? I wanna be behind a threshold for a while.”

“Of course.” He stepped aside and held the door for them. Buffy stopped so abruptly that Spike ran into her.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, Buffy.” Joyce folded her hands in her lap and turned steely eyes on her daughter. “Time loop?”

“Damn it.” Buffy kicked her shoes off and settled onto the couch next to her mother. “Okay. Is everyone ready?”

The story didn’t precisely change on its second telling, but there were details added that she hadn’t mentioned before. After listening for a while, he understood. This telling included nuance that might have provoked an ambiguous response from a truth spell. He made notes.

“So that’s it,” she finished. “A time loop. I’m really old, but I’m still me. I just need to fix everything.”

Joyce was silent for a long while. Then she asked, “How old? Older than me?”

“A lot older than you.”

“As old as Anya?”

Buffy’s eyebrows rose and she shook her head. “Not nearly.”

Joyce inhaled sharply and smiled. “As old as Spike.”


“Oh.” Joyce crossed her hands over her heart and squeezed her eyes closed. “Oh, I feel so much better about this wedding.”

“What...because I’m not really eighteen?” Buffy blinked. “Oh—you were worried I was jumping into things.” She shook her head. “You shoulda said. I didn’t say anything about all of this ‘cause I didn’t want you to worry.”

“Mothers worry. It's what we do.”

“Spike is the Blade of the Abyss,” Anya said. “There’s a prophecy.”
“That makes sense,” Buffy said, “given that he pulled an ax out of the endless, engulfing darkness, and of course there is. There’s always a prophecy.”

“Another bloody prophecy?” Spike scowled.

“Again, welcome to my life. We have some news, too, and another dream. You sure you want to hear this, Mom?”

“Yes,” Joyce said. She showed a lot of teeth.

“Okey-dokey,” Buffy said. “Just one question before I start. Why did you name me Buffy?”

“Alright,” Joyce said, after a moment’s puzzled pause. “Well, Hank and I fought for months about it. That should have been my first clue, I guess. But we finally settled on naming you after my grandmother—she died just before you were born. Her name was Elizabeth, but she went by Buffy, like the Queen Mother. Well, then you were born. You were tiny. Itty bitty. Elizabeth seemed like a very big name to give someone so small.” She blushed a little and licked her lips. “I wrote Buffy on all the paperwork while Hank was out of the room.”

“Go, Mom!” Buffy said. “But my legal, real, official name is Buffy, right?” Joyce nodded. “Oh, boy.” She set her ID card on the coffee table with a snap. They all leaned over to look.

“Dear lord.”

“So.” Between them, Buffy and Spike relayed what they’d learned from Doctor Framke, and the details of Spike’s dream. He added it all to his notes. “I think the three Buffys are because of the three currents feeding into the well from Spike’s dream.”

“Well, yes,” Anya said. “That’s because three realities have been merged.”

“Worlds were subsumed—destroyed?” He held his pen poised over the paper.

“No. Merged. Collated? If they’re very similar, most people won’t even notice. This seems to be centered on Buffy, so most of the differences are in her memory.”

“I’m a walking, talking Mandela effect,” Buffy said. “Great.” Giles did not recognize the reference. He wrote it down.

“So the Well is this world.” Any took his notes and flipped through them. She made an asterisk next to each reference to the Well of Light. “Which is made up of three worlds that used to be separate. Only thing I don’t know is why.”

Spike shrugged. “The whirlpool was protecting the green light which is....”

“Dawn,” Buffy said. “That was definitely Dawn.”

“To protect a Power? If it was in a vulnerable form, maybe.”

“She’s not.” Buffy closed her eyes. “That’s not why. I mean, it may be protecting her, but that’s not why it’s there.”

“Why, then?” Anya tapped the pen on the yellow legal pad. “We’re waiting.”

“The Well is this world,” Buffy said. “I drink from the Well.”

“Bloody—soddin’ Powers.”
“God, I should have realized.” She rubbed her temples. “Slayers get their power from the energy of the world—from the stuff that holds reality together. We were created with a very carefully balanced, very big, self-perpetuating blood rite. It’s a trade-off: Thinner walls for an armed guard. One ordinary slayer doesn’t damage the world too much. A couple of them makes things extra demony. A whole bunch of them can bring the walls down. And one like me....”

She turned and buried her face in Spike’s chest. He made soothing noises. “We aren’t supposed to live this long. If they hadn’t reinforced it, the apocalypse would have started already.”

“Oh,” Anya said. “So the Well isn’t the world. The Light is the world. The Well is you. You’re the hole in the world.” She smiled brightly. Giles took his notepad back and scribbled the phrase down. “So then Spike’s dream....”

“He chose,” Buffy said, her voice muffled, “to immerse himself in the Well of Light, even if it killed him.” She stroked his face. “Rather than go to war with the slayers.”

“S’pose I did, at that. But why was I human?”

“Because it’s the dreamlands,” Anya said, like it was obvious.

“In your heart of hearts,” Buffy explained, “that’s who you are. That’s how you see yourself.”

“Then why aren’t I human when you’re there?”

“Because that’s not how I see you. Until today, they’ve been my dreams.”

“Ah huh. ‘The Blade of the Abyss?’”

“That makes sense, too. Your power comes from the void.”

Spike nodded. “Empty, dark, and hungry. So the Moon Vine....”

The harsh jangle of a ringing phone broke the hush, and everyone stared at it. Giles glanced at the clock. Seventeen minutes past ten. His stomach knotted. “Hello?”

“Giles,” Xander said. “You gotta come. Willow’s awake.”

“We’ll be there as soon as we can,” he said, and hung up.

Buffy was already on her feet. “What is it, Giles? What’s wrong?”

“Willow’s awake.”

Anya narrowed her eyes. “I am still going to the auction.”
“He said he loved me.” Wires attached to Willow’s skin with stickers kept her from sitting up, but she strained against them until a chaos of whirs and beeps brought a nurse running. After a moment’s hesitation on the threshold, the woman stepped over the red chalk circle without glancing down, like it wasn’t real if she didn’t see it.

Was Hellmouth-induced obliviousness permanent, or did it fade away at Sunnydale city limits? Related question: Do demons cause brain damage? “Of course he loves you.”

“But then...why....” She started crying again, huge tears that grew in the corners of her eyes until their weight dragged them ponderously down her mottled cheeks. “He said...he said he didn’t...trust me, anymore.”

She squeezed Willow’s hand. “You did kinda lie to him, Will.”

“But not about anything big,” Willow wailed. “Not something big enough to break up over!”

Buffy blinked.

“It was the first thing he said to me when I woke up. ‘I’m sorry, Willow. I can’t be with you anymore,’ and then he left. Now nobody will tell me what happened. They just keep whispering and looking at me funny.”

Okay, yeah. That was a little harsh. This whole hospital trip had to be overwhelming, and then to add a breakup on top of it? She felt herself softening toward Willow—right up to the moment she said, “I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Oh, where to begin.

“So...what’s the last thing you remember?” She dropped Willow’s hand and stepped back. She wasn’t armed. They’d left their obvious weapons in the trunk of the DeSoto—not that she couldn’t have hidden a knife or a stake from the hospital personnel, but if she went unarmed, Spike would, too. Without complaining. She was having some trouble prying that ax from his hand, these days.

The curtain rod was probably aluminum. It would look big and impressive when she yanked it off the wall, but it would bend at the first swing. The bedside table was plasticized pressboard. It would shatter. No lunch tray. Willow would be allowed to eat solid food as soon as she felt like it—there was nothing physically wrong with her, after all—but she didn’t feel like it, yet. “Still woozy,” she’d said.

There. In the corner. One of those rolling IV bag poles. Steel tubing, if she had to guess. That would work. Three steps and she could have it in her hand. “How did you get hurt?”

“Am I actually hurt?” Willow’s eyes trailed down her body, over the needles and wires that bound her to the bed. “I mean, I must be here for a reason, and my throat is sore—that’s from the tube, I think. But I feel...okay.” She wrinkled her nose. “Sort of light?”

Light. She felt light? “We don’t know if she’ll keep the soul, you see,” Vera had said. “She’s not fighting for it.” Mathilda added. “Unusual in one so young. It’s like she doesn’t want it.” Buffy’s stomach did a slow roll backward. She edged away from Willow, just a little.

“If I could just...get...loose....” Willow struggled to turn under the wires.
Buffy put one hand in the center of Willow’s chest and pressed down until the girl stopped fighting. “You are not getting out of that bed.”

“I’m fine.” Willow glared up at her from the pillow, jaw set. “Let me up.” Her irises were too large and too dark. Willow couldn’t hurt anyone outside the circle—it was made to contain magic—but Buffy was not outside the circle.

She slid her hand from Willow’s chest up to her throat and applied a little bit—just a little bit—of pressure. “I’ll ask again: What’s the last thing you remember?”

Willow’s eyes widened. “I...uh...I was casting a spell to....” She coughed. “To help...someone...and....”

Buffy nodded. “You cast a spell to try to pull something out of me, right?”

“Yeah?” Willow tried to push her away. “Buffy, you’re hurting me!”

“Yup. So you do remember. That makes things easier.” She tightened her grip. “Here’s the sitch, Will. If you ever—ever—cast another spell on me without my consent, I,” tighter, “will,” and tighter, “kill,” and even tighter, “you.” When she let go, Willow sucked desperately at the air. “Are we clear?”

“But I was trying to help!”

“Wrong answer.” She gathered the front of Willow’s hospital gown into her fist. “Try again. Are we clear?”

“There’s something—Buffy, stop! I’m not your enemy!”

“Really? I mean, you tried to rip my soul out of my body. Sounds like an enemy to me.” She lifted Willow up slightly from the hospital bed by her gown, setting the machines off again. A nurse appeared in the doorway, gasped, and then disappeared again. “Never again, Willow. Do you understand?” She punctuated each word with a slight shake.

“Your soul? No...that was...no.” She licked her lips. “That was your soul?” Her brow creased. “No...it wasn’t...it didn’t look human.”

“That’s because it’s not. I’m not.”

Doctor Framke cleared his throat from the doorway. “Are you planning to kill my patient, Miss Su—Buffy?”

“Maybe.”

“Do I need to call security?”

She sighed. “No, I’ll come quietly.” She let go of Willow and stepped back. “Until you agree not to throw spells at me, Will? We’re enemies.”

“But Buffy! I was trying to he—” Buffy put her fist through the bedside table. Then she smiled into Willow’s terrified eyes and walked away.

“That was dramatic,” Framke said.

“The spell that ripped her apart was supposed to hit me.”
“Do you think....”

Running. She was running, powerful haunches bunching and smoothing, through the blue-tinted
night, each pinpoint star as bright to her feline eyes as a street light. Before her lay a world of crisp
edges and sharp contrasts, while the periphery was streaked with watercolor. There was nothing
behind her. What use did she have for the past? If she could pick one thing to do forever, it would be
this. Her breath sang out across the desert.

Night. That was new.

Beneath her feet, vines curled and grasped, but she moved too fast. They could not take hold. She
was the wind. She was a storm. She was a howling hurricane that tore the vines aside. A jagged gash
of naked earth pointed the way to the standing stones and she ran.

In the Forest of Watching Gods, the path grew wider until it opened out into a clearing, in the center
of which was her Well. Spike knelt at its edge, cutting moon vine away with his ax to neaten the
circle. He wore black—not his coat, but something like it. Something that flickered with starlight and
tossed in the breeze like the leaves on the vines surrounding him. His collar-length curls were the
same tawny brown as her fur.

“Got my ax, this time. Got my coat—more or less. Had to think on it. That’s what turned the lights
out.” He glanced up at her. “Wager that means this one’s mine.” He severed one final tendril and
stood, brushing sand from his knees. “Found something.” He walked around to the far side of the
Well and crouched down near a small granite rectangle.

“The vines grew around it. Not cut, yeah? Grew that way.” She touched her nose to the cool
stone. Willow Rosenberg, it said. 1981 –

“Wish you could talk. Tell me what I’m seeing.” He ran his fingers over her fur. “Know we’ve
trouble with Willow, but—.”

“She,” a voice with the certainty of mountains interrupted, “owes a debt in every world.”

Spike recoiled. “Bloody buggering—.”

“Save this one.” Buffy lifted her head to meet Ma’at’s dispassionate gaze. “And that only because
she does not owe it yet. The time will come. The scales must be balanced. Ammit is hungry.” The
goddess wore a simple red shift with a white feather in her long, dark hair. Her feet were bare.

“You have what you need,” she said to Buffy. To Spike, she said, “And you have more. Go.”

“Go where?” Spike protested, but Ma’at was gone. Buffy advanced on the Well. “Stay away from
the vines, would you? I’m sodding done with—Buffy! What are you doing?”

She crouched at the Well’s edge and extended her neck, lapped at the surface of the liquid, but it
wasn’t enough. In one smooth motion, she poured her body into the light. She heard Spike’s startled
oath behind her, but it was distant. Unimportant. This light was everything that mattered. At its
edges, she saw lights in a thousand other colors, and knew them to be powers in their own right,
ancient beings called to its sweetness and trapped in its skin, like flies in honey. Enemies.

Down and down and down she swam with Spike behind her until she reached the Well’s heart and
the three streams that fed it. She saw the green light, like Spike had, but she saw something else, too.
The light was protected by the maelstrom, nestled in its center like a gemstone in a gold setting, but it
also created it, drew the light in from three sources and spun it up to the surface.
And down to the surface. The Well continued past its heart, as far as she could see—farther—maybe all the way through the world.

Spike caught up with her,环ed his arms about her neck, and stared at the glowing green light, clung to her with the panic of a drowning man. She pushed off the side of the Well with every ounce of force she could summon, back to land, back to stone, back to desert.

“...her remorse is genuine?” Doctor Framke caught her arm. “Buffy? Are you alright? You stumbled.”

“I’m fine.” She shook her head to clear it. “Fine. What did you say?”

“Do you think she was expressing genuine remorse?”

“No,” she said, watching as Vera and Mathilda approached, their orthopedic shoes whisper silent on the hospital tiles. Spike staggered behind them, frightened eyes locked on her. “We’re going to need to bind her.”
She looked worried when she opened the door. Lines creased her forehead and the corners of her eyes. He'd drawn her from life, once, but not like this. Sleeping, fine skin smoothed over the angularity of her face, lending it an elegance at odds with the pouting downturn of her mouth. Beautiful.

“Missus Summers?” Sean said. “How are you this evening?”

She smiled. “Fine, thank you. Is there something I can help you...” That’s when she noticed Angel. Her smile flickered and disappeared, to be replaced by an expression of naked threat. “I am not inviting you in.”

Angel shook his head. “This isn’t going to work.” He turned to walk down the steps, but Sean grabbed his sleeve.

“Gimme just a second, would you? Jeez.” The words were disrespectful, but there was no intent to defy, and nobody important was watching, so he let it go. He shrugged and waited, staring intently at the toes of his own shoes. He couldn’t meet Joyce Summers’ eyes.

“It’s a nice night,” Sean said. “We can stay out here.” He extended his hand. “I’m Sean Walden, Missus Summers.”

She took Sean’s hand. Stupid. That was stupid. If Sean were any other vampire, it would be the last thing she did. He’d drag her across the threshold by that hand and drain her dry.

“Oh!” She laid one graceful palm against her chest and the smile came back. “You’re Spike’s little boy!”

Sean’s shoulders slumped. “I am not a little boy,” he whimpered. “I’m not.”

Joyce giggled. “Well, I can see that, now, but Spike calls you ‘The Boy’ whenever he mentions you.”

His eyes widened with almost comical horror. “No....”

She patted the boy’s shoulder—reached right across the threshold and patted him. Angel wanted to bite her just to teach her a lesson. “It’s alright, sweetie. I expect it’s just a function of his age. At a certain point in your life, everybody under forty starts to look like a child.” Sean laid his hand over hers and squeezed, offering an embarrassed smile in return. “So what can I help you with?”

“I’d like to talk about your gallery. I’d have approached you there, but it’s only open during the day and we’re—.” He shrugged.

“Of course.”

“And you know Angelus, right?”

“We’ve met.” She pursed her lips and tossed a brief sidelong glare in his direction.

“Oh, god. This again.” Sean covered his face with his hands. “This group is a political minefield. So much history, and it’s all of them. Every single one. I don’t know how they all still talk to each other. Missus Summers, Angelus is an artist.”
This time, the look she gave him was more speculative than hostile.

“Angelus? Show her your portfolio.”

He held it out, impressed despite himself. Pulled together into the portfolio case Sean had bought for him, it looked serious. Professional. Like he was a real artist, instead of a monster with delusions of grandeur.

After the movie the night before, Sean’s artist friends had unanimously declared him one of them. Two hours before dawn, they’d kicked him out of Sean’s apartment with instructions to go home and bring back a dozen or so of his best drawings. He didn’t know which ones those were, so he brought the whole stack and let Sean pick.

He’d selected exactly twelve, including his own mostly finished portrait, and slipped them carefully into the smooth leather case. There was one of Buffy and one of Spike, both caught mid-motion, in battle, both in charcoal like his drawing of Sean. There was a dreamy pastel of Drusilla with her eyes half closed, but looking directly at the viewer, a cameo of Darla in vivid primaries, wearing an elaborate eighteenth century updo, and an ink drawing of a dour-faced Penn—in the style of American Gothic. It hurt him to look at that one. He wouldn’t have included it.

The rest were done in colored pencil: Cordelia, with a smile like sunlight, in a yellow sundress with one strap slipping from her shoulder; Doyle in demon face, his expression wistful, hopeful, a cup of coffee in his hand; Nest—the Master—looming in the dark background, clawed fingers reaching to the fore; The Beast, a study in crimson, fangs and horns gore soaked; Acathla, stone mouth open wide enough to swallow the world; and, last, Joyce herself, drawn from memory just after his return from hell.

She flipped through them, a frown of concentration on her face. After an eternity, she looked up at him. “This is your work?” He nodded.

“So...Buffy mentioned that you were having trouble getting the gallery up to speed.” Sean licked his lips. “I think that’s because most of the people in Sunnydale aren’t human. A lot of them don’t come out until it’s dark.”

“I hadn’t considered that angle,” Joyce said. “You think I should be open later?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Sean said. “But you probably shouldn’t be there.” Joyce raised her eyebrows. “You’re Buffy’s mom. My life would be over if I got you eaten. But staff isn’t a problem. There’s a girl—Sandy. She was an art history major before she was turned.”

“You’re suggesting I actively court demon clientele.” There were frown lines between her eyebrows. Angel couldn’t tell if that was good or bad. “Starting with this show.”

“Angelus of Aurelius is a big name.” Sean grinned. “It’d be a kick-ass kick-off for your new extended hours.”

“I see. And this.” She flipped to the drawing of her. “This is how you see me?”

“Uh...” How else was he supposed to see her? “It’s...uh....” Accurate. The picture was accurate—true to life. She looked exactly as she did in person. “Yes.”

Her eyes dropped back down to it and her mouth softened. “It’s lovely. Thank you.” She took the portfolio and walked into her house, leaving the door ajar. He and Sean stared after her in confusion until she called over her shoulder, “Come in. Both of you. Sit down. I’ll make tea.”
“Well, you have, right?” The women sat two rows forward from him, front and center near the auction stage.

“That’s good!” She practically bounced in her chair. “It was good, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, it was very good.” The words summoned the snap of bubblegum and the clank of handcuffs, but nothing more. Was she a long-ago one-night stand whose name he had forgotten?

“So do it again. Problem solved.” The woman blushed crimson and batted ineffectually at Anya’s arm. Upon consideration, they were probably not mother and daughter. Not a one of his sisters, older or younger, could be that brazen with her mother.

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“Why?” Why, indeed. He’d posed that question himself on countless occasions, every time some nonsensical rule opened its maw to swallow his fun. The older woman shook her head and pretended to read her auction program, but Anya, bless her persistent heart, was having none of it. “You’re looking. He’s looking. So—.”

“We’re looking for different things.”

Anya frowned. “Different how? You both want sex, right?”

“Shh.” Her eyes skittered over the rapidly filling auction hall. “I want a relationship. There’s more to it than sex.”

“If you say so.” Ah, the sweet naïveté of youth. He had to fight an urge to lean forward and explain it to the girl himself. “So what does he want?”

The woman sighed. “Among other things? Olivia.” Ah, the plot thickened. The nameless he was not a one-woman man. This was far and away more interesting than his own meager sex life, and exponentially better than anything happening in the hall around him. He opened his program for camouflage and settled in to eavesdrop.

“Oh.” Anya slumped back into her chair and folded her arms across her chest. “Well, that’s stupid. Why is he looking if he has an Olivia?”

“She travels for work. They only see each other a few times a year.”

“That leaves plenty of time! You could—.”
“No. I couldn’t.” The woman hesitated, and closed her eyes. When she spoke again, her voice was so soft he had to strain to hear. “He likes the *variety* she brings to his life, and I can’t...I won’t be the *everyday* to anyone’s *variety*. Not again.”

“Men.” Anya stuck her lip out in a pout. “If I had my amulet, I’d—.”

So diverted was he by their dramatic exposition that he almost missed it when a black-clad attendant wheeled his prize to center stage.

The first lot to be auctioned, then. Sensible. Most of this crowd was here for the showier pieces—gold and platinum trinkets, statuettes with strange watching eyes, pottery painted with pigments made from the bones of long-extinct beasts. Heady stuff. By comparison, his little wooden box barely rated.

Even the program blurb was dismissive. “Attis Box,” it read. “Steel banded bocote. Enchanted with magic similar both to Ethros or Shorshack Boxes and to the Orb of Thesulah. Used in Ancient Rome to contain human souls during rituals now lost to time. A striking grain makes this curiosity ideal for the collector or decorator. Bidding begins at five thousand dollars.” Blah blah blah. He’d have to thank Rath later for that spoonful of pap.

With luck, he might be the only bidder.

An electronic jangle shattered the pre-auction hush, and it went on for three rings before he realized the offending device belonged to him. He fished it from his pocket and peered at the tiny screen. Then he flipped it open.

“Jason—one moment.” He made his way toward the door, dodging the straps of carelessly placed handbags and the glares of other early arrivals. One of them growled and extended a taloned foot to trip him. He hopped over it without slowing down, murmured a hex under his breath, and smirked as the folding chair collapsed beneath the creature’s weight. “Do you have news?”

Stubbs’ voice was chipper but far away, faint over the bustle of arriving auction-goers. “North Dakota is a go. So are Alaska and Tennessee. Nova Scotia is a work in progress.”

“Good, good, good, and damn.” He slouched against the wall and pinched the bridge of his nose. “What’s the holdup?”

“The property owner has heard of you.”

Blast and damn. “Is there another site available?”

Stubbs made a disapproving noise. “Your requirements are extremely specific. Maybe if we could compromise on some—.”

“That won’t be possible.”

“Perhaps another location? Louisiana has a number of—.”

“Jason.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, willing his blood pressure back to normal. His impatience was not the man’s fault. Neither was his looming deadline. A temper tantrum would serve no purpose. “As I said before, concrete containing pyrite, while ideal for a particular sort of enchantment, is unstable without magical maintenance. New Orleans is rife with magic. It does, of course, contain many buildings that match my specifications. Too many, in fact. If it’s ever evacuated, the whole city will crumble. The goal is to be one ensorcelled island in a sea of more durable structures. Increase the offer. Double it, if you must. Get me the site in Nova Scotia.”
He snapped the phone shut without saying goodbye. After years—decades—his work was nearly done. He’d built his house. All he had left to do was open the doors. The muscles in his jaw ached.

That was going to require more power than any rite he’d ever attempted, even from within his sanctum. Although the energy he’d cached would help, it was sheer delusion to think he had better than even odds of survival. Maybe if he spread the cost over a longer period of time, minimized the risk with baby steps...no. Time was more precious than magic.

The third new moon after the nine hundredth Feast of Delthrox would be upon him in the blink of an eye—T minus seventy-three days and counting. He had to strike Barvain at the moment of his rising, before he had a foothold in this reality, or he hadn’t a prayer. Delay was failure. He rubbed his temples, smoothed a few wiry white hairs back into the even darkness of his hairline, and breathed. Slowly.

He returned to his seat just as the bidding began.

The crowd was more demon than human. Reassuring, that. No dalliers making off with artifacts they did not understand. No infernal demi-gods released on an unsuspecting suburb. Stories about Ovu Mobani crashing a teen keg party still occasionally made the rounds. Although details were sparse enough that it might have been an urban legend, the rumors centered on Sunnydale, and it would be folly to doubt.

“Do I hear five thousand dollars?” the auctioneer intoned. Ethan raised his paddle.

“Five thousand from number forty-three. Five thousand. Do I hear fifty-five hundred? Fifty-five hundred?” There was no response from the crowd. “Five thousand going once.” A dark haired man whispering with Anya glanced over his shoulder. When their eyes met, Ethan’s innards went leaden. Swift shades of Sunnydale, that was Willy the Snitch. This could not end well.

“Fifty-five hundred!” Willy said, raising his paddle. There was malice in his smile.

“Six thousand.” Ethan glared back. Weren’t they beyond this kind of spiteful childishness?

“Seven thousand.” Willy’s grin widened. Perhaps he should have settled his tab before he left town last year.

“Eight thousand.” Thank Janus for his contract with the Council.

Willy snickered and raised his paddle. “Ten thousand.” Blasted barkeep.

“Ten thousand going once.” The auctioneer’s shoulders jutted too square from his neck, and his left arm tensed beneath the podium. Fingers on a panic button, no doubt. “Ten thousand going twice.”

“Fifteen thousand,” Ethan said, and closed his eyes. He didn’t need to witness Willy’s triumph.

“Fifteen thousand going once. Going twice. Sold to number forty-three for fifteen thousand dollars!”
“I can barely float a pencil, Giles. I’m useless! And they’re making me take her with me everywhere I go!” Willow scowled at her chaperone who cowered near the door, as far from Willow as she could get in the confines of his living room.

He’d had quite enough. “I should think you’d be grateful.”

“Grateful?” The color rose to Willow’s cheeks. “For losing my magic? For having someone follow me around all the—.”

“Miss Maclay volunteered her time. The original plan was for Vera or Mathilda to accompany you.”

Willow’s eyes widened and the color spread to the rest of her face. “Oh.” Giles folded his arms across his chest and waited. “Oh,” she said again. “But—.”

“Drink your tea.” He didn’t tell her she was lucky to have even that much magic. The chaperone was a compromise made at Buffy’s urging, as was the binding, and he questioned the wisdom of the tactic. Her offense was so egregious that the Lane sisters advocated stripping her power completely. Indeed, there was no way to know how much damage she’d done to it herself. He didn’t tell her any of these things because Xander was faster.

“We coulda killed her,” Xander said from his slouch in the corner of the sofa. Dark circles ringed his red-rimmed eyes. “We coulda killed you.”

“We were trying to he—.”

“That’s the thing, Will.” He scraped stiff fingers through dark hair, disordering it further. “We weren’t.”

“But there’s something wrong with Buffy!”

He shook his head. “Something happened to Buffy, sure. I mean, I was up half the night fighting with Anya about it. I still don’t understand it all. But that’s not the point. The point is we’re punching above our weight.”

“Pssh. What does that even mean?” Her voice was simultaneously shrill and dejected.

“You’re out of your depth,” Giles said. “There are greater forces at work.”

“That,” Xander said. He looked much older than his eighteen years. “You get a pass this time ‘cause you missed the last week and a half, but you gotta know—Buffy is different.”

“I know that. I saw her fight Veruca and...Oz.” The little catch of breath before Oz’ name was a hair too much. It utterly lacked sincerity. And whatever they might have seen when Buffy battled the werewolves paled in comparison to what he’d witnessed in his courtyard. Again, Xander got there before he did.

“No.” His eyes narrowed. “That wasn’t—that was nothing. She got shot. Twice. And she just kept going.” And that was more impressive than anything Giles had seen so far. No wonder Xander was rattled. “Remember the Judge? Unstoppable blue juggernaut?”

“Yeah?” Willow clutched her teacup to her chest almost desperately.
“She wouldn’t need the rocket launcher.”

“That just means she isn’t really—.”

He cast his eyes heavenward. “She is really. There’s a whole boatload of stuff going on that we don’t understand.”

“Oh, right, because Anya said so?” He couldn’t remember Willow ever being quite this mean-spirited, and toward Xander, no less. Vera and Mathilda were concerned that she might not keep her soul. He hoped this didn’t presage disaster.

Xander stood up, fists clenched at his sides, the pulse in his neck clearly visible from Giles’ vantage across the living room. “No. Because Buffy said so. I’ve learned more about slayers in the last week than I ever wanted to, Will. They’re—.”

“Not entirely human,” Giles said when Xander faltered. “And Buffy is unusual even for what she is.”

“What he said. Now, I’m not saying I’m on board with everything she’s doing.” Xander stalked toward the breakfast bar where Willow sat and loomed over her. “At the end of the day, I think Spike’s a vampire. If he even looks at her funny, well...there’s a pointy stick with his name on it.”

He set his hands on her slender shoulders and hunched over to look into her eyes. When had he gotten that big? Thick ropes of muscle bunched at his shoulders.

“Look—I get why you’re upset. Oz dumped you. He had a reason, but that doesn’t make it feel any better. He’s not speaking to me, either. Anya’s barely speaking to me. But lashing out at all of us? Not gonna fly. And Tara isn’t even part of this. She’s done nothing but help you.” He gave her shoulders a little shake. “Suck it up and apologize. Right. Now.”

Willow shrank back visibly, although there was still defiance in her expression. She nodded and whispered, “Uh...Tara?” Tara lifted her face as though she expected someone to slap her. “I...I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“I th-thought it would be b-b-better—.”

“Oh, it is. Way better. Thank you.” Willow’s smile did nothing to soften the brittle resentment in the set of her jaw.

“Tara?” he said, turning his back on the controversy. “Could I have your assistance in the kitchen?” The meek Miss Maclay made her way to him around the edge of the room, giving Willow a wide berth. In the kitchen, she set to chopping vegetables with the grace of long practice.

“How are you settling in to school?”

“I like Vera and Mathilda.” It was the first whole sentence he’d heard her speak without stuttering. She seemed a strange choice to officiate at Buffy and Spike’s wedding.

“They’re very good teachers. They come highly recommended.”

She nodded. “They remind me of my gran.”

In the living room, Xander caught Willow up on everything that had happened while she was unconscious. He articulated it all surprisingly well, even the parts he insisted he didn’t understand. When Giles was certain they were paying no attention to him, he asked, “Does Willow frighten
“You?” Tara stopped chopping for a moment. “Y-yes, sir.”

“Is it something she said?”

The girl shook her head. “It’s her aura.”

“I see.” He dumped a cutting board full of diced potatoes into a pot of boiling water. “Why did you agree to be her chaperone?”

Long seconds passed. Her hands stilled and her lower lip trembled. “I d-dream her b-better.”

Before he could ask what she meant, the door opened. “Honey, I’m home!” Spike held the door for Buffy, who came in right behind him, shaking rain from her jacket. “What’s for dinner?”

“Shepherd’s pie. Will one of you mash potatoes?”

“I c-can do it, Mister Giles.”

He patted her hand. “Of course you can, but they have superhuman strength.”

“Good for mashing,” Buffy said. She hung her jacket up and walked past Willow into the kitchen. She kissed him on the cheek, hugged Tara, and wiggled her fingers at Xander, while pointedly ignoring Willow, who made a little sound of protest.

“Hey, Buff?” Xander approached the pass-through cautiously. “Is Willow still invited to Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Depends on whether she can behave herself,” Spike said. He stole a chunk of carrot from Tara’s cutting board and popped it into his mouth, crunching loudly. Tara smiled.

“I wasn’t talking to you, Deadboy.”

“Depends on whether she can behave herself,” Buffy said, stirring the boiling potatoes. “These are...not quite ready to mash.” She tapped the liquid from the spoon and replaced the lid on the pot. “She has to figure out why what she did was wrong, apologize, and then—this is the important part—not do it again.”

“That’s not fair, Buffy!” Willow moved up next to Xander. “I was trying to help!” All the little hairs on the back of Giles’ neck stood up, and Tara gasped. Willow’s eyes were luminous, a narrow band of color around huge dark pupils.

Without warning, Spike reached through the opening and slapped her—gently, or it might have snapped her neck—across the face. It left a handprint. “Bloody hell, Red.” The sense of foreboding overhanging the room dissipated.

Xander lurched across the counter at Spike, a stake in his hand. Buffy took it from him like he’d handed it to her. “That’s not helping, Will.”

Willow put her hand over her cheek. “Wha...what?”

“You were g-gathering p-power.” Tara dried her hands and walked around the divider to the girl. She put an arm over her shoulders and led her to the sofa. “Remember you’re still hurt.”

“My control is gone.” Willow dropped against the cushions with an ungraceful plop. “I didn’t mean
to." Tara sat next to her, stroking her hair. "I didn’t even know I was.” Tara shushed her, but Willow started to cry. “It’s gone!” For the first time since she’d woken, Willow’s grief seemed sincere.
“Finn? Finn! Jesus, what are you doing down here? Weren’t you supposed to catch a flight?”

Riley lurched awake to find Porter leaning over him, a crease of worry between his dark eyes. Black curls brushed the tips of his ears. “You need a haircut, soldier.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Porter said. “Harass me after Thanksgiving. Deanna likes it long.” It took him a second to recall the name, but off-duty gold glinted in the cracks of his memory. Porter was the only Initiative soldier with a wife waiting at home. “Scared me, man. You looked like you were—.”

“What time is it?”

“Oh five hundred.” He hefted his duffel. “I’m on my way out. You need a ride?” Riley’s own packed duffel lay on the floor at his feet. His neck was stiff and sore, which was just as well. If he turned his head too quickly, he might throw up. His pulse stuttered like a snare drum.

“Not anymore.” This would be the third Thanksgiving in a row he hadn’t made it home. His folks were never gonna let him hear the end of it. “Missed my flight.”

“Damn.” Porter dropped to the couch next to him. The worry didn’t leave his face. “But...it’s Thanksgiving. Can you catch a red eye? Get there in time for breakfast?”

“Maybe.” He’d blown his flat-tire window straight to hell, so he was out the money for the ticket regardless. A late flight wasn’t a bad idea. “I can try.”

“I gotta jet. Beat the traffic.” Porter hauled himself to his feet and slung the bulging, oversized duffel over his shoulder one-handed, the way a normal person would carry a lunch bag. There’s no way around it, Riley. You are a science experiment. “You gonna be alright?”

Nothing was ever gonna be right again. Riley waved him off. “Say hi to Deanna for me.”

The booking was mostly painless. He handed over his credit card details with a silent prayer of thanks—one less thing he’d have to explain to his mother. “That’s one a.m. on the twenty-fifth,” the rep chirped. “Check in thirty minutes before departure.”

That left eighteen hours to kill. He hauled his duffel upstairs and tossed it onto his bed. Effortless. He was half again as strong as Porter. He’d slept most of the night, so he wasn’t tired. If he got up half an hour earlier every day, maybe he could flip to graveyard shift. Could be practical. He’d spent a lot more time in the dark since he started hanging out with vampires.

Lowell House creaked in the cool of the weird pre-dawn. Porter was the last of his guys to leave for the holiday, and the second string soldiers weren’t up yet. They’d take their temporary posts at sundown. No late flights home for them, poor bastards, but at least they got to sleep in.

When Ward first made the assignments, he’d worried that the new soldiers might target the demon allies, but Graham shook his head, all grim and secret. “The friendlies know how to avoid us.”

Which could have meant any number of things. He’d dropped the subject. If Graham had handed their patrol routes over to his demon pals...well. If he didn’t know, he couldn’t testify.

That line was so thin it could slice him in half.
A year ago, he’d have said Graham was a lifer. The structure and chain of command, the sense of being part of a larger whole—he was made for it. A real soldier. Now he spent most of his time with demons. Not that there was anything wrong with that, specifically. The events Riley’d gone to were alright. Normal, even. Darts. Karaoke. The occasional card game. The Brachen were just people.

But there were stranger things in Sunnydale, darker, less rational things, and Graham had chosen them over the Initiative. He ghosted fingertips over the freshly healed puncture marks beneath the collar of his shirt. Maybe he had, too.

His dreams dripped blood, every longing focused on his blue-eyed vampire girl, but he didn’t even know her name. Would Sean recognize her from his description? Or was that stupid, like asking if one black guy knows another just because they live in the same city? Was it rude? How many vampires were there? He’d ask Buffy. She wouldn’t laugh at him. She had her own vampire and—.

Cold shimmied down his spine. He had to get that file out of Ward’s office.

It hadn’t been moved. He knew that much. The backlog left behind when Walsh was escorted from the premises would keep them busy for months. But Ward and his DoD lackeys had been in the office twenty-four-seven. Even though he had a key, he hadn’t been able to get a moment in there alone.

But tomorrow was Thanksgiving. Was Ward with his family? Were the lackeys gone for the holiday?

He was so caught up in thought that he didn’t register the tiny scratch scratch scratch at the window until it had been going on for a while. A tree branch? There was nothing close enough—not since they’d trimmed the trees at the beginning of the term. A bird, maybe? Not this early. A bat?

He tiptoed to the window, spread the blinds with his fingertips, and peered out into the darkness. A pale face gazed back at him from the other side of the glass. He stumbled backward into a crabwalk and dropped to the floor. The scratch scratch scratch came again.

He crawled to the window on his belly, keeping his head below the window frame, and lifted his head until one eye was level with the corner of the window. He lifted the very edge of the blind.

An amused blue eye, clear as crystal, blinked back at him. He sat up and yanked the blinds open. His vampire crouched on the windowsill with one foot dangling and one hand on the frame for balance.

“How the hell did you get up here?” he asked, tugging the window open and offering his hand. She took it and climbed in, as gracefully as walking through a door. It was at least fourteen feet to the ground. He stuck his head out the window. A dainty feminine handprint marred the wood of the frame, and a trail of them led from window to ground. She’d climbed straight up the side of the building.

She tugged him toward her, tilted his face down with a fingertip on his chin, and stared into his eyes. Luminous. Radiant. He didn’t have words to describe her. “Have you missed me?”

What else could he say? “Every second.” He turned her hand to kiss it. Her nails were torn, the cuticles pushed back and bleeding. “You’re hurt.”

She smiled and lifted it to her own mouth. One finger at a time, slowly, she suckled the blood away. Her eyes never left his. When she had finished, she trailed a still-damp fingertip across his lower lip. His mouth went dry.

“Miss Edith says you’ll fly away.” She pressed her cool body against his and pulled his palms to her
hips, which did not help his composure. It took a few seconds for him to force words out.

“I...uh...only for a few days. I’ll be back.” He wrapped his arm around her waist, and slid a hand into her soft dark hair. She purred, but wouldn’t let him break eye contact to press his face into her neck. “Edith,” he said. It sounded like someone’s grandmother, a name from another era. How old was she? How old had she been? “Is that your name?”

Her brow wrinkled. For a second, she looked almost angry, but then she crumpled and spun away from him, shoulders shaking. What? “Oh god—I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He put an arm around her and led her to the edge of the bed. She sobbed silently, lovely face locked in a grimace of pain. He sat beside her and held her while she cried. “Third person,” he said when he finally worked it out. “That was your human name, wasn’t it?” A tiny whimpering sound. She hid her face in the fabric of his shirt. “Do you want me to call you something else?”

She laid a palm flat in the middle of his chest and shook her head. Then she lifted her tear-streaked face to meet his eyes again, still trembling. “Be in me.”

He’d joked about it the last time she said it, but he couldn’t joke now. It meant something. He smoothed her hair. “I don’t understand.”

So fast he didn’t see it happen, she flipped over and straddled him, one pale leg resting on either side of his. She grasped a handful of his hair in each fist, stared into his eyes, and said, “Be in me.”

“Edith—if that’s a come-on, I’m there.” He raised his hips, just a little, and stroked the smooth skin of her thighs. Her back arched in answer. “You are...I don’t...I’m bad with words.” She coiled her arms around his neck but didn’t look away. “God, you’re beautiful.”

She shifted.

Her features changed in a different order than Spike’s had, but the end result was the same: shortened nose, pronounced teeth, and that characteristic triangular brow. A vampire. He would never get tired of watching that. “Still beautiful,” he whispered, and the demon melted away.

With a sigh, she pursed her human lips and pressed her forehead against his.

“My name is Riley,” he said.

“Riley,” she repeated, and there were too many overlapping expressions in her face for him to make sense of them. “I am not a flower.” She leaned forward until her cool breath tickled his ear and asked, “You’ll fly back to me?”

“Straight as an arrow.” She flashed him a complicated smile. Then she was off his lap and gone. By the time he got to the window, there was no trace of her, and the glow of dawn lit the horizon. “Damn it.” He didn’t understand. Not even a little. “God damn it.”

His heartbeat thundered in his ears. He wanted to scream. He wanted to throw things or punch someone or kick his bed frame to matchsticks. Instead, he scooped his work keys from the nightstand drawer, and headed for Ward’s office.

The halls of UC Sunnydale were empty and still. His footsteps echoed on the tiles. Conspicuous, if anyone cared, but nobody was there to notice. The classroom was dark. He propped the door open but didn’t turn the lights on. No need to attract attention.

That’s when he smelled the smoke.
He sprinted to the back of the room. A black cloud billowed out from around the door to Ward’s office and hung just below the ceiling. The smoke alarms hadn’t gone off. Why hadn’t the smoke alarms gone off?

The door was locked. He fumbled for his keys with shaking hands, pushed the key into the lock, and opened the door.

The room was black—soot black, like the Initiative facility, like the lost mission under UC Sunnydale. There was no file to find. There were no files of any kind. Everything that burned was reduced to ash. Everything metal was slag. And the burn was surgical. The outside of the door was untouched.

In the back corner of the room stood a patch of darkness with flame colored eyes. It slow-blinked at him once, like a cat, and disappeared in a whirl of sparks.
“Shoulda killed her.”

“Would you fold the place cards, please?” He wore a cable knit sweater in off-white and blue jeans. With his curls grown out like that, without the leather and liner, he looked sunny. Boy-next-door. Like someone she would have gone out with the first time through. And there he was carefully folding place cards for Thanksgiving dinner. What’s more, he’d hand-lettered them that morning in his beautiful Victorian script, so they looked perfect. It was all perfect.

Well, except for this conversation.

“Buffy. She’s dangerous. You know it.” He looked up at her entreatingly, nothing but gentle concern in his blue, blue William eyes while he begged her to kill her best friend. Worry pulsed from him.

“I can’t. She promised.”

“She’s lying.”

“She is,” Giles said, “certainly lying.” He’d been listening to them bicker about it without comment for some time, fidgeting with a bone-china tumbler she’d found in the cupboard. It was one of eight, and it coordinated with but did not exactly match her mother’s good dishes.

Why did her mom have a whole set of blood tumblers? That was a conversation for another time. This, however....

“You agree with him?” Watchers were trained to be ruthless. She knew that. Giles was trained to be ruthless. When she was a teenager, she thought Ripper was the scarier version of Giles. Now? Giles in watcher mode made her skin crawl.

He held the tumbler up to the light. “Not entirely. What is this?”

“A cup.”

He peered over the rims of his glasses. “Yes, Buffy. What is it for?”

“Blood. Don’t change the subject.”

“It’s lovely.” He turned it in the light for a few seconds longer before setting it back on the counter. “She is lying. She is dangerous. But killing her seems extreme. No, I’m afraid I agree with Vera and Mathilda.”

“You think we should strip her power? Permanently?” Whoa. It was one thing for the witches to suggest something like that. They didn’t know Willow. Giles, on the other hand—.

“Kinder to kill her,” Spike said.

“Guys?” Buffy rubbed her temples. “I can’t do either of those things.”

“Whyever not?” Giles spun a dining chair backward and straddled it, irritation with a touch of arrogance. Sometimes, he moved like Spike. “Given what you know about her future, stripping her power seems a reasonable precaution.”
She stared at him for one long moment. “Holy ends and means, Giles. By that logic, I should kill you both.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You and me? We weren’t always on the same side. Look. I asked for her promise and she gave it. That means she gets to be part of this group. If I kill her or strip her power, I break my word.”

“You understand she’s not sincere?”

“Yup, but that has nothing to do with me. Unless and until she screws it up, my word stands.” She pointed at a bowl on the counter. “Now go stir the stuffing.”

A tiny smile lifted the corners of Giles’ lips and his eyes crinkled. “Right away.” He twirled the dining chair back to its rightful place and strode toward the stuffing. He hummed as he worked.

“What’s that all about?”

Spike chuckled. “You sound like a bloody hero, Slayer. Watcher’s proud of you.” He neated the triangular stack of folded place cards with careful fingers and started on the napkins. “I’m proud of you and I’m evil.” She didn’t point out the irony.

After a moment, Spike said, “Playing with fire, keeping her around.”

She hot glued the final pinecone onto the centerpiece before answering. “Yeah. She’s almost as dangerous as you.”

“Not the same thing.”

“Not this time.” She ran her fingers through his hair, toyed with the curls at his crown until they were a mass of tiny ringlets. Then she tried to smooth them back down again. Hopeless. He’d just have to stay fluffy. “Last time? You were angry and trapped, resentful and insincere—and evil. Way more evil than Willow.” She shrugged. “You still saved the world.”

“Buffy?” Giles called. “What’s in the oven?”

“Blood.”

“I see. Low heat?”

“Just keeping it warm.”

“May I...should I put the stuffing in with it?”

“Cover it with foil so it doesn’t dry out.” She squeezed Spike’s hand. “Look at it this way. People like you and Angel—and Willow, even? You count twice.”

“How do you figure?”

“Each one of you is a warrior the other side lost, right? But you’re also a warrior my side gained.”

Giles joined them at the table, a tea towel slung over his shoulder. “That’s remarkably pragmatic.”

“That’s me.”

He rewarded her with a fond, approving smile. “I believe everything is ready. The table looks
splendid."

“Thanks. Giles?” He raised his eyebrows. “Just so you know? If Willow screws up, I’m gonna kill her.”

“I see.” The smile fell to a somber line.

“That bit’s less heroic, Slayer.”

“I know, but you’re right. Stripping her power would kill her slowly.” She felt her nails digging into the palms of her clenched fists. “And I can’t.”

Giles watched her for one long moment, and then he glanced at Spike. “That’s mercy. Complements heroism nicely.”

Spike raised an eyebrow. “S what I’d do. Wouldn’t’ve agreed to the terms in the first place—not if I could help it—but if I did? Rope enough to pull her up or hang her.”

“Yes, well...you’ve buggered my understanding of vampires entirely. I begin to suspect I’ve been lied to.” The bing-bong of the doorbell interrupted them. “You two sit. I’ll get that.”

“Buffy?” Spike said, his nose twitching.

“I’m on it,” she said, hauling herself to her feet with some effort. They hadn’t been yanked into the dreamlands for a full forty-eight hours, but she wasn’t yet caught up on her sleep. Her feet hurt. “I hope I still live here. What do we do if I don’t?”

“You’re only considering this now?” Giles shook his head as they walked to the door together. “By the way,” he said as he opened the door, “I didn’t see any dessert in the kitchen.”

“That’s because it just arrived.” Sean said, listing a little under the weight of a large, soft-sided cooler. “You must be Giles. Nobody told me you were British. I like it.” He grinned. “Hey, Buffy. It smells amazing in here.” He handed the cooler to Giles, and stepped past him into the living room, no invitation necessary.

Uh huh.

That left Angel alone in the doorway, awkwardly clutching a large corked decanter filled with deep red liquid. “I didn’t know what to bring. I’ve never been to—." He shook his head and held the container out to her. “It’s mulled wine. Traditional at Samhain.”

Every word he said sounded American—Californian, specifically—except the last one. For those two syllables, and those two alone, Angel was Irish. The accents of immortals could get weird. They accreted over time, a vowel change here, an elision there. Piecemeal. Unless they stayed in one place for decades, they rarely sounded right anywhere. They all had accents specific to their personal history. She and Dawn drilled with recorded newscasts so it wouldn’t happen to them. Even so, she still occasionally lapsed into trilled Cibolan ars.

“Joyce suggested it,” Angel said in a rush, dropping it into her hands, and then he, too, walked past her into the living room.

She looked down at the wine and then up at Giles and finally over at Sean and Angel, who stood near the dining table next to Spike. Angel watched with bemusement while Spike folded the last of the napkins and tied each one with a ribbon. “Do all the vampires visit my mother when I’m not here?”
“Your mum’s a lady, Slayer. Always has a cup of cocoa for me.” He walked around the table, setting a napkin folded like a maple leaf at each place.

“She made us tea,” Sean said. “She’s a sweetheart. I gotta ask. Napkin folding?”

“Hosted many a tea party.” Spike raised a defiant eyebrow. “Know how to lay a table.”

“Joyce was even nice to me,” Angel said, “after a while.”

Sean snickered. “She made him apologize. Then she was nice. We came to talk to her about the—oh, wow.” Giles had taken the dessert cooler into the kitchen and returned with a tray full of china. Sean bounded toward him. “Angelus, look!” He lifted a blood tumbler in one hand and a plate in the other. “They’re perfect.”

“So you’re the reason my mother has those?” She tried to glare at Sean, but he looked so excited she couldn’t sustain it.

“This,” he wiggled the plate, “is Wedgwood Florentine. Turquoise. I won’t drop it. I can’t afford to replace it. This,” he wiggled the cup, “is from a line of demon china that coordinates with classic Wedgwood. My friend Hasna makes it, along with other, more avant-garde pieces. Joyce asked to see a sample of her work before she’d agree to carry it in her gallery, but that would be only one. There’s a whole set here.”

“She ordered more, which means the demon ceramics are a go.” Buffy sighed. A cream background covered in elaborate turquoise flora and brown gargoyle faces—very Sunnydale. They went well with the china. Her mother would be impressed. She took them from Giles and began setting the table. “I suppose it was just a matter of time before my mom started hobnobbing with demons. But how’s she gonna sell them to vampires? She closes too early.”

Sean ran one hand from Angel’s shoulder down his arm and around to rest in the small of his back. “You should tell her.”

Angel actually smiled—happy and open, like Angelus minus the malice—but he didn’t get to answer. A knock and Xander entered, with Willow leaning on Tara behind him. His arms were loaded down with Tupperware. “Hey ho, happy Thanksgiving! We come bearing goodly goodness. We have assorted olives.” He set a container on the table. “Spicy green beans.” Another container. “And cranberry sauce! And whoa, this is fancy.” He scanned the length of the dining room table. “Am I allowed to be here? Feel like I should sit at the kids’ table—and Great Googly Moogly, why does Spike look like a person?”

“Sp-pike looks n-nice,” Tara said.

“Very Club Monaco, right?” Sean hugged Tara. “Been busy? We missed you at the mixer.” The exhaustion in her expression was more eloquent than words. “Yeah, me too.”

So Sean knew Tara. Inexplicably, the way he knew everybody else in Sunnydale. Mixer? The memory coalesced from bits and pieces gathered from her mind and Spike’s. An offhand comment from Angel. A flyer she’d seen in the quad. The LGBT mixer last Friday. Tara missed it to help with Willow. She sighed. Sunnydale was the Anti-Cupid.

“Sean?” Willow’s voice was tentative. “Are you here with...Angel?”

“Not a plus one, but,” he shrugged, “more or less. You here with Tara?”

“What?” Willow looked back and forth between Sean and Angel for a moment, confused. Then she

“M-more or less,” Tara said.


Commiseration and chocolate, the lament of the unhappily single. Buffy knew it well. “You three should hang out.”

“I’d like that,” Willow said. “I don’t have any single friends, anymore.”

“Oh no,” Sean said. “Oz?” Willow’s shoulders slumped. She looked so small and miserable that it was hard to remember she could end the world—harder to accept that she might have to be killed. “Damn. I should have brought more brownies. Are you okay?”

“Hold on,” Buffy said. “You and Willow had a class together, right?”

“Film club. Extracurricular.”

“And Tara’s from another club?” He nodded. When did Sean sleep, exactly? “So how do you know Oz?”

He grinned. “I know everyone.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. This town is so small you don’t need all six degrees. If I don’t know someone, I know someone who knows them. Like...I’m a Dingoes fan, right? Devon’s hot.”

“Pfftt,” Willow said.

“Now, now. I know a bunch of people who’re into him. I’m not one of them, but he connects in a lot of places. Sam, the bass player, though.... He’s harder. Less connected. I like local bands, so I met up with Angelus at the Pump for an acoustic show. When I got there, he was sitting with Willow, Oz, Xander, and Anya. Now I’m two degrees from Sam.”

“And from the Lords of Hell,” Buffy said.

“What?”

“They were good,” Willow said. “That acoustic band?”

“Yeah! When they’re in town again, we’ll—.”

“I brought booze!” Anya yelled from the doorway. Her arms thrust triumphantly in the air, a bottle in each fist. “Willy bought it for me.”

“I...uh...” Willy licked his lips. “She’s older than she looks.” Buffy turned away from the general uproar when Clem came in, waggling clawed fingers in greeting. Xander was just going to have to deal.

“So you know everybody here, plus my mother.” There had to be some way to make use of that. Maybe he could run for office?

“Well, yeah, except for Giles. Why did nobody mention he was British?”
“When a felon’s not engaged in his employment
Or maturing his felonious little plans,
His capacity for innocent enjoyment
Is just as great as any honest man’s.”

~The Pirates of Penzance, Gilbert and Sullivan

“Willow!” Anya snatched the tumbler from her hands and set it back on the table with a china-threatening clink that raised Spike’s hackles. The sweater didn’t actually render him toothless, no matter that everyone was all polite smiles and how-do-you-do’s. “Stop moving the vampire dishes.”

Willow examined the place settings like they were a riddle. She turned on Clem accusingly. “Do you drink blood?”

“Not as a rule.” Clem shifted uncomfortably. “But if it’s all you’ve got....”

“Of course not! There’s plenty of food.” She took a blood tumbler from one of the place settings and replaced it with a dinner plate. Anya switched them back.

Willow glared at her. “He doesn’t drink blood.”

“He’s not sitting there.” Anya pointed at the place card.

Willow squinted at it and then shook her head. “Then it’s in the wrong place.” She picked up the tumbler again, her hand wrapped around its circumference, while Anya grabbed it by its edge, fingers inside, thumb out. A standoff. “Stop it, Anya. Sean doesn’t need—.” Spike slid to his feet to intervene but Sean stepped up.

He reached between the girls and tugged the cup downward out of their hands. “First,” he said, “that’s handmade. Joyce will be annoyed if we break it.” He cocked his head and something in his face tensed. “I will be annoyed if we break it.”

“Sorry,” Anya said immediately. She clasped her hands behind her back and edged away from him.

“I’m sorry, too,” Willow said, “but you don’t know what it’s—.”

“Second.” Sean set the cup carefully back on the table and straightened the place setting. It was a family style table—not formal for all the pretty dinnerware—but Buffy had included an appetizer plate for each vampire. There were, she’d said, spicy things. “I’m hungry.”

Willow huffed dramatically and pointed at the cup. “You don’t—.”

“I don’t eat a lot of human food.” Sean pasted on a smile as fixed as a photograph. “I’ll need that.”

“What? But you’re not...you can’t be....” Willow’s eyes pinged wildly around the room seeking a single supporting gaze but she found nothing. She settled back on Sean. “You’re a vampire?”
The words sent Anya into a double take worthy of Wile E. Coyote. If the earth had crumbled beneath her feet, she would have hung in the air for a count of three before plummeting to the ground.

“Is there a problem?” Angel loomed into the circle and laid one hand on Sean’s shoulder.

“Sean’s a vampire!” Willow said.

“Sean’s a what?” Xander stopped cold, homemade brownie halfway to his mouth.

“A vampire,” Anya said. “Don’t tell me you didn’t notice.”

“No,” Xander said. “No—I did not notice. Sean’s a vampire?” He examined his brownie. “Are these vampire brownies?”

“Uh...yeah?” Angel’s brow furrowed. Sean stroked the big vampire’s fingers until they curled around his bicep, and then pressed back into him with his eyes half closed. “And...I don’t.... What kind of question is that?”

Quite the picture that was: Angelus, stern and forbidding in his defense of Sean despite the offhand way he spoke to the children; And Sean, deferring to him, calling for his aid with nothing more than a tilt of his head. They were master and vassal, a relationship as vampiric as any he’d ever been witness to.

Or, seen through human eyes, an obvious couple. Six of one....

Buffy squirmed with a kind of appalled amusement. She slid her arm around his waist. “What’s the what?” He buried his face in her hair and inhaled. She smelled of vanilla and baked apples, cinnamon and nutmeg and, deep beneath it all, rich red slayer blood. He pressed his tongue against the soft skin at the corner of her jaw, beneath her earlobe, and felt her shiver. Her pulse raced, and the warmer scent of her arousal joined the others.

Who was he kidding? He’d be as harmless as a white wool sweater if that’s what it took to be hers.

Sean sighed. “They didn’t know I was a vampire.”

“I knew,” Anya said. “I’m not stupid.”

Xander and Willow both glared at her. “How?” Xander said.

“By looking.” Anya grimaced and wrung her hands. “Xander, now I’m worried you’re going to die because you can’t identify vampires.”

“They look like people,” Willow said. “How’s there any difference?”

It was embarrassing, is what it was. This was the team that foiled his every plan and routed all his minions? Spike raised a hand to fidget with his hair and found a riotous tuft of curls. He glowered at Buffy who shrugged and stroked his cheek. His irritation fell away.

“Guys,” she said, “this is why you need more training.”


“H-his aura.”
“I suck at auras.” Willow stomped her foot. “Buffy?”

Buffy pulled the drawer of the sideboard open and rummaged in it for a second. “Anya? Catch,” she said. Then she threw something small at Anya’s head. Fast.

Anya squawked and stumbled back a step, but caught it—just barely—in the awkward claw of her raised right hand. Still breathing hard, she held a tea light out for the gathering to see.

“Good,” Buffy said, and pitched one at Sean. When he caught it, there was no fumbling. He didn’t fall back. He didn’t hesitate. His hand just was where the candle was going to be.

“See that?” Buffy said. “How every move is more controlled—easier? They’re not all Bruce Lee, but they’re strong and really, really fast.”

“Oh,” Willow said.

Xander nodded. “Got it.”

Sean spun the tea light in his fingers. “Why?” He flicked it into the air and caught it between thumb and forefinger. Then he eased his thumb away until it balanced, just so, on his fingertip. “Before I was changed, I’d’ve made Anya’s catch look Olympic—and I might’ve hurt myself doing it.”

“Because you’re not real,” Buffy said. Spike felt rather than heard Angel’s growl. “Okay, I think it’s time to feed the vampires. Giles?” She took a few steps and poked her head into the kitchen. “You guys ready?”

Giles appeared in the doorway carrying a plattered turkey nested in cranberry stuffing and new potatoes. Willy followed with a large tray bearing an assortment of smaller covered dishes. In a matter of minutes, between the two of them, dinner was served. “Shall we?” A rosy flush lit his face and made his eyes sparkle.

Willy and Giles had taken refuge in the kitchen moments after the whole crew arrived. Now—twenty minutes in—they were both in uncommonly good spirits. “Anya brought booze,” Buffy snickered. “Willy brought more.”

“What’s everybody standing around for?” Grinning expansively, Willy spread his arms to encompass the table. “Sit!”

So they sat. From his place at the head of the table, Giles carved the turkey, while Willy passed dishes around from his spot near the other end. There were mashed potatoes and yams, beans and olives, and six kinds of cheese. Buffy spooned something green onto Spike’s plate. “Candied jalapenos,” she said. “Clem brought them.”

He hadn’t yet filled the controversial blood tumbler at his place when Sean began to laugh. “What?” Angel asked, but the boy just pointed at his cup and laughed harder. “What?”

“Taste it,” Buffy said. “Live the cliché.” With beetle-browed concentration, Angel filled his cup. He lifted it to his face and sniffed before taking a small and cautious sip.

“That’s not bad.” He licked his lips. “What is it?”

“Turkey,” Sean wheezed, “and cranberry. A solid third of that is cranberry juice. God, Buffy.”

“Oh.” Angel didn’t seem to get the joke. He drank his turkey and cranberry anyway. Spike filled his own cup and tasted it. It was pretty good, but he wasn’t sure he got it, either.
Sean shook his head. “They have no idea. Did you do that just for me?” Buffy grinned and they high fived across the table.

“Is anybody else weirded out by this?” Xander’s voice was a little too high, his eyes a little too wide. “Cause there are three vampires, here—that I know about. Are there more?” He stared pointedly at Willy, who popped a large olive into his mouth and chewed happily.

“Xander,” Giles said, “it’s part of their strategy. They’re reconstituting the Order of Aurelius and bringing it into alliance with Buffy. They need vampire allies to eliminate rivals and occupy territory. I don’t have numbers—.”

“Seventy-three.” Angel nodded at Sean. “Unless—.”

“Four new ones.” Sean refilled his tumbler and drank deeply. His hands shook. Buffy saw it, too. When was the last time the boy ate something?

“Seventy-seven,” Angel said, “not including us.”

“Are they all like you guys?” Like Xander, Willow was nervous, but she held it together better. As calculating as Angelus and smarter. If she turned, she’d run Sunnydale in a matter of weeks. He was gripped by an impulse to follow her home and snap her neck. Without looking at him, Buffy shook her head.

“They’re mostly like me,” Sean said, “instead of Angelus and Spike. Not fighters; just vampires.”

“We’ll train them. They’ll be fine.” Sean shot Buffy a look of abject misery and refilled his cup. “So will you,” she said.

“’Cause I’m not real?”

“Angel?” Buffy set a stake on the table next to her plate just as the rumble began again. It subsided. “Your human body is gone—consumed during your turning. You are—.”

“Dust,” Willow said.

“Bingo,” Buffy said. “You’ve seen a vampire get dusted?” Sean nodded slowly. “That’s the only matter left. Everything else is magic.”

“That’s lame,” Sean said. “If I’m just magic, why couldn’t I be taller?”

Which was a good question, now he thought about it. Buffy poked him in the ribs, and then, for just an instant, he leaned against the cool stone wall of a family crypt in Restfield, while Buffy, on tiptoes, ground her warmth against him at exactly the right height. He gasped. “You could.”

“What?” Angel narrowed his eyes and his nostrils flared.


“So I could control it?” Sean licked his lips. “Just...believe...and I’d look different?”

“Theoretically. In practice, it’s usually vampires who trained magically before they were turned who can do it.”

“Focused will,” Tara said quietly, and Buffy nodded.

“Dracula,” Spike said.
“Best example. He’s an actual shapeshifter. He can get fangs without going into demon face, turn into a wolf, turn to smoke. He can dust and re-form.” She rolled her eyes. “Pain in my ass.”

“The shadow lurker thing!” Sean bounced in his seat. “Angelus—the way you sort of smudge into the darkness.”

Angel nodded. “What’s The Matrix?”

There was a collective wince from everyone at the table, and Sean covered his face with his hands. “I’ll find a copy—or maybe it’s still playing somewhere. Angelus, it came out in March,” he whimpered, “of this year.”

Giles leaned toward Spike. “It’s refreshing to feel so young and...plugged in. By contrast, if nothing else.”

Spike raised his glass. “I’ll drink to that.”

“You two...” Xander wrinkled his nose. “Why are you so friendly all of a sudden?”

Buffy shook her head. “It’s not sudden, Xander. They—.”

“‘When a felon’s not engaged in his employment,’” Giles said. “‘Tarantara,’” he said. “Did you see that? First run?”

“In London—not New York.” April eighteen eighty, right before he was turned. It had been glorious. One last bright moment. His mother’s final outing.

“What?” Was Willow posed the question, but all the children stared.

“I’ll see your ‘what’ and raise you a ‘huh,’” Xander said.

Angel looked like he’d swallowed a bug. “The Pirates of Penzance,” he growled. He hauled himself to his feet and stalked into the kitchen.

Sean let his eyes linger on Angel’s back until he was out of sight. Then he turned to Tara. “Focused will. Could you teach me?”

“To be taller?” Willow’s lips bent into a doubtful frown.

“To be useful,” Sean said. She dropped her eyes. “I’m not a fighter—I’m just not. I mean, the Master of Ceremonies bit is cool, but it only matters when we’re all in one place. So could you?”

“S-sure.” Tara gave him a watery smile.

“To be taller?” Willow’s lips bent into a doubtful frown.

“To be useful,” Sean said. She dropped her eyes. “I’m not a fighter—I’m just not. I mean, the Master of Ceremonies bit is cool, but it only matters when we’re all in one place. So could you?”

“S-sure.” Tara gave him a watery smile.

“Wait.” Xander held a hand up. “Tell me again why we’re training vampires?”

“Oh, for the love of—there’s a war, Xander,” Anya said. “They’re fighting a war.”

“Against who?”

“The other vampires.” She punctuated each word with a shake of her fork. “All of them.”
From the doorway to the kitchen, swirling a glass of amber liquid in his hand, Angel said, “We’ve taken California, the southern tip of Nevada, and western Oregon, north to Salem.”

“Angel and his people lead the charge.” Buffy folded her napkin and squared up her shoulders. In an instant, the California co-ed was gone, replaced by the relentless force of The Slayer. Even her voice changed. “Every time he hits someplace new, we get an onslaught of attackers. Spike and I deal with the cleanup, keep track of the Hellmouth, and make sure the last of the Initiative doesn’t explode. Sunnydale is more dangerous right now than it’s ever been.”

“Oh—that’s why you made us—oh.” The color drained from Willow’s face. She looked like she might be sick.

“Slayer wants you alive, Red. Go to school.” Spike refilled his turkey and cranberry and sipped it, licking his lips. Strong. Tart. Not bad at all.

Buffy’s composure fissured briefly. She giggled. “Anya?”

“Vampires like cranberries.” Anya pulled a notepad and pen from the bag slung over the back of her chair and jotted something down. “I have to say, Buffy—starting a war in the middle of wedding preparations is extremely poor planning.”

“Oh—only way to have a unified Order in time.”

“So there are...like...eighty vampires?” Willow said. “On our side?”

Sean nodded. “We’re on Buffy’s side. Defectors, but not all the way over. The Old Ones weren’t right, but humanity’s not, either.”

Everyone stared at Sean. Half of them held their breath. “Go on,” Buffy said.

“A pop quiz? At Thanksgiving?”

“Finish it, lad.” Spike’s voice rumbled just a little at its lower edge.

“Fine—fine.” He settled back into his chair. “So the demons were here, first, right? For hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of years. No way to know. But they’re not from here. They’re from a whole bunch of different worlds. This was their vacation timeshare until humanity arose.”

“The animals,” Willow said.

“For a long time, yeah, but then they weren’t. And they started fighting back. In the beginning, demons could come into this reality in their true forms.”

“Like the Mayor,” Anya said. “Now that requires a Rite of Ascension.”

“Yeah. Humanity closed the world, so everybody has to obey physical laws. Demons who come here get reshaped to native forms. That’s why some of them can interbreed with humans—or other animals. Depending. But that pissed the demons off. In retaliation, they made vampires. Like biological warfare? We were supposed to exterminate humanity from the inside. In retaliation for that, humanity made The Slayer. So vampires and slayers have been fighting this war forever.

“But it’s not our war.

“The demons want to end humanity. If they do, vampires lose. Even if we don’t feed on you, that’s how we make more of us. And humans want to end vampires. What odds do you give The Slayer if
the Council doesn’t need her anymore?” Sean shook his head. “We’ve called a truce. Screw both sides and their ancient fucking war. I like this world.”

He sighed. “And Xander? They’re vegan.”

Xander startled at the sound of his name. “Did I miss something?”

“I had the recipe before I was turned. The brownies are vegan.”
The table had been cleared and the dinner dishes set to soak in warm, soapy water. Buffy and Spike had wiped down all the surfaces in the dining room the way they did, like it was some kind of combat training drill, and gone into the living room to relax. Spike’s narrow body tucked into the corner of the couch, one leg draped limply over the couch arm, while Buffy curled like a kitten in his lap. They looked drowsy and comfortable and extremely happy. Angel wanted to kill something.

Someone laid a hand on his shoulder and he wrenched his eyes away from the couple. “What?” he snarled. Rupert Giles scuttled backward. “Giles. I’m sorry. I’m just....”

“Well, I was going to ask how you were handling all this, but I guess I have my answer.” Despite the jumpiness, he could sense no fear from the man at all. He looked sympathetic.

“You’ve been spending too much time around Spike,” Angel said. It bothered him, this lack of fear. They should be afraid. Fear was healthy in Sunnydale. It was necessary. The watcher ought to know that.

“Indeed,” Giles said. “Other demons, too.” He gestured at the pink skinned Clement. “Quite the menagerie about, lately. It’s been an education.”

Angel grunted noncommittally. Since the problem with his soul, he never knew what to say to Giles. How do you apologize for killing someone’s lover and leaving her corpse in his bed? What if only half of you is sorry? His eyes drifted back to Buffy and Spike, and he found Spike looking up at him. “Sire,” Spike whispered, too quietly for human ears. “Angelus?” He kept doing that—kept calling him by his other name, invoking family ties severed decades ago. It was confusing. Angel stared at him. He couldn’t possibly mean what it looked like he meant.

Buffy tilted her face up out of the crook of Spike’s neck and flashed him a ghost of a smile before letting her eyes drift closed again. “Sire?” Spike said again, and patted the cushion beside him. That’s exactly what he meant. Well, what the hell. He made his way across the room and sat down next to them.

Spike leaned into him, and it was like no time had passed at all. He felt small and new, just exactly like the fledgling he had been more than a century ago, and he smelled like family. Buffy smelled like family, too, but that was recent—indirect, less visceral. It didn’t make his blood sing. Angel put his fingers into Spike’s curls and tugged his head down onto his shoulder. Spike was still his, no matter what Buffy might say: his blood, his boy, his own. The mating bond couldn’t change that.

He patted Buffy’s shoulder, pulled the pair of them into his chest and held them there. All the others were watching from across the room, whispering amongst themselves like they thought they were being discreet. Sean pushed through them and skittered up to the edge of the couch. He stood there, vibrating, eyes wide, hoping to be noticed. He was blood, too. Angel lifted his arm up and waited. Sean sprawled across his lap and leaned his head against Buffy’s knees. Spike reached out to ruffle the boy’s hair, and Angel snugged him in close with the other two.

Sean immediately burrowed in, switched to his demon face, and started to purr. And didn’t that beat everything? He didn’t change faces when he fed, didn’t change when he was angry, but wrap him in the arms of his kin, safe, happy, and full, and that’s what brought the demon out? When Spike was a fledgling, he’d been...no, not even Spike had been that weird. He switched faces, too, and nuzzled the kid. Weird or not, they were his. He’d been away for so long, and now he was back. His demon rumbled its approval. It wasn’t perfect happiness, but it was good.
“Missed this,” he said, only loud enough for his family to hear him.

“Shouldn’t’ve cut an’ run, then, you wanker,” Spike lisped through fangs, fixing him with a resentful, yellow-eyed glare. He pushed his shoulder harder against Angel’s chest, demanding as a fledgling. “Should’ve stayed with us.”

Angel shook his head. That was a fantasy. It didn’t even make sense. “I couldn’t stay. I had the soul. Darla said...”

“Fuck Darla,” Spike said, bumping his head softly into Angel’s jaw. He turned his head and nicked Spike’s ear with his fang, just deep enough to bring blood to the surface, just deep enough to taste him. He was relieved when Buffy didn’t react. “Always hated that bitch. You should have taken us with you.”

“But...” He’d never wanted to leave them. They were his, god damn it, for good or ill. He made them. He’d wanted to take them and run away, even at the time, with the wound of the soul still fresh and gaping, but he didn’t want them to be trapped between worlds the way he was. He couldn’t ask them to stop hunting, couldn’t watch them if they didn’t. He couldn’t even bring himself to tell them what had happened. He never wanted them to see their sire weak. It was shameful.

“You were with us four years after, Angelus. Whole time, we knew somethin’ was wrong, even if we didn’t know what. Should’ve asked us to go.”

“I couldn’t...you wouldn’t have....” He took a shaky breath. Would they have gone with him, if he’d asked? He was almost afraid to know, now. It would have changed everything. “Vampires need...we can’t...”

Spike, still wearing his demon face, glanced down at Buffy. He smoothed a stray strand of golden blond hair out of her eyes, brushed his lips across her forehead. “Amazin’ what we can, for somethin’ we want enough.” Angel couldn’t think of anything to say.

Over in the dining room, the others had clustered up, still chattering in that irritating undertone. “I didn’t know vampires were so...snuggly.” Willow’s whisper bubbled up out of the general buzz. “It’s kind of cute.”

“Oh, they can be very affectionate in their family groups,” Anya said. She didn’t whisper. Good. At least one of them wasn’t rude. “But you’re not family. You’re dinner. I wouldn’t get too close.”

“Yeah,” Willy nodded. “You got your basic pride-of-lions scenario going. Best to keep your distance.”

“Don’t pet the big kitties,” Willow said. “Got it.”

“Okay, so I get that those are predators—with the fangs and the claws and the grrr argh—and that they curl up together on chilly nights—” Xander started.

“They nest,” Giles said, glaring disapprovingly at the boy. “Vampires nest.”

“They nest,” Xander said. “Fine. But how is that a family? More importantly, how is Buffy part of that family?” Spike, confrontational little brat that he was, chose to illustrate his relationship to Buffy by burying his fangs in the claim marks on her neck. Xander reacted predictably. “Yeeeaugh!” He spun around to face Giles. “Stop him! He’s hurting her!” Angel rolled his eyes.

“You know,” he said, “we can hear you.” Xander stormed over to the couch.
“Well, then, why aren’t you stopping...this?” He pointed accusingly at Buffy and Spike. “‘Cause, man, this is wrong, and you’re not doin’ jack!”

Angel stared him down in demon face, and Xander took a step back. He didn’t often agree with Spike’s shock tactics, but he’d make an exception this time. This point had to be made and Xander pissed him off. “Why would I stop it? Why should I?”

“He’s hurting her, Deadboy!”

Giles made his way into the room. He put a firm hand on the young man’s shoulder, trying to lead him back to the group. “He’s not hurting her, Xander. Leave them be.”

Xander was having none of it. He threw Giles’ hand off his shoulder and snarled, “He’s feeding on her!”

Angel examined Spike and Buffy carefully. Spike’s fangs pierced her skin but he wasn’t swallowing. He was purring and pushing his tongue against the mark. Buffy wasn’t struggling. She was, in fact, making contented little humming noises in the back of her throat and clenching her fist in Spike’s sweater. It was sweet, in a publicly inappropriate way, but it made his insides ache. Buffy was fine—more than fine. He was the one in pain, the one who had to watch the woman he loved move on to someone else, and this joker had the nerve to be worried about Buffy? Damn Xander Harris for making him defend this.

“Don’t be stupid. Does she look like she’s hurt?”

Xander opened his mouth to argue, but Sean raised his head and smiled, locking eyes with the angry young man for one long moment. “Xander,” he said, his tone so smooth and reasonable that Angel had to fight the urge to obey, “sit down and shut up.” Xander immediately dropped cross legged onto the floor in front of the couch and stopped talking. Everyone in the living room, Angel included, turned to stare at Sean. “Much better.”
Xander hunched forward with his elbows braced against his knees, apparently unaware that anything out of the ordinary had occurred. The other party guests—equally oblivious—wound their chittering way from the hallway into the living room. Anya came first. She appraised the staring vampires with pursed lips before sprawling on the floor next to Xander.

Clem, Tara, and Willow dragged chairs from the family room table into a rough semi-circle around the couch, while Willy carried a tray with coffee, cream, and sugar on it. “It’s not decaf. Figured this crowd stayed up late.” The bartender had been something of a surprise. Giles already knew him to be shrewd, cagey, and pragmatic. Outside the setting of his demon bar, though, he was...pleasant.

“Might I be able to ask all of you a few questions?” Sean’s demonstration left him hesitant to broach the subject. His time under Drusilla’s power left scars that remained long after Angelus’ marks faded away. More than a year on, he still had nightmares. Giles shuddered. Why hadn’t anyone seen fit to mention that Sean had thrall?

“Now’s as good a time as any, Watcher. Pull up a chair,” Spike said, leashing his demon and tugging Buffy upright on his lap. He nodded at Willy and took a cup of black coffee. “Sean?”

The fledgling yawned and slid back into his human face. “Do I have to sit up?”

“You gonna stay awake?” Spike asked. The words were affectionate, but they brooked no argument. Spike was the voice of authority. He sounded like somebody’s father. When Sean hesitated, Spike’s brows shot together and he made a sound—a narrow, controlled exhalation of air that ended in an unvoiced rattle. Sean winced.


“Okey dokey,” Xander said, and moved to the chair. Anya sat happily in his lap. Nobody who noticed said a word.

On the surface, it was an ordinary Thanksgiving scene, repeated in millions of homes across the country. Everyone was seated in the living room in a companionable, post-dinner stupor. Willy perched on the arm of the couch, next to Sean, who at least pretended to alertness, while Clem, Willow, and Tara sat in dining chairs. Xander was conspicuously quiet. Giles didn’t know whether to panic or cheer.

“So,” he said, “tell us about yourself, Sean.”

Sean rubbed his eyes. Much like Buffy—and Spike, this evening—he looked harmless. He was a young man of that sensitive, expressive variety so often found in California. It was easy to picture him stretched out on a sandy beach, sipping a wine cooler, with that dreadful zinc oxide slathered on his nose. “I’ve done this a lot, lately,” he said, flashing a self-conscious smile. “I’m going to write a ‘Hi, I’m Sean, the vegetarian vampire!’ essay. Make a bunch of photocopies. Refuse to talk to anyone who hasn’t initialed the bottom of each page.”

“Vegetarian...vampire?” Willow asked, her eyes very round. “How does that work?”

“Willow,” Sean said, “maybe a little less literal? I just mean I don’t hunt.”

The last three words were spoken with emphasis. Sean’s solemn gray eyes swept the room, resting
on each of them briefly, reassuringly. Giles didn’t know what to make of it. The boy handled this situation with more grace than most people would.

People. His categories strained to breaking.

He had no trouble thinking of the souled Angel as a person. Lately, the unsouled Spike had become a great deal more person-like. Now Sean, unsouled and wielding a disconcerting amount of power, edged into personhood. It helped, of course, that he’d only done what Giles himself might have—oh, how he’d fantasized about making Xander Harris just shut the hell up—had he the means. He hadn’t the wherewithal to think about Clem. “That’s quite...how did that come to be?”

“Not hunting? Well, at first, I couldn’t figure out how. I mean, I’m stronger and faster than I used to be, but that bar’s set pretty low, right? Not to mention that I was all alone, and changing really messes with your head. It’s scary. But time passed and I figured stuff out. I could probably hunt now, if I wanted to, but I’m used to my life the way it is. Plus, this way Buffy doesn’t stake me.”

“That is remarkable,” Giles said.

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised,” Anya said. “It’s pretty common.” Willy nodded. He really must spend some time talking with both of them. The former demon had more experience with the supernatural world than everyone else in the room combined, even if you included the vampires and this new, much older, Buffy. Because she ran roughshod over social cues, though, it was easy to mistake her for the teenager she appeared to be. The bartender had fewer years in the game, but his contact was daily and intensive. Both were resources Giles intended to exploit.

“I beg your pardon?” Giles said, smiling at Anya, who smiled back. She was truly lovely. How did Xander merit these beautiful, blunt girls?

“I know, right?” Sean said. “Lots of us. We lay low. Avoid graveyards, dark alleys, burned out factories—all the b-movie clichés. You know, try to stay off Buffy’s radar.”

Sean ducked, laughing, as Spike whacked him in the head with a throw pillow. Despite the fact that each held a full cup of coffee in his hands, not a drop was spilled.

“You mean the bite houses?” Buffy asked, snatching the pillow and whacking Spike with it. “That’s where the pretty girls who don’t hunt end up. Some of the pretty boys, too.” When Sean reached up over Angel’s head to steal the pillow, nearly upsetting Angel’s coffee, Angel took the pillow and stuffed it behind his back. “Spoil sport,” Buffy said. Willy moved to another chair, near Giles.

“And vampires have...pillow fights?” Willow said.

“Yeah, right up until the crotchety old guy hides the pillow.” Sean poked Angel in the ribs and took hold of his hand when he poked back. Interestingly, Angel didn’t pull away. “And yeah, Buffy. The bite houses, among other places.”

“I wasn’t aware that was happening here,” Giles said.

“Least three of ‘em,” Spike said. “That’s Sunnydale, for you.”

“Bite houses?” Willow said.

“Vampire brothels, Will,” Buffy said. “People pay to be bitten because,” she looked directly at Xander, “if the vampire isn’t trying to hurt you, it feels really good. Anyway, most of the vampires working there don’t hunt for one reason or another. And yeah, they’re off my radar. I have enough to do without supervising Sunnydale’s kinky sex scene.”
“There’s also a guy who works in the hospital morgue,” Sean said. “Drains the recently dead. You met him, Buffy. Mark, from my movie party? Cute, but straight, damn it.” Sean held Angel’s hand between his and stroked the back of it absently. “So. I don’t hunt. Never have. Not gonna. Next question?”

“Have you always been a vampire?” Willow asked the question all in a rush, her face pinched with worry. Giles blinked at her, dumbfounded. Spike raised a single eyebrow.

“Um...no.” Sean snickered. “Kinda the way it works.”

“Twerp,” Buffy said, smacking the boy in the back of the head. She didn’t have a pillow so she had to make do with the flat of her hand, apparently. The four of them, the vampires and his slayer, were relentlessly, blithely violent, like teenaged boys, except that they left broken skin and bruises. They were hitting hard. “Quit messing with her.”

“Ow!” Sean said, rubbing his head and grinning. He didn’t sound particularly upset. “Why is everybody always hitting me?” Angel yanked the pillow out from behind his back and hit Sean with it.

“Saw that one comin’,” Spike said, ducking when Angel swung the pillow at his head. “That one, too. He was turned in ninety-seven, Red. Before you met him. Sire’s Luke.” Angel caught him on the back swing, hit him hard enough to knock him off the couch. “Missed that one,” Spike said from the floor. He rubbed his jaw, glaring at Angel, who leered back in a manner uncomfortably reminiscent of Angelus. “Not gonna miss again.” Spike’s coffee sat undisturbed on the floor next to the couch. Giles had no idea how it got there.


“So, how are you all related?” Anya asked. “Who killed who?” Willy choked on his drink. “Oh, please,” she said to the circle of shocked faces. “Everyone was thinking it.”

That broke Spike, who collapsed on the floor in spluttering laughter, pulling a giggling Buffy down on top of him. “Oh, Xander,” Buffy said, wiping the tears out of her eyes, “you’ve gotta keep her. She’s perfect.” She caught her breath and continued, “Here’s the family tree. Heinrich Nest—The Master—was Luke and Darla’s sire. Luke was Sean’s sire. Darla was Angel’s sire, and Angel is Spike’s sire.”

“I didn’t kill him,” Angel said to the room at large. Buffy and Spike started laughing again. Giles didn’t understand what they found so humorous. None of this seemed especially funny to him—nor, apparently, to Angel, who now wore a panicked expression on his usually impassive face. Just the mention of killing someone was enough to rouse his soul? “I didn’t turn him.”

“Yeah, Angel. I’ll get there. Hold your horses. Two ways to be someone’s sire. One, you turn them. Two, you hang out by their body until they rise so you’re the first thing they see.”

“Doesn’t have to be the first thing,” Angel said. “They just have to be new enough to be...pliable.”

“Hours? Days? Weeks?”

“Days.”

“Huh. Bigger window than I thought. Good to know. See, vampires imprint,” Buffy licked her lips,
“like little duckies.”

This earned her dirty looks from all three vampires, but she didn’t seem bothered. “Usually, it’s the same sire twice, but it doesn’t have to be. Spike comes from one of those rare two-parent families. Drusilla may have turned him, but Angel—.” Buffy sobered and met Angel’s eyes. “Angel trained him.” The big vampire looked away first.

“Well, that’s disappointing,” Anya said, “and boring. With three of you, you’d think at least one of you would have killed another one. Next you’ll probably tell me you’ve never had sex with each other.”

“So...Angel,” Willow said, a little too loudly, “that makes you...like...Spike’s father? And Sean’s your cousin?”

“Wouldn’t go down that road if I were you, pet,” Spike said. “Doesn’t lead anywhere good.”

Angel grimaced. “You can’t think of it like that.”

“Huh?” Willow said. “But your sires have the same sire, like cousins, and you’re Spike’s sire, right?”

The girl wasn’t getting it. Dear lord, he wished she’d stop talking before the vampires explained. Or Anya.

“Uh, Willow?” Buffy said carefully. “Think about this. Drusilla sired Spike. She’s not his mother—not like... They were a...uh...together for over a hundred years. Try to force human shapes on vampire families and you get an Oedipal nightmare.” Giles breathed a sigh of relief. That was as G-rated an explanation as he could hope for.


“Parent-child analogy fails, big-time. Darla and Angel were a couple,” Buffy said, “and Luke and Sean....”

“That wasn’t platonic, either,” Sean finished for her. There was grief in his voice. Could he actually regret the loss of the creature that killed him? Did he miss the sire he’d never known? Sean’s fingers twined with Angel’s and Angel squeezed his hand. He glanced around the room, frowning. “You have something you want to say, Xander, you go right ahead.”

“You’re gay?” Xander choked. Giles rubbed his temples. That’s what Xander took away from this conversation?

“Yeah. Me and nobody else in this whole stupid town. How’s there a pocket of nineteen-fifty-three in Southern California?” Sean shook his head. “And UC Sunnydale was my second choice. First choice was in Cleveland, and I just couldn’t.”

“Oh,” Giles said. He was hesitant to ask the next logical question, but he had to know. Sean was young. He was turned a few short years ago. How much had changed for him? “Forgive me. I realize this is...personal...but is that something that predates your...transformation?”

“Well, yeah,” Sean said. “From way before. Like, middle school. You know, with the stickers and buttons and support groups. I have a lot of stuff like that. I’d love to show you, sometime.” He aimed an impish grin directly at Giles.

“You remain attached to your human life? Really?” Giles found himself leaning forward breathlessly, falling into Sean’s large, gray eyes. His smile was warm and reassuring. It made him
feel safe. There was some part of him that knew what he was doing was dangerous, but he dismissed it. There was absolutely, positively no way Sean would ever hurt him.

“Really. Gotta call my grandma at least once a week or she worries.” Sean’s smile broadened until there were dimples in his cheeks, and Giles felt a wave of arousal. He was a beautiful young man, almost too pretty. Almost feminine—like Ethan had been when he was very young. He flushed. Where had that come from? He hadn’t had more than a passing thought of Ethan in months. “Oops. I think my ride is getting antsy,” Sean said, nodding at the Clement who glanced pointedly up at the clock. “Places to be, people to see, and Kolku waits for no straggler. Do you have any more questions, or are you done for the night?”

“No, no. I think I’m done,” he said. He had the feeling he was forgetting something, but he couldn’t remember what it was. “Thank you.”

Sean stood and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. He flipped it open and removed a business card, which he tucked into the palm of Giles’ hand. “You’re welcome. If you think of anything, please call me—or drop by. There’s always beer in the fridge. Info’s on the back.” Then he and the Clement said their goodbyes and left.
Once Sean was out the door, it was like Xander’s strings snapped. His shoulders slumped, and his eyes started to drift closed. When he spoke, his words were slurred. Finally, he yawned hugely and said, “I think the food coma’s setting in. This train is leaving the station. You guys ready to go?” before saying his sleepy goodbyes and ushering the girls out the door, apparently unaware of his part in the evening’s controversy. He even shook Spike’s hand as he left.

The moment they were out of hearing range, Spike turned on Giles and snarled, “Are you out of your bleedin’ mind?”

“Out of my mind?” Giles waved one hand in the air indignantly. “My mind was fine until your...your vampire thralled me!”

He narrowed his eyes at the man. “‘S what you get, Watcher. You bloody well know better. He does the whole ‘look into my eyes’ routine, like soddin’ Mesmer, an’ you do? After he dropped Xander? Deserved it.” He folded his arms across his chest, ceding no ground.

“Why in god’s name didn’t you tell me he had a thrall?” Giles snapped back, facing Spike down. His fists were clenched at his sides. Livid patches absent of color spattered his cheeks and forehead. His lips were pinched sallow. For all his tweedy gentility, this man was a warrior. Should it come down to a physical confrontation between the two of them, Spike was only certain he could kill him. Incapacitating him might be harder. Right now, Giles looked like he might throw a punch, and then Buffy would yell at him for fighting with her watcher. Bollocks. “A very powerful thrall, I might add.”

“Well, I would have, ‘cept I’d never seen him do that, before.” Spike shook his head. “Din’t know he could.” He raised his eyebrows at Buffy.

“Me, neither,” she said. “Never once, the whole time we’ve known him. Blew me away.”

“Took Xander down a peg, though,” Spike mused, settling into a reluctant grin. “Was almost worth the shock.”

“Yes, well,” Giles said. “That was good, wasn’t it?”

“None of you knew?” Willy said, pouring a second round of coffee for everyone. It was rich and dark, freshly ground from beans Willy brought to the gathering with him. It smelled heavenly. “Thought for sure you knew. Keeps him alive.”

“Uh,” Angel said, not meeting anybody’s eyes. “I...uh...I think...I think I knew.”

“Angel,” Buffy said, “this guilt thing you do—it’s pointless unless you take steps to make sure it doesn’t keep happening. You do something wrong; you feel guilty; you apologize; then you don’t do it again. That last one is a biggie.”

“Don’t you think you might’ve mentioned....” Giles trailed off at the look on Angel’s face. “You didn’t know. You think you should have known.”

Buffy rolled her eyes. “And getting broody over things that aren’t actually your fault? Never helpful.”

“I should have known,” Angel said. “I knew he was doing something.”
“So what was it?” Willy asked. “Did he make you stop hitting him, give him your phone number, or bring him free drinks? Gotta be one of those. It’s all he ever does.”

Giles nodded his thanks at the bartender, inhaling the steam from the coffee with pleasure. “He got you, too?”

“A couple of times—a few free beers. I figured out how to duck pretty quick. Besides, I’m not his type.” He smirked, looking back and forth between Giles and Angel. “You guys are. What did he do?”

“He made me feel safe,” Giles said. “Like nothing was or could ever be wrong in the world.”

“That’s...uh, yeah,” Angel cleared his throat. He had that shifty, guilty look on his face, again. “That’s what he does to me.”

“Does?” Spike said. “Not did?”

Angel nodded. “Every time I go over...he...it’s like he...pacifies the demon. I’ve been...better, lately.”

That was true enough. The Los Angeles trip had been the worst of it. Following the news about Buffy, and then the gem, Angel had been on edge, snapping and snarling at the slightest provocation. Spike hadn’t been sure he’d be able to get away from L.A. without killing him. Funny that he hadn’t noticed the improvement in his sire’s mood coincided with his introduction to Sean. There was only one thing that made him nervous. “Makes you right happy, does he?”

“Dear lord,” Giles said, pulling his glasses off and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Is that a risk?”

“No!” Angel said. Spike raised an eyebrow. He did not want a repeat of the antics of crazy Angelus from a couple of years back. Sire or no, he would stake Angel if it happened again. “No...that is...I don’t think so. I would have said something if...if there was a risk....” Angel glared around the room, hostility falling from him in waves. “It doesn’t feel like that!”

“Well, what does it feel like?” Buffy laid a hand on Angel’s arm in a fair approximation of the way Sean did, which seemed to work. Settled him right down. Old Pavlov had a useful notion or two.

“Safe,” Angel said, and then, after he considered the question for a minute, “like the worst is over and everything is going to be okay. Not happy, alright? Just...not anything else, either. Even.”

Buffy was nodding. He felt trembling relief from her, like she’d dodged a bullet. “So...he’s like...mystic Lamictal?” Spike was pleased they weren’t planning to hunt Sean down and dust him, because he wasn’t inclined to let that occur, but that last bit lost him completely.

“Uh...what...?” Angel said.

Buffy made impatient little circles in the air with her fingers. “Sean. He’s like...a mood leveler? Keeps you balanced. Not so many highs and lows.” Angel nodded slowly.

Spike had a hard time getting too worked up about Angel. Seemed Sean was doing much the same thing for Angel that Buffy did for him, but with different methods. Buffy knew an endless number of tricks to short-circuit all those demony behaviors human folk found so upsetting: temper tantrums, dominance displays, restlessness, bloodlust, and plain old, ordinary violence. She could knock him into purring submission without hardly trying.

“Thing is,” Angel said, “I’m not sure he’s doing it deliberately.”
Now that made sense. “He is really young,” Buffy said.

“You’re saying that power is unformed?” Giles said. He didn’t look comfortable with the thought. “He’ll get better at it?”

“Maybe not stronger,” Angel said, “but he’ll be able to do it when he decides to. Right now, I think he’s just running on...want...” Spike snickered, and Angel glared at him. “You know what I mean.”

“Don’t think I’m wrong,” Spike said.

“He’s not after me,” Angel said, with a mix of irritation and patience Spike hadn’t heard for a very long time. “He wants you.”

Spike blinked. Were they both talking about Sean? Sean, who couldn’t keep his eyes—or his hands, if he got the chance—off Angel? Sean, who routinely described Angel’s naked body in glowing and unnecessarily specific terms? That Sean? “He swore fealty,” Angel said. “Willingly. Saw it. You didn’t demand...he just...” Oh. He hadn’t forgotten, but Sean had been so damaged at the time that he’d never held him to it, had never considered the consequences.

“He swore what?” He thought it was Giles who said that, but he wasn’t sure. Fealty. Willing fealty. He was caught on the words and all their implications.

“Allegiance, Giles,” Buffy said. “That means...Sean is bloodbound to Spike. He...belongs...to him, in a way. It’s...a vampire thing. Hard to explain.”

“In my notes,” Spike said distantly. “I need...” He felt dizzy. “I need to take a walk.”
“I need to take a walk,” Spike said, and then he was up and out the door before she could speak a word to stop him. She felt dizzy—tight in the chest, like she couldn’t get enough air. The room spun.

Angel’s big, cool fingers gripped her shoulder while she fished blindly in her purse, found the soft suede of her journal, and drew it out. It fell open to a page with the words “I love you” drawn in the kind of chubby bubble letters everyone learned to make in grade school. She focused on it and opened her mind. It wasn’t enough, not nearly, but until she figured out how to send words, it would have to do. Spike's thoughts were too jumbled to decode.

Everyone else watched the front door close. “What just happened?” Willy asked, turning worried eyes on the group.

“He’s scared.” Angel’s nostrils flared. Vampires. Always smelling people. “Why’s he scared?”

“It’s...hard to tell,” Buffy said, closing her eyes, “but I think it’s about Sean.”

“I do wish I had Spike’s notes with me,” Giles said. “Is it about that...bond?”

“Fealty,” Angel said. His subsonic growl shook the air around him. She pulled away, glaring. Was she going to have to smack him? “It’s exactly what it sounds like.” Willy buffed his upper arms with his palms, like he was cold.

“Except that we’re talking about vampires,” she sighed, “and everything they do is way more permanent and, like, enforced—magically. So humans get married by swearing a solemn oath ‘Til death us do part.’ Vampires take the ‘death us do part’ part one step further. When one of them dies, it shatters a bond so deep the other one dies, too. Right?”

Giles’ expression was pained, but he nodded. “I have come to understand that my continuing horror and dismay serve no purpose. Yes.”

“Glad you got that figured out.” Buffy rolled her eyes. “As I was saying—vampires like to be sure. Where humans would swear an oath of allegiance to a king, vampires give themselves over, body and soul, in a magically binding blood rite.”

“I see. So this spontaneous declaration of loyalty,” Giles said, “this is a common occurrence?”

“No,” Angel said. “I’ve never seen it happen before, never, uh, voluntarily.” Buffy shuddered. Of course Angelus would only have seen submission. Although the rites were identical, the intent was completely different. Submission was forced. A new master would come in and slaughter almost everyone. Those few remaining chose between submission and death. Fealty was an expression of devotion.

“This stuff is rare, Giles. Old. It’s vampire court stuff—almost never done, anymore.”

“Like mating claims?”

“Like every fangy ritual that ever oh ever there was. Slayers were around for eons without making a dent in the great vampire families. So were stakes and holy water, sunlight and fire. Angry mobs didn’t make any difference, either, ‘cause they never knew how to kill the bloodsuckers. The thing that brought about the beginning of the end of the clans? The printing press.” Buffy grinned
maliciously at Angel. “Go, go Gutenberg! Yay, Gutenberg!”

“Hey Buffy,” Willy said, smiling so hard his dark eyes were barely visible between the creases. It was a good look for him. “Show me your pompoms?”

“Sure, Will—they’re upstairs in my closet with the rest of my cheerleading stuff. You wanna borrow them?” She sent Spike a mental picture of Willy wearing her cheerleading uniform and holding pompoms, and felt him relax just a little.

“Seriously?” Willy said. He licked his lips. “You were a cheerleader?”

Giles cleared his throat. “So the decline of the use of ritual coincided with the decline of the vampire clans?”

“Uh huh,” Buffy said. She’d missed Giles’ stuffy, perfectly British understatement, and his profound desire to avoid any and all mention of sex. “You see what we have here—packs of fledglings sired by other fledglings. Nobody knows anything. It’s chaos. Sunnydale would be safer if there was a clan in charge.”

“Far be it from me to question your strategy—you are the slayer, after all—but there was a clan in charge,” Willy said, “and you killed them all.”

“And now it’s a mess. Yeah. I know. Trying to fix that,” Buffy said. Angel and Giles wore identical, beetle-browed looks of disapproval. Too bad. She didn’t have time for their judgment. “And hey—it’s the same clan. The history books might even consider it an internal conflict. A coup.”

“Do you see it that way?” Giles asked. “Backing the rebels in an uprising?”

“No, Giles,” she said. She squared her shoulders, lowered her eyebrows, and brought The Slayer forth. “I’m using my considerable power and status to manipulate an internal conflict to my benefit. It’s a time-honored political tactic.”

There was a brief silence while Angel and Giles digested that information, and then Willy said, “You know, that guy of yours is right. When you do that commanding thing you do? Very hot.”

“Hotter than the cheerleading outfit?”

“Yes. I do believe so,” Willy said softly, and her heart broke just a little. He’d been away from home for such a long time. “So what’s wrong with Spike?”

“I think,” she said, ticking through the list of problems one at a time, “it’s just a lot. Sean. Us. Thanksgiving dinner.” White sweater, fancy napkins, turkey and cranberry. The Scoobies, Angel, family. “The Order.” Minions, responsibility, consequences. “Prophecies.” She could feel him raging in the back of her mind, howling with frustration. Sunnydale would be down a dozen fledglings by morning, but he still had no human words. “What I asked of him—what he’s trying to do. This is not....”

“Natural?” Angel said. The rumble erupted into a snarl for just an instant, but then he stuffed his anger down and slipped into his usual determined brood with sad puppy overlay. The dissonance of it made her skin crawl. How had she missed that barely submerged hostility? She almost wished he’d yell at her. At least it’d be honest.

“Oh, please,” she said. “Don’t talk to me about natural. Neither one of us is anything like natural, Angel. I was going to say ‘easy.’ Nothing he’s doing is easy.”
“No,” Giles said. “I don’t imagine it is.”

“He’s really attached to Sean. I think it just got overwhelming all at once, with the thrall thing.” Buffy shrugged. “If anything goes wrong, it’ll pull him apart.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” Giles said.

That low-grade growl intensified again. “’My life,’” Angel said, “’from your hand.’ That’s the oath. Makes Sean want to please him. Makes him culpable for Sean’s actions. If Sean disobeys, Spike’s the one who has to dust him.” His shoulders hunched. “If anyone sees.”

Giles recoiled. “That’s quite a burden,” he said. “They’re...family. I’m not certain I understand the relationship fully, since there’s no human equivalent. Close family?”

“Yeah,” Buffy said. It made her feel sick. Sean was Spike’s Dawn—neither sibling nor offspring, but something in between, something a little too human for vampire law. Layering fealty on top of it only complicated things. “I...god, I hope Sean doesn’t do anything stupid. Stupider. We can forgive what’s happened so far, right? Please?”

Angel lifted his chin. “Nothing to forgive.”

“He’s done no harm,” Giles nodded at Angel, “and perhaps even some good. I bear no ill will.”

“Thank you. Thank god. I encouraged Spike to keep him. Wanted him to have...someone else...here. I didn’t anticipate...that. Who the hell has thrall, anyway?” The Master. Drusilla. Dracula. Sean? She folded her arms across her chest and stuck her lower lip out. “Damn it.”

Angel considered her, brows raised in surprise. “This is all for him,” he said. “For Spike. The Order, this war—all of it. You’re remaking the world for him.”

“I’m trying,” she said, hoping Spike could hear.
Spike twisted the fledgling’s head completely around three times before it snapped from his body and he dusted. Then he turned on the headstone and kicked it to rubble. It didn’t make him feel any better. Buffy’s reassurances weren’t helping, either. Well, except for that image of Willy dressed up like a bleedin’ high school cheerleader. That helped a little.

He was through his fourth cemetery, so far, and he’d only found two rising vampires, both of which he’d ripped apart, bare-handed. His ax lay, still sheathed, on the floor of Joyce’s living room. It hadn’t even occurred to him to bring it. He hardly needed weapons, anymore—not unless he was going after something big. A steady diet of slayer blood kept him pumped to pulsating pseudo-life, with jangling nerves and warm skin. It made everything feel very, very real.

This was a touch too real.

And it wasn’t bloody fair. He’d met Sean...what...a month ago? Two? Not long enough to be responsible for him forever and ever. Not hardly. If he were any kind of demon, he’d dust the boy and move on.

He might’ve, too, if it weren’t for the nearly tangible sense-memory of cradling him, broken and bloodied, hardly bigger in his arms than a child, while the kid swore fealty—based on the vague outline of a rite they’d only just discussed a few days before. No, Sean was his, no matter how recently they’d met, and he’d fight to keep him. Spike reduced another headstone to pea gravel with his boots and then climbed to the top of a crypt to contemplate his current existence.

He had a family, now. That hadn’t been true for decades and he’d missed it. Darla sent Angelus away and scurried off to wherever the old bitch went to lick her wounds. That left him alone to care for Drusilla. Her world, her vision fascinated him. He’d have done anything for her: brought her silks and sunken treasure, chased will-o’-the-wisps through faerie forests, listened with silent reverence to the songs the stars sang, or danced barefoot in the blood of innocents. But there were times all he wanted was a whole conversation with someone who could hold up her end of it. No matter how much he loved her, it wasn’t enough. His dark princess had not made him happy.

And now he was.

That was the knotty truth he faced. He’d lost everything, watched his life fall to ruin, reduced to pebbles like the headstones in his path. Then as soon as he gave up, let himself believe, truly and deeply, that it was all gone forever, a whole other life was dropped in his lap.

In this new life, the woman he was in love with loved him back, and she’d gone out of her way to prove it to him. That was not only more than he’d expected; it was more than he’d ever imagined. He had to blink away tears every time he thought about it. He had mates to play cards with, people to talk to: Willy, Rupert, Sean, sweet Joyce, Clem—hell, even Angel seemed happy to see him, lately. There was enough money to buy pretty much anything he wanted, and he didn’t have to petition anyone to get access to it. He had a real place in Sunnydale, and all he’d had to do to claim it was change sides.

He lay back on the crypt and laughed. Dead moss crackled beneath his fingertips. There he was, death on top of death on top of death, and Buffy thought he was a bleedin’ hero. He wished he could believe she was wrong, but she’d said the word “Champion” and he’d practically heard the shining armor clank. What was it Darla used to say? “What we were informs what we are,” or some such. He could blame William for this. Or thank him. He wasn’t sure which.
Drusilla knew.

Oh, she’d tried to warn him. He was just too thick to see it. Now that he had the benefit of hindsight, he realized the warnings started coming way back, before he came to Sunnydale, long before he met this particular Slayer. “My knight,” she’d called him, over and over, as though someone else would try to claim him. “If you play with the Sunshine, you’ll burn to ash,” she said. “Kill the slayer, Spike! Kill her for Princess?” It was always a question, like she was entreating him to choose her. Sometimes, he wondered if the “burning baby fish” she’d seen the night she turned him was a warning, too.

He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, tried to force the tears back.

“Well, something came through here,” a male voice said from perhaps fifty yards away. “Headstones are smashed.”

“Grave’s disturbed, too. You got anything, Holmes?” That was voice number two.

“Nada,” Holmes said. “Everything’s cold. Makes the signature hard to spot.” They were Initiative soldiers, and not the friendly ones, then. Buffy assured him that they’d be gone soon. It could not be soon enough.

“Well, there’s nothing out here. I say we bag it for the—fuck!” the first voice yelled. “What the hell!”


He sat up so sharply that he rolled off the roof of the crypt and landed painfully on the concrete stairs leading to its door. No damage, because of the Gem, but bloody hell it hurt. He crept into the shadows and lay there, listening.

“Bobby Shaftoe’s gone to sea, silver buckles at his knee. He’ll come back and marry me, pretty Bobby Shaftoe,” Drusilla sang into the darkness.

Of course. Of course she was here. He should have realized that as soon as family started clustering up in Sunnydale, Dru would be right along. He must have sensed her—or maybe Buffy had. Either way, that’s probably why she’d been on his mind so much these last few days.

“Jensen! You okay?” There was the sound of mad scrambling. “The fuck! Jensen—what are you doin’?” That was voice one. There was a lot of panic in voice one.


“Naughty boys shan’t have cakes for tea.” He heard a very slight lisp. She was in demon face, then, probably hunting. “But this one isn’t naughty...sweet as cream, he is.... Do you taste like cream, sweet boy?”

“Fucking drag him, then,” voice one—and that must be Thompson—said. “Grab him and drag him the fuck out of here.”

Drusilla hissed, and there was a loud cracking noise. Holmes screamed. “My arm! It broke my fucking arm!”

“Not nice to keep the sweets all for yourself,” Drusilla said.
“Let me go let me go let me go,” Holmes chanted. “Please, god...please...” There was another cracking noise and Holmes screamed again.

“Jensen...what the hell is wrong with you?” Thompson yelled. Jensen didn’t answer.

Spike could hear Thompson breathing, almost gasping, each breath punctuated with a panicked whimper. Then the sound of his breathing grew quieter, went farther and farther away, along with his footsteps. Faced with Drusilla and without the support of his team, the squad leader had decided to run. That left Holmes in a precarious position. He had at least one broken bone, and Drusilla still had hold of him, unless the second crack meant she’d broken his leg to free up her hands.

“Bobby Shaftoe’s bright and fair, panning out his yellow hair. He’s my love for ever more, bonny Bobby Shaftoe.” Her delicate voice rang out through the darkness, esses exaggerated by fangs. What was with the Shaftoe song, anyway? It was eerie.

“Please...please...please...please....” Holmes’ voice was getting weaker. Sodding soldiers, blundering like cattle into things they didn’t understand, making a mess they didn’t even know would need to be cleaned up. Would serve them right to be Dru’s dinner, but then he’d have to explain it to Buffy. He couldn’t see that going well no matter what explanation he came up with, so he got to his feet and jogged around the crypt to the two remaining soldiers—and Drusilla.

Spike leapt on her in a flying tackle, knocking her to the ground and grinding her face into the manicured soil of the cemetery. The thrall soldier shook himself as though he’d nodded off for a second and just come to. “Run!” Spike roared at him, shifting to demon face. Jensen’s eyes widened but he didn’t hesitate. He hauled his comrade up by his gun belt and dragged him unceremoniously out to the street.

Dru hissed and bucked beneath him, slashing out with claws she kept filed like razors. She swept them across his face, into his eyes. If he hadn’t been wearing the gem, he’d have been blinded. He grabbed a fistful of her hair, yanked her head backward, and buried his fangs in her throat. He held her there without draining her, waiting for her to stop struggling. She was strong. Clearly, she’d recovered completely from their adventures in Prague. Still, he was stronger—slayer-fed stronger—and she couldn’t actually damage him. He pushed his teeth further into her flesh.

She kicked her legs out hard, almost throwing him free, but he jammed one knee into the small of her back and pulled her spine into a sharp arc that was one step away from snapping. She howled and writhed, but couldn’t knock him loose. Finally, she lay still, panting, and he pulled his fangs out of her throat. “‘F you behave yourself, I won’t snap your neck,” he whispered, vampire quiet, in her ear. “Sit up, and we’ll have ourselves a nice, long chat.”
Ad Astra Per Aspera - Ethan

His blood froze in droplets on the concrete floor.

Before disembarking at Bismarck Municipal, he’d confirmed that the power was on, the light fixtures and outlets were in working order, and heat would be available. The bomb shelter had been well maintained over the years, pressed into service as a hunter’s weekend getaway. Brackets for rifles lined the walls, and the occasional brass shell casing glittered from beneath steel shelves still laden with hermetically sealed foodstuffs. At the rear of the room, a narrow loft bed nestled above a curtain covered closet.

It was the most livable property he’d purchased to date. A hundred and twenty square feet of paranoia painted stalag gray. Spray cleaner and some elbow grease would elevate it to a retro cold war chic he would have appreciated twenty years ago. Now it just left him cold, despite the ancient Kenmore heater chugging away in the corner.

He squinted at his work, hands shaking, and cursed himself for beginning with the obfuscation spells. Who would notice his spell work here, in the wilds of North Dakota? Black blotches peppered his field of vision.

But better safe than eaten by demons, so the wards came first.

Perhaps an hour remained before sunset. The dreary light wafted in through the open hatch, along with old snow tossed from the tops of drifts and half decomposed leaves. He flexed his hands to make the blood flow faster, scraped at the congealing cuts with his fingernails to reach the red and drip it, precious milliliters at a time, over the black wood arch. His eyes ached.

Two hours in, after the first deep cut, a lightbulb blew. It was the one in the shaft, so he ignored it, but then the one over the bed went, followed a scant twenty minutes later by both bulbs in the central hanging fixture. Finally, the bulb in the closet went, stranding him in subterranean darkness. Without interrupting his chant, he lurched across the room and climbed the shaft one handed to lift the hatch and let the sunlight in, utterly defeating his wards. The temperature rose to just below freezing by noon, but had dropped rapidly since.

On the upside, by the time he finished pressing the viscous liquid into the last of the carved symbols, he needed no lag time for drying. He buffed the arch with a chamois cloth, opened the portal, and sealed his work. The firelit warmth of his Sanctum library shone from inside the arch.

By the time he reached the top of the ladder to close the hatch, his vision had retreated to blurry pinpoints. He dialed the number by touch.

“You’re an hour late.” Jason Stubbs sounded more bored than angry.

“So charge me.” His lips felt oversized, his consonants indistinct. “Are you there?”

“I’ve been here all day.” A hesitation. “It’s quieter than I thought it’d be. Got a lot done.”

“So glad you’ve enjoyed yourself.” His heartbeat jittered, faint as a dying sparrow. “Do you have your car?”

“As requested, Doctor Rayne. What’s wrong? Where are you?”

“Bismarck.”
“You’re slurring. Did you say ‘Bismarck’?”

“Well...Burleigh County. South of Bismarck.” He hooked one arm over the top rung of the ladder to keep from tumbling to the floor.

“North Dakota?” Stubbs’ voice rose. “Are you at the bomb shelter?”

“Er...yes. May need some assistance.”

“Great Gla’aki, Ethan. What are you doing?”

“Just Ethan?” His words had become incomprehensible even to him. “Not Uncle Ethan?”

“You are the most—. Stay put. I’ll send someone.”

“No...no. Just a moment.” He snapped his phone shut and stuffed it into the pocket of his slacks before closing and sealing the lead-lined hatch. With painful deliberation, he edged down the ladder in the dark. His foot slipped, and his jaw connected with a ladder rung. The room spun and he tasted blood. For an instant, his fingers went slack, and he fell the rest of the way to the floor in slow motion.

Gadje! Gadje! They chased him, jeering. He’d stuffed his school uniform deep in his duffel, donned too-short denim, and thrown away his shoes, but it hadn’t helped. He no longer belonged here. Gadje! Gadje! No matter how fast he ran, lungs burning, they stayed right behind him, too many to fight. He fled down the stairs, around the back of the old warehouse, and into the alley. Blocked! They closed both ends and surrounded him. Gadje! Gadje!

He didn’t know who threw the first stone, but it hit him in the jaw and loosened a tooth. Blood in his mouth. He cried out, called for his mother, while the jeers grew louder and more obscene. Gadje! Blows rained down on head and shoulders as he crouched in the alley sobbing. So many of them. Nothing he could do.

He closed his eyes and lashed out, bright pain and chaos, screaming and the indelible scent of charred human flesh.

He awoke curled fetal at the base of the shaft. “Blast.” For the first time in hours, he could feel his face. He probed it with his fingertips, which prickled like his arm had fallen asleep. “Damn.” He had no idea how long he’d been unconscious.

With the hatch closed, the room was notably warmer. It cleared his thoughts. He pulled himself upright and scooted to the heater, flipped the switch to off, and crawled through the portal into his Sanctum. A word closed the door and he sat for a moment on the stone floor of his library, breathing the smoke-scented air. He’d half a mind to draw a bath, and bugger the real world, but he’d left Jason hanging.

Not to mention the blood loss and—very probably—hypothermia. The Hshthk, useful though they might be in most circumstances, could not actually provide emergency medical care.

He hauled himself to his feet, braced against the wall to keep from toppling. With another word, he opened a portal in the arch next to the one through which he’d entered. One lurching step forward took him through, and a final word closed the door behind him.

This left him facing another door. He took hold of the knob, but it was round and too smooth. His blood-slicked fingers couldn’t find purchase. He heard startled swearing from the room beyond.
He tried again to open the door, but the knob spun in his hand. He resorted to batting at it like a cat.

“Damn it, Ethan,” Jason whispered. “What are you keeping in your closet?”

Footfalls approached. “If something jumps out of there and bites me, I am doubling my fees.”

“Won’t bite,” Ethan croaked. “Promise.”

“What the—.” Jason yanked the door open and Ethan fell to his hands and knees in the pleasant, seventy degree normalcy of his Los Angeles apartment. “Gods, Ethan! There’s blood everywhere!” Jason crouched and rolled him over. “Why are you always covered in blood?”

“Occupational hazard?”

“And your lips are blue. What—.” Jason laid the backs of his fingers against Ethan’s cheek. “You’re freezing. Were you actually in North Dakota?” He leaned sideways to peer into the closet. “That’s a doorway. You built a doorway to Bismarck?” He shook his head. “For Gods’ sake, Ethan. Why?”

The question didn’t make any sense. “I don’t...uh...hospital?” He closed his eyes.

“Don’t you dare die,” Jason whispered, and then everything was quiet.
Drusilla – Spike

She screeched like a hawk, earsplitting rage that would have knocked him back a step even if she hadn’t embedded her nails in his thigh. Distantly, he heard the rupture of denim and the receding panic of the Initiative soldiers. He twined his fingers in the tangle of her hair. She smelled of birch smoke, cardamom, and bright, fresh blood. It made him dizzy.

That scent held a hundred years of longing.

An avalanche of memories fell, rosy and contextless as vacation slides: a game of tag in Parisian catacombs amid terrified tourists who could not see in the dark; ending a hunt hungry to watch beetles the size of bread plates wend their ponderous way over the rainforest floor in Brazil; swimming naked beneath the flooded prison ruins in Rummu, starlit ripples silver on the lake. He tried to shake them off, but they wouldn’t go. She was part of him.

Dru’s bare toes scraped for purchase in damp earth and caught. She pushed herself a few inches forward—not far, but enough to dislodge his knee from her spine and break his leverage. With him still clinging to her, she pulled her legs under her belly, dug her feet in, and launched them both backward.

His head rebounded with a crack off headstone marble, and he lost his grip on her hair. While he was reeling, she ducked, pulled her body downward from the circle of his arms, and shot forward. She was twenty yards away before he could gather himself to follow. Cursing, he staggered after her. He’d forgotten how fast she was. **Blinding.** Not as fast as him, maybe, not now, but faster than anything he’d faced besides Buffy. She dodged and wove in and out of shadows, ducked behind mausoleums, and tossed pebbles to distract him, clucking her tongue when he looked the wrong way.

But he was gaining on her.

When he’d narrowed the gap to a dozen feet or less, she glanced over her shoulder, eyes wide in a demon face whiter than moonlight, and curled her lips in a feral grin. With no discernible change in speed or posture, she vaulted a stone and dropped from view. By the time he caught up, she was gone.

He could still feel her, that niggling awareness at the base of his skull.

“Drusilla?” Nothing. His fingers itched for his ax, though he didn’t know, even now, if he could use it. Not on her. “Dru, love?” The cemetery bordered a stand of trees—fir, mostly. Their evergreen branches dripped deep shadow.

From within the wood, her voice sang out, light and sweet, “Bobby Shaftoe’s gone to sea....”

Without a breath to move the air, he approached the wood’s edge and waited, listening. Nothing. Not a footfall. Not a rustle. No sound to betray her position. Just an absolute, demonic certainty that she was there, just ahead of him, hidden in the trees.

It was a trap. He knew it. **Bugger Bobby Shaftoe.** He went in anyway.

The woods were dark—too dark, too quiet. The small wild things that made their homes here knew better than to scurry. There were predators about. When a pine cone skittered past his feet, he didn’t turn his head. “Drusilla? Come out and talk, pet.”
“He’ll come back and marry me....”

She was close, so close. He spun in a slow circle, searching; the subtle magic tendrils common to his kind spiraled outward through—what had Buffy called it? Aetheric space? Out and out and out to the limits of his awareness, and nothing. Slippery chit. He almost gave up, but there was one direction he hadn’t searched. He tilted his face to the sky and found her twenty feet above him. She’d climbed a bloody tree. He caught a glimpse of her, half obscured by branches, watching him. With a giggle and the snap of twigs, she scrambled away through the canopy.

Since his will to live was stronger than his urge to chase her through the treetops, he stalked her over land, lunging when she dropped low enough, shaking trees at their trunks when she climbed too high.

“Poor, poor Willy,” she cooed, “lost in the wood, and the wolves are coming.” She lifted her head and howled, long and mournful. An answering howl set his teeth on edge and he glanced up at the sky.

Waning gibbous, thank god. He didn’t need a werewolf crashing the party.

“Not lost, Dru.” He slammed his shoulder into the tree trunk, and she gasped. “Right where I should be.” He said it with such confidence that he almost believed it himself. “Are you?” He seized a fallen branch from the trail and hurled it as hard as he could in the direction of her voice.

With a shriek, she tumbled from her perch, crashed downward through the foliage, and came to an abrupt halt dangling by one hand from an outstretched bough, her face six inches from his. “I am not a flower,” she whispered, and then she kicked him in the teeth.

“Bloody buggering....” And they were off again, out from under the trees, on the street, racing through a Sunnydale nearly emptied by the holiday.

Drusilla leapt atop a parked car, laughing as its alarm began to sound, and stooped to snap off its antenna before continuing on her way. She whipped it back and forth through the air, listening with delight to the whoosh it made, like a child with a switch.

After a while, he stopped trying to catch her.

She ran, more excited than frightened, the skirts of her pale yellow sundress fluttering in the autumn air. She matched him, step for step, kept him a fixed distance behind her, no matter how fast he went, as though she was leading him—where? No clue. He was the follower in this scenario, so he followed.

Through suburban neighborhoods, down back alleys, past the warehouse district, to the outskirts of town. A full ten minutes after they passed the “Welcome to Sunnydale” sign, she finally slowed and came to a halt at the edge of a cemetery.

Everly Memorial Park stretched before him, small and neat, with lushly watered grass. It lacked the frenetic aura of cemeteries closer to the Hellmouth. As far as he could tell, there was only one new grave. The slayer didn’t patrol this one. It was outside Sunnydale, and so, by Buffy’s reckoning, outside her jurisdiction.

“You coulda just told me we were goin’ somewhere,” he said when he caught up with her. “Polite to let a fella—.”

“Shhhhh.” She pressed one berry-colored nail against his lips and jerked her head at the newly turned plot.
Three figures—human, probably, two men and a woman—sat cross legged next to the headstone. They wore black, and a variety of digging implements rested on the grass beside them. They whispered amongst themselves too quietly for him to hear.

The fledgling punched his fist up through the earth.

The squelch of a walkie-talkie, and a male voice said, “We are a go. Transport?” A dark car crept forward along the one-lane road through the cemetery. It looked like an old police cruiser.

The woman grabbed the fledgling’s hand and started pulling, while the other two got to work clearing the earth from around him. Spike narrowed his eyes. No great tragedy if they aimed to be dinner, but what were they trying to accomplish? They tugged the snarling newborn up to solid ground and pushed something silver into his hands. A thermos?

“Dru, what—”

“Tch. Bad doggie.”

The fledgling tipped the thermos upward and gulped the liquid down. When he finished, they gave him another one. When he finished that, they hustled him into the back seat of the car and tossed the tools in the trunk. Walkie-talkie man took shotgun, while the other two straddled a matte black Harley. They all roared away into the night.

“No that’s a puzzler,” he said. “Care to enlighten me?”

When he turned to where she’d been standing, Drusilla was gone.
The green door arose in front of him like he’d summoned it with his thoughts. He didn’t know how long he’d been walking.

Since Buffy was busy putting Joyce’s house back in order and was, in any case, too preoccupied with Spike to be effective, he’d taken patrol. He shouldn’t have bothered. Everywhere he went, stone was crushed and wood splintered. Nothing moved.

He’d scoffed at the rumors about Prague. Spike’s tales always grew in the telling, and this was no different. The city had stood for a thousand years; it would stand for a thousand more. But all around him lay wreckage on a grand scale. Sunnydale’s coffers might empty to fix it, and this was only a tantrum. What had he done when Drusilla was hurt? What would he do for Buffy?

What had Spike become?

Angel had followed the exploits of his family, over the years, but only in outline. Best to keep his distance—for their sake as well as his own. Darla. That’s what happened when he got too close.

Part of him still missed her, an inexpressible, bone-deep ache, worse because another part was glad she was gone.

He raised his fist to the door and dropped it again, not so he wouldn’t be seen, this time, but because there was nobody behind it. The only sounds of life in the old house came from upstairs. Sean wasn’t home, yet.

The kid was at his second Thanksgiving dinner of the night, while Buffy’s was the first Angel had ever been invited to.

Not that he expected Kolku Drallig to invite him over any time soon. Sean’s Brachen landlady was terrified mute by his presence alone. What would happen if he walked through her door? He’d started coming to Sean’s by way of the alley so he wouldn’t pass her window and give her a heart attack.

Angel lifted the planter on the landing and retrieved the spare key.

The apartment still smelled of Sean’s afternoon baking spree: cookies, brownies, and several flavors of pie, all rich, all delicious. He barely remembered what food tasted like when he was human, but it didn’t matter. He wanted to roll around like a dog in the panoply of scents. Instead, he paced, inhaling.

Such a tidy space—main room, kitchen, bathroom—but soothing, like Sean’s presence was embedded in the fabric-draped walls. And maybe it was. How could he know? Sean’s thrall, if you could call it that, wasn’t like Drusilla’s or Dracula’s or even like Nest’s. He didn’t make anyone hallucinate or alter their mental landscape. He didn’t force his will on them. No, Sean’s was a subtler magic. He curled its tendrils around you and tugged you the way he wanted you to go. Why would you fight it? No fight was offered.

It was the only peace he’d felt in a century.

He ran his hands over the open shelving in the kitchen, touched each lovingly crafted thing in turn. There, blown glass goblets. There, a steel wire serving bowl. There, a hand-woven dish towel. Every item had a story, an artist. He traced a fingertip along the rim of one of Sean’s china tumblers, its pale
green spiral like a half closed bud. Beautiful. It was all beautiful.

Not just the objects, but all of it. Sean and his artist friends. Movie night. The way he moved between human and demon worlds. Live music at The Espresso Pump. Plastic tubs of animal blood, warmed and seasoned to feed both his demon and his soul. A way to exist that did not cause despair.

In the midst of the war he waged as Angelus, he only remembered himself here, with Sean. He only let his guard down here, while Sean kept watch. It gave him hope, this glimpse of what his life might be when the war was over. It gave him a reason to keep fighting.

He wanted it so much his chest hurt.

Did that mean Spike was right? Did being this close put his soul at risk? Did the safety of the world hinge on the emotional control of a fledgling vampire? It couldn’t. He couldn’t let it.

He’d wanted Buffy like that, too. He’d watched her, followed her, climbed in her window when she wasn’t home to touch the things on her shelves, just like this. But if he was honest with himself, it wasn’t about her.

She was The Chosen One, youth and innocence painted pink and gold, purity of heart personified. If she loved him, he couldn’t be the monster in his memory, could he? He had to be something better, something that deserved her. He loved the way her love defined him.

The girl herself was a different matter.

Most of the time, he was just confused. The language she used—were those even words? How she spent her time: cheerleading, dances, homework, high school. He didn’t get what she wanted or what she expected of him. He hated himself for thinking it, but sometimes she seemed thoughtless, shallow even. Weren’t slayers supposed to be all about strength of purpose? How did shoe shopping fit in?

He couldn’t really be part of her life, either. True, some of that was because he couldn’t go out in sunlight, but only some. They didn’t enjoy the same things. He never learned to ice skate. Her friends were insufferable and short-sighted, even Giles, who should have known better. And every time he tried to help, she got mad. Where did Spike learn to fold napkins, anyway?

A figurine caught Angel’s eye and he picked it up, stroked its smooth contours. An egg-shaped mass of spheres and tentacles carved from intestine-colored stone. It seemed to glow from the inside.

The sound of a key in the door brought him back to the world.

“Rivera’s crew found one,” Gray said. “They’re all pretty crazy at first, but he’ll be okay.”

“Do not think this makes up for your last catastrophe,” Hasna answered, flames dancing in her eyes.

“He was with a girl.” Gray carried an armful of board games. “I thought we had time.”

“Um...hi?” Sean said. “How’s Yog?”

Angel blinked. “What?”

“He knows the gate, he is the gate, et cetera, et cetera? No?”

Angel shook his head.

“You should probably put him down.” Sean walked around the divider into the kitchen, took the
figurine from his hands, and set it carefully back on the shelf. “He was a gift. I don’t know what he does.” He grinned and took Angel’s hands. “Did you just come here to touch my stuff?”

“Mostly.”

“On that note.” Gray slid the board games onto a shelf and dropped the curtain back over it. “I’ll catch you later.”

“Your jacket?” Hasna slid it from her shoulders and draped it across her arm in one supple motion. She held it out to Gray, who licked his lips.

“Will you be warm enough?” he asked as he took it from her. They were exactly the same height.

“I will go straight home.” She smiled. Her teeth were very white. “Won’t you need it? For work?”

“Nah. This is from basic.” He pulled the jacket on and patted the insignia patch on the shoulder. “Timberwolves. The one-oh-fourth. Lately, I’m prouder of where I started than where I ended up.”

“Thank you for lending it to me, Gray of the Timberwolves.” She laid her palm on his cheek, and then, in a cloud of sparks, she was gone.

“That’s not my—.” His shoulders slumped and he rubbed his hands over his stubble-covered face, chuckling. “I guess it is now.” He raised a hand in farewell, and then he, too, was gone.

“Whoa...boy,” Sean said on a breathy exhale. “I sure hope he knows what he’s doing.”

“Oh.” He always felt like he was missing something. “Uh...okay?”

“She’s a being of elemental flame, Angelus. Get her to talk, sometime. Great stories. I don’t know exactly how old she is, but she predates Islam. Gray is—”

Oh. Oh. “Playing with fire?”

“Too literally.” Sean raised an eyebrow. “So. You’re not here to visit Yog. What’s up?”

“We need to talk.”

“Right.” For just a second, Sean stood very still with his eyes closed. Then he was a blur of motion again. “Hold that thought.” He heated cow’s blood in a saucepan, adding spices as he stirred. “You hungry?”

How could he be hungry? Buffy’d fed him until he practically sloshed when he walked. “Uh...no. Thanks.”

Sean filled a large mug and drank it down without stopping. When he was done, he filled it again and drank half of it before turning to Angel. “Ready.”

“Are you alright?”

“Nope.” He finished the second mug of blood and dropped it into the sink. “But I passed my final, added a minion, which brings us to seventy-eight, and I’m booked solid over Christmas, so what’s a few days without eating or sleeping?” His eyes crackled gold. “Just say it.”

“I can’t come here anymore.” He glanced at the charcoal drawing on its easel in the corner. “I’ll finish your picture, but I can’t just—.” He swallowed the knot in his throat. “—be here.”
A disbelieving huff. “Are you serious?”

He couldn’t trust himself. All he could do was put some distance between them. He nodded.

“Oh god.” Sean began breathing, rapidly, through parted lips. “Was it the Xander thing? I just wanted him to stop. He was—.”

“No.”

“Was it Giles? I didn’t mean to push that hard. I’m so tired I—.”

“No, Sean—.”

“Did I say something?” His hands shook. “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing.” Raised voices drifted down from the floor above them.

“Did...did I hurt you?” A panicked hitch made the words uneven. An answering panic pooled in Angel’s gut. “I didn’t mean to—”

He laid his hands on Sean’s shoulders. The fear coiled up from his stomach around his spine and exploded at the base of his skull. He yanked his hands back, but it was too late. He couldn’t force the demon down.

“My fault.” So hard to talk through fangs.

“Oh,” Sean said. "Wait." He curled his hands into fists. “I get it, now. This is the it’s-not-you-it’s-me speech?” The fear was joined by fury.

“It’s not you.”

Sean growled, an animal sound at odds with the boy himself.

“I’m sorry.” He leaned against the kitchen counter, trembling as waves of anger rolled over him. “I just need to—”

“Angelus,” Sean said. His voice cracked on the word. “Get out of my house.”

Hot pokers stabbed his eyes. His bones were on fire. He couldn’t stay there one second longer. Angel took a gasping breath through clenched teeth and ran.
He woke in half-light to the bone-crushing squeeze of compression cuffs.

The girl stood beside his bed in a bathrobe several sizes too large. Her purple hair hung straight down, almost to her shoulders, its blonde roots pearlescent in the monitor’s glow. She looked young and small and much too thin. He barely recognized her.

“Thistle?” He couldn’t sit up. A complicated system of straps and buckles immobilized his limbs, while a broad swath of black nylon across his chest bound him to the bed. “What are you doing here?”

“Same as usual.” Her slender shoulders twitched in a shrug that fell short. “What about you?”

“I fell.” He tugged at his restraints. They did not budge. “Why am I tied down?”

“At a guess? The cuts. They think you’re a suicide risk.”

“I’m not.” Blasted doctors. Would’ve been better to take his chances with the Hsshthk. If he died—well. At least it would be quick. This took time he did not have. Barvain would rise with or without him, and the demon prince would be vulnerable for only a moment. He had to be ready to strike.

“I know.”

“Are you going to help me out of here, or not?” When he smiled, his lips cracked. A skim of new blood thickened the dried crust at their corners, adding a fierce itch to his many complaints. Janus, what he wouldn’t give for a tube of lip balm.

“Not.” She waved serenely at the equipment behind him. “Alarms.”

“I see.” He didn’t. If he could marshal his magic, he’d liquefy the restraints, but his head throbbed, and he thought he might vomit. The world seemed to run at the edges like a painting tipped sideways before it could dry. He was drained.

“Never piss the nurses off. They own you.” She wrapped one slender hand around an IV pole and pushed it unsteadily toward the foot of his bed. Its wheels squeaked. “Your friend’s in the hall. He’s been on the phone for an hour, talking to a different doctor. I think he’s trying to get you switched.”

“Jason?”

“The suit. Is that his name?” She rested for a moment, breathing hard, and then continued on around the curtain, out of his sight. “Freckles? Balding?” Her words rose over the sound of running water.

“Yes.” Thank Janus. “Did he say which doctor?”

“Huh uh. Man’s voice, I think. There was yelling. He recognized your name, so that should help, but....” The water stopped with the splat of a wrung-out cloth.

“But what, child? I haven’t got all day.”

“Well, first—it’s two in the morning.” She inched around the curtain and back up to the head of his bead, washcloth in one hand, IV pole in the other. “You and me? We’ve got time. Nobody’s deciding anything for hours.” He would have glared at her, but it hurt too much to move his eyebrows. “Second—this is the neuro ward. Even if you do find a doctor who knows you bleed
yourself to cast spells? You’re gonna be here a while.”

Blast and—neuro ward? “I hit my head?”

“Looks like.” She squinted at him through the gloam and began cleaning his face, very gently, with the warm cloth.

Her touch shattered him.

Roots and runners, pale things unused to light, crept into the cracks of his psyche and pressed him apart, left him in shards, fragile and translucent as the roots themselves. He had no defense. He’d drained himself pallid, poured blood and power onto frozen earth, and he could not keep her out.

Moreover, he couldn’t want to. Hers was life magic—specific, uncontrolled, wild—chaos at its kindest and most lovely. Kin to his power, perhaps, but as unlike it as a hearth to a wildfire. He was a sorcerer. His chaos had bite. It tore at the frayed edge of reality, pulled on the strings that bound it whole, pulled harder until it spooled apart, and rejoiced in its destruction and its bloody rebirth.

It was a kind of beauty, he supposed, but nothing like the sacred grief of Thistle’s broken magic—or her broken music. She made him a gift of her regret. She made him grateful for it.

“Bandages,” she said, dabbing at his hairline, at his eyes. Gently. He didn’t know that he’d ever been touched that gently. “They shaved your hair.”

He tried to speak, tried again when his voice came out in a croak. “I don’t suppose I could convince you,” he asked in a whisper that was the only sound he could manage, “to take a look at my chart? Perhaps a hint at my prognosis?”

“Your friend took it.” She laid a palm on his chest, over his bindings, considering. “What would happen if I let you loose?”

“I would be pleased.” He couldn’t let her trouble herself for him. He couldn’t let her face his consequences. “The nurses would not.”

She ran the cooling cloth over his eyes and lips once more before setting it on the bedside table. “You aren’t much like your reputation.”

“Of course I am.” Such strength of heart she had, such goodness. It blinded her, as it did Jason. He’d sold his soul piecemeal to the highest bidder, but they—bless them—were too generous to see.

“No, not yet.” Her rough voice echoed strangely, an auditory afterimage against this beeping mechanical backdrop. “You have time.”

Time.

That was the sticking point, wasn’t it? He’d lost years indentured to the elder Stubbs, repurposed as a tool to further the aims of Wolfram and Hart. Whatever reputation he’d had at the beginning of his servitude, he was a mercenary by the end, stained in blood and compromise.

Even now, with the benefit of hindsight, he wasn’t sure he’d make a different choice.

Curl small in the corner of his holding cell with Randall’s blood still spattered on his shoes, he’d listened as Rupert made the stammering call to his watcher father, who brought the full force of the Council to bear. Rupert walked free without so much as a backward glance.
His call to his own father had a different ending. The baron Rayne listened in silence until he’d finished his story. “Please help me,” Ethan had whispered, humbled in a way he could not remember being, then or since.

“No,” his father said. “Don’t call me again.”

Having one less suspect did not, of course, make the body go away. He’d spent seven interminable weeks behind bars by the time the lawyer came to call. “Good afternoon, Ethan!” Hubert Stubbs said, his smile as bright and false as the one Jason used now. “Would you care to make a deal?”

He’d signed that contract in blood. At the time, ten years of obligation seemed preferable to fifteen in prison. It still did, but only just.

“Time is exactly what I do not have,” he told Thistle. He’d have all the time in the world once he took Barvain, but, until then, his dance card was full.

“There’s always time,” she said. “Every day is—” Her gaze went wide and lost focus. “Every—” She blinked rapidly, her pupils narrowing to pinpoints despite the darkness, and then her eyes began to dart like she was dreaming.

“Thistle?”

“In the dark,” she said, shaking her head. “Out of sight? No—secret. Unseen. They think they...but they don’t.” Her fists clenched and unclenched rhythmically. “Shoots. Hundreds of—hundreds of hundreds of hundreds and...it touches—and they touch more. And they touch more. Pulls it...it’ll fall if they can’t...if they....”

The call button was inches from his fingertips. He stretched. He could touch it, just barely, but he couldn’t press it. “Jason?” he called. His throat hurt. “Stubbs?”

“They have to cut it back.” She panted, her fist white around the IV pole, and began to sway. “Roots in the well.”

“Nurse?” he yelled. “Damn it—anybody! Help!”

“No no no no! It’s now it’s now there is no time!” She tilted her head back, opened her mouth as wide as it would go, and screamed. Then she crumpled to the floor, convulsing.

All at once, his room filled with light and sound. Medical personnel rushed in and cleared space for the seizing girl. Nobody asked why she was there.

Three breathless minutes later, they hustled her into a wheelchair. She was conscious but not clear, holding her head up only with great effort. “Did you get it all?” she asked indistinctly.

“Yes.”

Her eyes fell closed, and she smiled. Jason Stubbs arrived as they pushed her from the room.

“Who the hell is—”

“A client. Now unfasten these straps,” Ethan said. “I’m out of time.”
“Did you know?”

The vampire spat the question from the doorway. She’d only made it halfway down the stairs, distracted mid-task by the bellowing fistfight in the alley behind her.

Human, damn it. They were both human, so out of her jurisdiction, but rude. Not to mention way hard to ignore. Totally forgivable if she knocked their heads together, right? A public service, even. Nobody would mind if she—

“Buffy.” Did he just growl at her?

“I’m sorry—what?” She dragged her eyes back to Sean. He wore flannel pajamas, his demon face, and a scowl. “You’re all bad moody. Did I wake you up?”

“No. Did you send him here?” Sean was angry—vampire angry. She’d seen him mad before, in the Initiative cell, but he was beaten half to death and barely rational. This was honest-to-bloodsucker cold fury. He looked sort of like a dangerous, fangy Pomeranian puppy. Or one of those fluffy cats with flat faces, the kind that took a swipe at your ankles if you got too close.

“Since I don’t know what you’re talking about, I’m guessing not.”

Without breaking eye contact, Sean shifted, slow and on purpose, back to his human face, which was some pretty tight control for a baby vamp. With practice, maybe he could learn to Dracula. Would Tara really tutor him? Might be best. Vera and Mathilda weren’t over their intro scuffle at Crawford. They’d lose their stuffing if Sean showed up at school.

Eventually, she’d get the witches and the vampires on the same page. Then she’d add the council and—one by one—the potentials. A whole new world, a lot like the one she left, but without the bloodshed, horror, and looming planetary demise. It would happen. Breathe, Buffy. Breathe and balance. You’ve got this.

Whoda thunk neutralizing the Initiative would be the easy part?

“Fine.” Sean spun and stalked back into his apartment, leaving the door open. “Mi casa et cetera.” He continued around the dividing wall into his little kitchen without slowing down. “Want tea? Or that green stuff?”

“You have kshikle’un?” Her night was finally looking up—well, as long as she didn’t have to stake Sean. That would suck beyond sucking, and Spike would never forgive her. She followed him in and closed the door. It muted the yelling outside.

“Just for you. I’ve been afraid to try it.” By the time she got to his kitchen, he’d already poured her drink and put the teakettle on. He passed her a china tumbler the same pale green as the liquid inside it. It tapered in a graceful spiral from base to rim like a flower bud. “Will it really kill me?”

“From the inside out, like swallowing fire.”

“Jesus. And it doesn’t hurt you?” He plucked an orange from the wire bowl on his shelf and sliced it, revealing pulp the saturated red of sangria. Then he filled a tea ball with a mix of peppercorns, cloves, and chili flakes. When the teakettle screamed, he poured boiling water into his mug and garnished it with a blood orange twist.
“Sort of? Would’ve when I was younger, but now I heal so fast that it’s the good kind of hurt—like hot sauce.” She sipped it and licked her lips. Wonderful.

He wrinkled his nose. “What’s in it?”

“Lye.”

A second of open-mouthed incredulity and Sean shook his head.

“Hell of a way to get an endorphin rush.” He inhaled the steam from his mug. Lines of tension wrinkled his forehead and the corners of his mouth, and the skin around his eyes was a smidge too pale. Exhausted, if she had to guess, but it was hard to tell with vampires.

“So...” She laid her hand on his shoulder. Sean stared at it like it was a cockroach on his immaculate kitchen floor. She pulled it back. “What happened?”

“He dumped me.” His eyes hardened, steel sharp in his baby face.

“Who? Angel?” Well, that came out of nowhere. Now Angel was worried about his soul? He’d seemed sure it wasn’t a problem six hours ago.

“Why do you call him that?”

“It’s his name.” Except lately it hadn’t been, had it? At her request. Something cold settled in the pit of her stomach. “You call him Angelus, don’t you?”

“It’s his name.” Abruptly, Sean brushed past her into the living room. After a moment, she followed. She found him hunched in front of his computer staring at a wedding video.

“Sean?”

“I need to finish this by dawn. If you wanna yell at me, you’ll have to do it while I’m working.”

“I wasn’t gonna—is that an Aurelian mating ceremony?” On the screen, a vampire couple in elaborate, old-fashioned finery pledged eternal love before a crowd of equally well-dressed onlookers. She didn’t recognize anyone.

“Yeah.” He snorted. “But nobody in it is Aurelian.”

“Then why—”

“You’re the It Girl of the demon world, Buffy. A celebrity. Everybody wants to be you—or be with you.” He raked his hair into a dishwater bird’s nest, a gesture so Spike-like that she had to smother a smile. “We could double our forces instantly if we recruited outside the Order.”

Which was not a bad idea. She could organize them by lineage, let them ride Aurelian coattails into the twenty-first century. Other demon groups were already on the guest list. Hell, the Hsshtthk would be there, and they were scarier than any native-born demon, way scarier than vampires.

“I’ll run it by Spike and Angel, but I don’t have a problem with it.” Of course Sean would be the one to suggest strange alliances. With just two degrees of Sunnydale, he could put the Lords of Hell in the same room with the Council of Watchers—and maybe even make them behave. Was D’Hoffryn vulnerable to his thrall? What about Quentin Travers? Who else did he know? She rubbed his back in slow circles. “Good thought.”

He blinked a couple of times, breathing hard, and then he burst into tears. “Damn, that would make
this easier. Aurelians are so hard to find.”

“I know, sweetie.” She wrapped her arms around him, rested her cheek on the top of his head. “I know. Spike and I killed most of them.”

“I found a new one.” His whole body shook. “Today. And another possibility. I’ll meet with him...tomorrow night, maybe? The night after? I don’t know when. As soon as I catch up. Thank god for Thanksgiving break.”

School. She’d almost forgotten he was still in school.

“Do you ever sleep?” She tilted his chin up to get a good look at his face: tearstained, demoralized, and really, really young. Drowning, like Spike. She could feel him, still, howling in the distance, but nothing in his head made any sense. And now Angel was keeping secrets and making sudden moves.

Had she broken her vampires?

“Not lately.” He turned back to his screen and forwarded through the video, frame by frame. “I’m sorry I lost it. I’m just so tired.”

“You lose control under stress?”

“I guess.” He dropped his head into his hands.

“Why didn’t you tell us you had thrall?”

“Is that what it is? I mean, Spike tells stories about Drusilla and this is not that.”

“Xander sure seemed to—”

“I just put it out there. Xander dove for it.” Sean peered up at her between his fingers. “I have never seen that before in my life.” He turned his focus back to the computer screen like he was walking to the gallows. “I can’t replace anyone’s reality, can’t make them see things that aren’t there. I can suggest stuff, influence reactions. Coin flip whether it’ll work or not, but I don’t know until I try. And then? Sometimes people can tell.”

“They get mad?”

“They get mad. Buffy, please please don’t rely on it. I’m doing everything I can. Or I was, until Angelus dumped me—fuck.” He smacked his palms down hard on the top of his desk, next to his keyboard, and then sprinted out the door, to the landing, where he tipped the giant terra cotta planter up and looked beneath it. “Fuck.”

“Is there a problem?”

“He was here when I got home from Kolku’s, touching my stuff. He let himself in.” A nod at the planter. “With the spare key.”

“Creepy.” At sixteen, she thought it was romantic. In hindsight, not so much, and Angel knew better. If he hurt anyone with his stalky vampire bullshit, she’d kick him to dust.

“Tell me about it. I don’t get vampires. The Brachen make way more sense.” Had Sean imprinted on his Brachen landlady? That would explain so much. And there were worse role models. It took her decades to patch the hole left in her psyche by the imprint of her cheerleading coach. “And then he
“gave me the it’s-not-you-it’s-me speech.”

“Okay—ew. But it’s not you.”

“Please don’t, Buffy. I’m too tired.”

“It’s really not. He’s afraid he’ll lose his soul.” She closed the door and pushed Sean gently onto the couch. If he missed his deadline, they’d deal. “After you left, we asked if that was a possibility. He said it wasn’t, but I guess he reconsidered.”

“How? I don’t manipulate him or anything. I just share my calm. I have a lot of calm. Well, usually.” He bit his lip. “I don’t even get how it could happen. It’s happiness, right? So I’d have to be incredibly happy at the same time I was totally out of control and that’s...that’s...oh.”

“That’s a recipe for crucified puppies.”

“So probably for the best?”

“Probably.”

“Great. Just great. Fine. But...could you check on him?”

“Sure.” Warning bells jangled in the back of her skull. “Why?”

“I was pretty pissed. Out of control. I...uh...told him to go and he started running. I don’t know how far he got or which way he went.”

She rubbed her temples, feeling only a hair’s breadth less broken than the vampires. If this war didn’t end soon, they’d all implode. “I’ll find him. Take his car to him. You want me to get your key back, too?”

“Yes, please.”

“On it. Finish your project. Get some sleep.” She ruffled his hair and headed out into the night.

Fifteen yards away, she nearly tripped over one of the fistfight guys. He sat in the alley with his chin on his knees, sound asleep and snoring. Tears dragged a salt trail down his bruised cheekbones.
“I kind of hate you all.”

Sean’s face peeked, pale and bleary, from the bundle of blankets he’d dragged with him to answer the door.

“Tough.” The fading scents of chocolate, apple, and jalapeno competed with the smell of brimstone that hung in the air like—hold up. Brimstone? A question for later. Right now, “Slayer wants your calendar and your budget—oh, and your...your routing number.”

Sean blinked blankly. Then, without so much as a by-your-leave, he turned his back and stumbled to the kitchen, leaving Spike alone at the threshold next to a rumpled mound of discarded blankets. He closed the door, gentle as he could with his own hackles rising, and dumped the blankets onto the unmade bed. Then he followed.

Boy was downright surly, today.

And what for? Gone past four, already. Even a fledgling should be up and about. Wasn’t like Sean to stay abed this late into the afternoon. He’d always been an early riser, up as soon as the daylight grayed, diligent at some task or other. Something was wrong.

But what?

Buffy’s explanation hadn’t helped a whit. Thank god she’d used a phone or he’d still be lost. She must’ve been hunting. She’d fallen so far into sense and motion that he could smell the night air like he was standing beside her but couldn’t even find his name in her mind. Pure slayer, fierce and wordless. So he’d had to make do with what she said out loud. Something about Angel’s car, maybe?

She’d updated him best she could and sent him off to bed with a list of instructions as long as his arm.

The boy’d had some sort of tiff with Angel. He knew that much. But that couldn’t be all, surely? Course he pushed a bit, way a fledgling ought, testing. That was normal—vampire normal—and, god knows, Sean had seen little enough of that. Good for him to get a taste.

But Angel was bound to push back sooner or later. They’d all seen it coming, Thanksgiving revelations notwithstanding. And there Sean stood, no blood, no bruises, all his limbs intact. Couldn’t have been much of a fight. When he was a fledgling, Angelus liked to bait him into disobedience and flay him raw for the sport of it. This new, souled Angel was a more magnanimous master.

Course, he had made fledgling Sam swim to shore from a submarine, so clearly a soul did not entirely preclude Angelus’ particular brand of spite.

“What crawled up your—”

Sean slammed two mugs down onto the counter. “Coffee?” He didn’t wait for an answer, but poured two cups full to the brim and smacked the hammered tin cinnamon shaker down beside them.

“Had a night, did you?” He slid a brown paper parcel down the counter toward Sean, who eyed it incuriously while he sipped his coffee.
“Made my deadline. That’s all that matters.”

“Your deadline?” Buffy was right. They couldn’t have him worried about work, right now, in the middle of a war. Not when all signs said things were about to go sideways. Why else would Dru resurface, spouting dire warnings? And the mad chase to an unfamiliar cemetery—what was that about?

“Had to finish a wedding video. Didn’t wanna be late. Vampires are assholes.”

“Present company excluded?” Sean raised an eyebrow pointedly. “Can’t be all that bad, can it? Slayer’s arrangin’ an allowance for you. Says you’re workin’ too much. Package is from her.”

“Buffy’s a sweetheart,” Sean said, his expression softening, “like her mom.”

“Get no argument from me.” A wistful pang twisted his gut. He missed Joyce more than a fella ought to miss his mother-in-law, ‘specially with Drusilla lurking about. She could always get him sorted, no matter what games Dru played. He glanced at the calendar tacked to Sean’s refrigerator. Tomorrow. She’d be back from her sister’s place tomorrow. He could wait that long. Bring her a present, maybe. Those leggy daisies she loved so much, sepia-toned wildflowers like his mum kept on the sitting-room sill.

“Tell her—god, I don’t know. Thank you? And thank you, Spike. If I don’t have to worry about rent, everything gets easier.” Sean unlooped the string from the package with hesitant care. “But money isn’t the only reason I....” He pulled back the paper and stared, openmouthed, at the packets of blood inside, all labeled *Summers, Elizabeth A.* in Doc Framke’s neat script. “Oh, wow. She’s not mad at me? She really didn’t send Angelus?”

“Nobody sent Angelus, lad.” He upended the cinnamon into his coffee. “He does what he does.”

“Fuck that.” Sean gulped the rest of his own coffee and poured another cup. “And fuck him. I don’t understand the whole soul thing. Is it really that important?”

“What do you think?”

“Well, I don’t have one, and I’m not nailing puppies to the door.” He sighed. “Do you ever think about...oh, I dunno...staking him?”

Spike laughed. “All the time. Never could. Likely still can’t. He’s my sire.”

“He’s not *my* sire.”

“Sean.”

“I could do it.”

“*Sean.*”

“Just wait for him to go to sleep and—”

Spike rapped the bridge of Sean’s nose sharply with two stiff fingers, the way you would to stop a puppy from biting. “You’re not gonna kill Angelus.”

“It wouldn’t be any trouble just to—”

He cuffed the boy hard enough to make him stumble. “Bloody hell, kid. I don’t wanna head the Order. Do you?”
“That’s...okay, that’s actually a good point.”

“You think?” He shook Sean, just a little. “Is that what put a bee in your bonnet? You’re mad at Angelus?”

“No. I mean, I am, but that’s not it. He still has to finish my picture, by the way, and he’s not weaseling out of the show. Not now. I have way too much skin in the—”

“Sean!” He shook the kid again, harder this time. “What’s the problem?”

“The scary dream-chick in the face paint. Could you stop manhandling me?”

“No.” Face paint? All the little hairs on the back of Spike’s neck stood up. “What are you on about?”

“I haven’t slept, Spike. Not really. Not for weeks. None of us have. All the Sunnydale Aurelians are having nightmares—except you. I told you that.”

His whole body buzzed like some nasty was sneakin’ up behind him. “Bird in your dreams—dark skin and hair, wrapped in white, face painted like a skull?”

“Yeah. Dreadlocks. Not good dreads. Not deliberate, if you get what I mean? The kind of dreads that happen when you have tight curls and no way to comb them. She feels...ancient? I dunno.”

Bollocks and buggery. “And you dream about her?”

“Over and over again. She waits for me—for all of us—right at the threshold between waking and sleeping? If I get past her, I can fall asleep, but I usually can’t. She’s too fast.”

Spike rubbed his temples. He’d slept, as per Buffy’s instruction, but not much and not well. Not with Dru gallivanting through Sunnydale. Not with the attacks from outsiders coming at such a clip. Like Sean, he’d spent weeks on high alert, and he’d worn a trifle thin. Thank god the Aurelian challengers went after Angelus. They wanted the Order. The Hellmouth itself, with its resident slayer, wasn’t worth the misery.

“Sean.” He swallowed the panic rising in the back of his throat. “What does she do?”

“She...she shows me things. All of us, I mean. All different. But I don’t understand any of it. It’s really symbolic and ominous and.... Unfamiliar. Like someone else’s dream. And when I don’t get it, she gets mad.” He sighed. “I don’t think she likes me.”

“No, lad. She doesn’t like any of us.” Sodding slayer dreams, which left him at a loss. For words. For ideas. He didn’t even know who to ask. Rupert, maybe? No, this was outside the purview of the Council. They knew how to kill vampires, not how they came to have prophetic nightmares. Might help interpret, though.

“Who is she?” Sean’s voice shook.

“Uh...the slayer. The Slayer. The first one.” Slow, deep breaths. Buffy was asleep or he’d ask her. Anya, maybe? Or the witches. Think, William. You used to be good at it. “Right. Everybody dreaming—are they mine?”

“Yeah. All the Sunnydale Aurelians, like I said. Everybody bound to you.”

Bound to him and him to Buffy. Bloody buggering hell.
“Have you written them down, anywhere?”

“Spike?” Sean shifted foot to foot with wary discomfort. “What happened to your accent?”

“Not important, right now.” Insult William’s intelligence and up he jumped, defending his bloody honor. He’d never get rid of the tosser, now. “Have you?”

“No—should I?”

“Yes. Spread the word. Everyone records their dreams until further notice. Understand?”

“Got it. I just didn’t know it was important. I thought you were here to yell at me for pushing Xander.”

“Well, I was. Sidetracked, is all.” He cuffed Sean soundly on the side of the head and the fledgling grinned. “Mind me, Sean. Don’t make Buffy stake you.”

“How are you gettin’ Angelus to reminisce in an—” A knock interrupted him. “Expectin’ someone?”

Sean glanced up at his clock. “Must be three minutes after sunset. She is prompt. Gotta give her that.” He made his way to the living room and pulled back a curtain to reveal a shelf packed, floor to ceiling, with video tapes. He selected one and went to the door.

A dark-haired vampire woman in demon face stood on the other side. “Hey, Corrinne. How are you?”

“Just give me the tape.”

“No time for chitchat? Well, it was a beautiful ceremony. Unusual choice, though, since you’re not Aurelian.”

She huffed and rolled her eyes. “Like you are?”

“I actually am. Funny, right?” He held the tape out and Corrinne struck, quick as a snake, aiming for his wrist with talons lacquered crimson.

She rebounded at equal force off the threshold, and one of her nails snapped.

“Oh, come on. A human? There’s a human living here? See, Sean, this is why nobody believes your stupid story. An Aurelian would never....”

Spike stepped around the door into her line of sight and bared his fangs in a leer. “An Aurelian would never what?”

“M-master.” Corrinne dropped ungracefully to her knees and bowed her head. “I wouldn’t presume.”

“Corrinne, is it?” She nodded without lifting her eyes. Her shoulders trembled. “Take your bloody tape. My kinsman and I are in the middle of a conversation.”

Sean held the tape out, keeping his fingers carefully inside the invisible boundary of the threshold. “Pleasure doing business with you.” Her gaze flicked back and forth between Sean’s face and
Spike’s, eyes wide and wild. She snatched the tape and fled.

Sean closed the door and grinned. “Thanks. That helped a lot.”

Only one thing bothered Spike. “Didn’t know you had humans upstairs. Thought it was just Brachen demons.”

“It is,” Sean said. Spike raised an eyebrow. “Oh. Are you wondering about the threshold?”

“Well, yeah.”

“My friend Berit made it. Owed me a favor. Hearth and home? Kind of her thing.”
“I’m not freaking out.”

She was definitely freaking out.

“Angel, she’s totally out of control. Why can’t you see that?” Her voice spiraled upward to a tiny, tinny whine, crackling at the limits of his cell phone’s speaker. He winced away like the morning after, head throbbing.

He hadn’t had a hangover in centuries, but he remembered. In ainm Dé, he remembered.

“It was Buffy’s decision to take away your power?”


“What do you want, Willow?”

“Well, you don’t have to be all grumpypants about it.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“No—wait!” Willow squeaked. “Anya said Sean thralled Xander!”

Buffy tipped her head back, eyes to the top of the car, and mouthed the words ‘fixed that.’ Or it might have been ‘fuck this.’ He couldn’t really tell.

“And?” Angel said.

Willow had clearly expected some other response. She spluttered and huffed. “But aren’t you going to do something?”

“Not my problem. Take it up with Spike. Anything else?”

“Well, no, but....”

“Goodbye, Willow.” He cut her protest short by ending the call.

“I talked to him late last night,” Buffy said, “before I went looking for you. Spike just left his apartment.” She took a corner a little too fast, narrowly missing a fire hydrant, swore under her breath as she made the correction. His fingers tightened on the leather edge of the passenger seat. “Sorry—not used to this car.”

She’d found him somewhere north of Oxnard, on the edge of Sam’s territory, at six thirty in the morning. He was huddled in an alley doorway with his back to the first rays of the rising sun, coat collar popped up to shield his face. If he’d kept his hands tucked in and his head down, he probably would have survived the day. Probably.

He’d run all the way from Sunnydale.

He didn’t know if there really was something chasing him or if the nightmarish pursuer at the edge of his perception was an artifact of Sean’s thrall. But every time he slowed down, a sense of hounding doom overwhelmed him and spurred him onward. When he finally stopped running, it was because
he’d decided to die.

That’s when Buffy pulled up beside him, shoved him into the trunk of his own car, and drove him to Sam’s place. They spent the day there, minions tiptoeing around the half-conscious slayer like they thought she might bite. Neither of them actually slept. They left just before sunset with him wrapped in a blanket to withstand the fading light.

“What’s Spike have to say?” Amazing how much he relied on their connection. It was an incredible weapon. Their preternatural awareness of one another let them fight as a seamless unit, a single attacker coming from two directions, closing on their foe like a snapping jaw. Unbeatable. That was the only reason Sunnydale hadn’t fallen. He had no other warriors on the Hellmouth. He had none to spare.

He could resent it all he wanted, but he needed them together.

“Among other things, he says we have bigger problems than Sean’s thrall.”

Of course they did. Angel pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders. He wanted to sleep for a century. His body ached in the aftermath of his panicked flight from Sunnydale. “What is it this time?”

“Nightmares.”

“Sean’s nightmares? With the face-paint girl?” She smacked the steering wheel hard with the heels of her hands.

“Angel, so help me god—”

“What?” She scowled murderously at the road ahead. “Are they important?”

The poppy strains of Madonna’s *Material Girl* shattered the tension. He was pleased, briefly, that he recognized the song, but then Buffy turned her glare on him and punched a button on her phone. “Hey, Anya.”

Her cell phone speaker was better than his. Anya sounded clear as life. “I’m sorry, Buffy. I’m so sorry. Willow called Angel. I accidentally told her some things I shouldn’t have. I thought they knew. I really did. But they don’t know anything!”

“As a rule, yeah. Not your fault.”

“Xander seems okay. I mean, he’ll get over it. But there’s something off with Willow. She’s so angry. I think she’s looking for vengeance.”

“Damn it. I’ll...I’ll figure it out. It’s officially on my to-do list. How was the meeting with the caterer?”

“Great—she had so many ideas! You have final approval, of course. She’ll make small batches of everything for you to taste test before the big day. It’s finally coming together. I’m excited.”

“Me, too.” Buffy’s face softened into a sweet smile that made her look younger than Sean. No matter how old the mind inside it was, her body was eighteen, with a girl’s slender curves and fresh skin. Her eyes were clear and green as beach glass.

No.
That wasn’t right. They were blue, weren’t they? Buffy had blond hair and blue eyes.

With rising panic, he pulled his wallet from the pocket of his coat and opened it to the photo she’d given him before he lost his soul. Blond hair pulled sleekly to the side with a pink barrette shaped like a bow. Sun-kissed cheeks and glossy lips and large green eyes untouched by worry or despair. Barely more than a child.

“Catch you later, Anya. Thanks again,” she said, and hung up the phone. “Angel, why are you staring at me?”

“Your eyes are green.”

“Hazel, actually. They go from brownish greenish to a kind of amber gold. What color did you think they were?”

“Blue.”

“Huh. Not in any life I’ve lived so far.” She bit her lip and giggled. “Spike says, and I quote, ‘Darla’s eyes were blue, you sodding nit.’ End quote.”

“No. No. I remember. You had beautiful blue—”

“Angel? Stop. You left me for my own good.” She made air quotes with her fingers, taking her hands off the wheel of the car, which lurched into the oncoming lane. She yanked it back to the sound of blaring horns. “Which, in hindsight, was probably the right choice. But that doesn’t mean I’ll let you wax poetic about the color of my eyes—especially since you just dumped Sean for the same stupid reason.”

“That’s not fair.” Why was she saying this? “Do you think I wanted to leave?”

“Who—me or Sean?”

“Either of you.” What did she want from him? “Buffy, where is this coming from? I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the dreams. I didn’t realize they mattered. Who’s the face-paint girl?”

“The First Slayer.” She looked directly at him and emphasized each word, hauled the car back on course when it veered off. “The Sunnydale Aurelians are having slayer dreams.”

The bottom fell out of his stomach. “Dia ár sábháil,” he whispered. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack. Was that Gaelic?”

“Yeah. How?”

“We’re not sure yet, but that’s part of the reason Sean lost control. He isn’t sleeping. He’s working too much, still going to school, and trying to find the few Aurelians left in Sunnydale. He’s in this constant state of panic, one step ahead of catastrophic failure, and then someone led him on and dumped him.”

“I’m sorry.” He closed his eyes. “I didn’t want to.”

She pulled into the parking garage beneath Angel Investigations and cut the engine. “It would be easier if you didn’t mean that, but you do, don’t you?”

Did she think he wanted to leave peace and comfort, place and company to spend eternity in the dark alone? How could he? But he couldn’t risk freeing the monster inside of him. He couldn’t risk the
world. He had no choice. “Yeah.”

“My god, you are an idiot.” She ran frantic fingers through the haystack of her hair. “I bet you’ll even spin it as some noble sacrifice, like you’re the big hero, but you’re not. You’re a coward. If you’re so worried about your soul, fix it. Find a way. It’s what I’d do.” She smiled again, sweet and warm. “It’s what Spike would do.”

“Spike wouldn’t—”

“Spike definitely would.” He was gearing up to argue when she stuck a finger in his face. “What he wouldn’t do is wallow in misery and splatter it on everyone he loves, and neither should you. You’ve done enough damage.”

He felt like he’d been slapped. He’d reared Spike and trained him, made him a punching bag and the butt of jokes, set him to mind Drusilla when he got tired of her. He was Spike’s master, his sire, his superior in every way, so how the hell, in Buffy’s reckoning, had Spike come out ahead? He stared numbly into her bottle-green eyes.

“You know, Angel, when you get all I-am-Champion-hear-me-roar, I can see it in your face. Let’s go.” She got out of the car and locked up, dropped his keys into her purse. “I’ll give those back to you tomorrow. I’m taking your car to the shop—it needs new windows.” His windows were fine but, given her uncertain mood, he decided not to argue.

When they walked into the Angel Investigations office, Cordelia looked pointedly from Buffy’s rumpled hair to Angel’s rumpled shirt and said, “Hi, Buffy. Is the wedding still on?”

Doyle blushed bright red. “I...uh...sure she didn’t mean....”

“I’m sure she did,” Buffy said. “Hey, Cordy. The wedding’s still on. I have a jillion errands to run and family stuff keeps imploding.”

“Family, huh? Is that what you guys call vampires, now?”

“Just the ones who’re family. Speaking of—is there someplace quiet I can sit? I told my dad I’d call when I got here.”


“Getting coffee. Yes, ma’am.”

“What’s wrong?” Cordelia asked.

“Nothing.” She folded her arms and waited, tapping the toe of one designer shoe. “I...I think I screwed up.”

“No!” His throat felt tight and sore. He couldn’t draw in enough air to sustain speech. The words dropped off at their ends. “No. I panicked and hurt someone—not physically.”

“Hurt someone,” she repeated. Her eyes widened. “Wait, was it a breakup?”

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know if it’s a breakup?”
“It’s complicated, okay?”

“It’s gotta be. I can’t even guess who you were seeing. The only Sunnydale person you ever talk about is that guy Sea...” She blinked precisely twice. “Ohhh.”

“Coffee,” Doyle said. “Piping warm. What’s up?”

“It’s complicated.” She took the cups from Doyle, handed them to Angel, and opened his office door. “We’ll talk later.”

“See you in ten. Love you, too.” Buffy snapped her phone closed. “Is that hot coffee?”

“It’s...uh...warm coffee.”

“Close enough.” She wrapped her fingers around the cup. “Thanks. Sorry I yelled at you.”

He nodded, tried to smile, but the word coward still rang in his ears. “Your phone is...good.”


“I...don’t know what any of that means.”

“It means that, for now, time is on my—”

A green-skinned demon in studded armor burst through the glass of his office window, swinging a sword in a lethal arc. A gem in the center of its forehead glittered crimson in the half-light. Buffy rose from the chair, spun, and kicked so smoothly it looked choreographed. The creature slammed into the wall, its helmet clattering against the wood paneling.

He felt so slow, lead to her quicksilver. By the time the ax was in his hand, she’d leapt atop the demon, grinding its face into the floor. “Angel.” She practically crackled with urgency. The eyes that met his were neither blue nor green, but the glittering yellow of phosphor bronze. “Don’t come any closer.”

He stopped mid-step.

“Good. Now, drop your weapon. I need you to answer a question, okay?”

“But it attacked—”

“Okay?” she asked again. He nodded. “Good. Do you want to be human?”

His ax clattered to the floor. “What?”

“Yes or no, Angel. I can’t hold him forever. Do you want to be human?”

What a question that was. He sank to a crouch on his office floor. A shallow cut over the thing’s eye oozed green neon. “It’s the blood,” she said. “Come on, Angel. Make a choice.”

Human. He’d thought about it when they were together, but only for her sake, because it was what she wanted. Not that he hadn’t dreamed of home and family when he was young, but that dream died when he did. “One drop, and your heart will beat.”

He couldn’t think. He’d been running on panic since Sean exiled him, since an imaginary menace
chased him forty miles down the California coast. Exiled. His own fault. He’d given up at the end, too, waited on his knees to die like a coward, cornered by the rising sun. “You’ll breathe.”

He could fix it, maybe. Apologize and go back. But he couldn’t have Sean’s world if he were human. “You’ll live.”

He couldn’t have Buffy’s world, either. “You’ll grow old.”

His order would be lost to him. His family. “You’ll die.”

“Angel!” The creature struggled beneath her. She tightened her grip. “Make a goddamned choice!”

“No now,” he said.

“You sure? No future guarantees.” There never were. But if he wanted that—someday—he’d find a way. He was not a coward.

“I’m sure,” he said, and the panic finally subsided.

Buffy lifted the demon’s head with both hands and smashed it, forehead first, into the office floor. It vanished in a flash of red-white light.
The building had once been an ostentatious old Southern California mansion but, like many such houses, it was now carved into smaller apartments, each with its own entrance. It was near the university, in the small section of town mostly inhabited by Sunnydale’s demon population.

Giles checked the business card again. In the midst of a line drawing landscape, wound about with trailing flowers, stood a wooden sign carved with the words “Henry David Productions.” A stand of trees partly obscured a small pond in the distance. At the bottom of the card, “Sean Walden, Filmmaker,” was printed in unobtrusive gray text. Sean’s address and office hours were on the back.

It was not yet full dark, early in the hours listed on the card. Only in Sunnydale could an entrepreneur get away with business hours that began after the sun went down. All things considered, it might even be a competitive advantage. He hadn’t realized how many of the people he interacted with every day might be something other than human until Buffy invited a few of them over for Thanksgiving dinner. Given how smoothly the event had gone, she may have been making a point.

He walked around the building until he found the door. It was at the bottom of a tidy flight of concrete stairs—basement level, then—and painted a deep, muted green. On the wall next to the door, above a large terra cotta pot planted with a variety of herbs and succulents, was a steel placard bearing Sean’s name.

He hoped he hadn’t made a mistake in coming by himself, particularly since he hadn’t mentioned the trip to anyone else. Should he disappear, the vampire whose lair he’d walked into alone would be the only one who knew. Taking one last steadying breath, he raised his fist and knocked.

The vampire opened the door.

“You know those dreams you have where people show up completely out of context—like the one where you run into your second grade teacher at a drag show?” He winked. “Makes you take another look at your second grade teacher.”

“Well, you did say....” Giles glanced back down at the card in his hand. “Is this a good time?”

Sean laughed. “No time better. Come in. Please.”

The apartment was silent and still as the grave, but a place of rest and welcome, nonetheless. Not at all what he’d expected from a vampire’s lair. This was someone’s home.

There were no windows. A riot of foliage thrived in light diffused by linen shades. More than a dozen brushed metal planters hung in corners or clustered on end tables: maidenhair fern and broad leafed begonia, parlor palm and peppermint, Swedish ivy, sedge, and mosses—too many mosses to count. The air smelled alive.
Plush pillows in shades of green lay scattered in inviting disarray across the furniture, and gray fabric hangings covered the walls. The single geometric nod was a wooden easel which bore a mostly finished charcoal drawing of Sean himself, perched in a director’s chair and smiling over his shoulder at the viewer. The detail was exquisite.

“Isn’t that amazing? Angelus’ work.” Sean said. “He swears it’s almost done, but he finds something new to obsess over every time he touches it. I was planning to send it to my grandparents for Christmas, but now I just hope it’s done in time for the show.” He grinned. “Got my fingers crossed.”

“Your...grandparents?” Although he’d been told that Sean hadn’t severed ties with his human life, Giles still hadn’t expected him to talk about his family. He’d assumed the reference to ‘calling grandma’ was a joke.

“They live in Portland—Oregon, not Maine. They raised me,” Sean said. “I haven’t been back since...well, since everything. But I call them and we write. They don’t know.”

He waved a hand in the general direction of the couch. “Have a seat. You want something to drink? I’ve got...coffee, tea, beer, soda...” He went around the divider into his kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. “…the evil green stuff Buffy likes that’ll kill you if you drink more than a thimble full...so, yes. Poison. I have poison, beef blood, and...pineapple juice.”

Giles had an absurd urge to jot the contents of Sean’s refrigerator down on his note pad. He almost resisted. “Beer would be fine. Thank you.”

Sean appeared a moment later with two tall glasses and watched as Giles finished writing. “The beer is local,” he said. “I have a friend who runs a microbrewery—I don’t know if that makes a difference for your notes.”

“Does it make a difference to you?” Giles asked as he took the glass. “That it’s local?”

Sean slouched in a chair across from him and sipped at his drink. Whatever was in his glass was carbonated and reddish, like a cranberry spritzer. “Yes and no,” Sean said. “It matters that it doesn’t suck. It matters that Chilge made it, ‘cause he’s my friend and we help each other out. It matters that he uses the money I give him to buy things from other people I know...you know, those are all yesses. Yeah. It makes a difference.”

“That surprises you?” He was surprised. That argument for patronizing local business was beyond the grasp of most young men with souls.

“It makes a different difference than it used to,” Sean said. “I care for...reasons. It used to be...used to be...” He shook his head impatiently. “It used to be the right thing to do. Now, it’s the smart thing.”

“That’s an important distinction?”

He nodded. “I remember...the demon doesn’t care about artisan beer, you know? Or a lot of the stuff I used to care about. I was an activist. Did you know that? A bleeding-edge do-gooder.” Sean yanked open the bottom drawer of the table next to the couch and pulled out a handful of plastic cards, all rubber-banded together. He pulled the band off and dealt them out onto the table, one at a time, so Giles could see.

They were membership cards—mostly to animal rights and social justice groups, with a smattering of vegetarian cooking clubs and a couple of prominent environmental action committees.

“I marched. I organized. I started letter-writing campaigns, filmed protest documentaries. I was gonna
change the world.” He raised his glass so that it sparkled crimson in the light and smiled a twisted, insincere little almost-grimace. “Instead? It changed me.”

“You don’t...like...being a vampire?” There was some central piece missing from his understanding. There had to be. It was flatly self-contradictory. Sean would have preferred to remain human, but he still missed his sire? He associated with an assortment of demons and humans—rare for vampires, who were usually fairly clannish—as well as his own family, senior members of which had allied with the slayer against their own kind.

“I don’t hate it,” he said, swirling the liquid around in his glass. “I’m just not very good at it. My other life—I was good at that.”

Giles sipped his beer. It was good, dark and rich. “Mmm. You seemed like you were catching on. That’s quite the talent.”

Sean winced. “Everybody else already yelled at me. I think it might be your turn. Let’s see. Angelus spoke to me last night before he left town. Buffy’s lecture came just before dawn, this morning. Spike smacked me in the back of the head this afternoon. Took him a while. I’m kind of surprised you didn’t run into him as he was leaving. Yeah, you’re the only one left. I hereby present myself for scolding.” He bowed his head and folded his hands in his lap.

It was such an ordinary, age-appropriate irreverence that Giles was momentarily speechless. Sean opened one eye just a crack. “I didn’t mean to do that to you,” he said. “I meant to make Xander shut up—didn’t know it would work so well—but I just wanted to convince you we were on the same side.”

“Why is that?” Giles asked, and Sean raised one eyebrow in a strikingly Spike-like fashion. “I understand why you wanted to convince me. I mean, why are we on the same side? I know you said you couldn’t...”

“I couldn’t figure out how to hunt. I’m small—wasn’t quite finished growing, I think. I was never fast or strong or...physical, really. That’s better, now, but I bet you’re still stronger than me. There are lots of us who don’t settle in. We do the best we can, but....”

“The bite houses.”

“Yeah. I was totally determined not to end up there.” Sean shuddered. “I made friends with those girls, at first. After a while—it’s like bonding with guppies. Just don’t. I mean, the real vampires hate them. They hate me. I’m only alive because I had a roommate.” He sighed. “They’d probably hate me even if I did hunt.”

“Your roommate...was human?”

“Yeah. I lived in student housing.” There was Spike’s eyebrow thing again. “So a bunch of them were chasing me. They’d already pounded on me a lot, but I got loose and ran, went back to our room and knocked on the door—I’d been missing for about three days. Kent took one look at me and said, ‘Get your ass in here!’ I didn’t find out until later that I was in demon face. Kent’s local.”

“And he still invited you in?” Giles hoped none of his children would do anything so foolish.

“My demon face? Not intimidating.” Sean shifted to a vampire face which looked like nothing quite so much as a house cat. He changed back almost immediately. “I’m like ‘The Vampire as imagined by Jody Bergsma.’”

The reference was unfamiliar. Giles wrote the name in his notes to research later.
“Spike gets crap about it, too. His demon face is, like, Hollywood pretty. They challenge him ‘cause they think he’ll be a pushover. Only he’s not, and I am.”

Wait. “Other vampires attack you for your appearance?” Sean shifted again and made a soft chirruping noise, lifting his eyebrows and blinking his golden eyes once, very slowly, exactly as a kitten might. Giles chuckled. “All right. You’ve made your point.”

“Kent helped me find this place, before he graduated and moved away.” Sean said, shaking off the demon. “He knew...stuff. I like it here. Building is owned by a family of Brachen. Decent people. I take care of the landscaping in exchange for part of the rent. Keeps my expenses down.”

“So...you, and others like you, are rejected by your own kind? You live at the edges of human society? Secretly?” Giles made a note to pay closer attention at evening events.

“Closed.” He grinned. “Spike was the first real vampire to talk to me—except for work. They’ll talk if they want me to film something, but other than that? Nah. I make them pay me up front, too. Never trust vampires.”
A half mile outside the city limits, he spotted Drusilla.

She crouched like a gargoyle atop a utility pole, incandescent against the tousled black and scarlet of the sunset sky. As he passed, almost before he realized it was her, she stood to her full height, tipped forward, and dove, arms outstretched, toward the earth. He braked hard and spun the DeSoto to a stop on the empty highway.

At the bow of her arc, something taut as a kite string caught her. It translated the force of her fall into forward momentum and sent her hurtling horizontally back toward town. It took him a moment to understand what he was seeing.

Drusilla was swinging hand over hand along the power lines.

_Bloody buggering hell._ No wonder he couldn’t track her by scent. The poles were three hundred feet apart. She could shimmy up and swing across. By the time she slid back down, he’d have lost her trail. She could jump, too, pole to rooftop to ground and up again, leaving a muddled scatter of partial trails in her wake. Untrackable.

Then again—he laughed aloud at her audacity—she might just tuck up like an aerialist, flip past the poles, and skim from line to line indefinitely, forty feet in the air. “Neat trick, love,” he said, as she disappeared into the distance, flitting and swooping like a swallow in flight.

He didn’t know if he could do it. He was stronger by a fair bit, but she was a good deal lighter, and much easier to throw around. Some of Buffy’s acrobatics were beyond him, too. He’d half a mind to pull over and try, but Buffy’s impatience bubbled up inside him. With one last longing look, he put the DeSoto back on the road and pointed it at Los Angeles, at Buffy and his father-in-law to be.

Wasn’t worth the worry. He’d catch Dru when she wanted to be caught.

Truth be told, he worried more about what she’d said than anything she’d done. _I am not a flower._ And wasn’t that a kick in the teeth? Drusilla was many things—fickle, vengeful, selfish, and mad—but she was not a liar. She said it; she meant it. She was not a bloody flower. She was not the Moon Vine.

Which left him...where, exactly?

Lost in a haunted wood, of course. Stone trees with the faces of gods, all wound about with flowers. The wolves were coming. The wolves were coming. The wolves were coming.

Yellow eyes gleaming even in daylight, hunting him, chasing him, howling his name. The slayers in his dreams and the dreams of his family? Or the mystery at the end of Dru’s goose chase, the pack of humans waiting unwisely for a fledgling to rise? Both, perhaps? Or something he hadn’t thought of yet. He didn’t know.

And if Dru was not the Moon Vine, who was? Willow, maybe. Red was certainly motivated, and she had power enough to cause trouble, even with the dampers on. Tara? No. Not a mean bone in that girl’s body.

He itched to get Rupert and Anya alone with a stack of old books.

Nothing for it, now. He turned his music up and lost himself in it. He hardly felt time passing until he
pulled into Burbank for gas. As he turned out of the station, a battered truck pulled up beside him. The driver glanced his way, let out a snarl audible over the rumble of both engines and his remastered Ramones CD, and laid on his horn. Spike recognized him.

Cam Salk, erstwhile master of Oxnard, looked no worse for wear. He’d had a week or three to lick his wounds, but it hadn’t improved his temper any. Still as smooth as barbed wire, and he kept hammering on that horn. Did he want to pull over and have it out right now? Spike changed faces and rolled his window down.

“Sod off, Cam. Don’t have time for your—” That’s when the demon stood up in the bed of the truck.

It was better than eight feet tall—prob’ly why Cam was driving—and wore something suspiciously like a Nazi uniform, all high boots, broad shoulders, and shiny silver buttons. With a grin that exposed double rows of jagged teeth, it took one crouching step forward, and leapt for the roof of the DeSoto.

Spike floored it. He hit sixty from a stoplight standstill in eleven seconds flat. By the time twenty seconds had passed, he was screaming through Burbank at a cool one-ten per with a chorus of sirens wailing behind him. Buffy wouldn’t like it.

But he did.

His baby flew, ‘specially since they’d fixed her up, and Cam’s Chevy cornered like a rhino on roller skates. If it hit you, it’d hurt for certain, but it was gonna hit a whole heap of other things first. He spun onto a residential street, and slowed when the DeSoto ricocheted off a curb and bounced up onto two wheels. If he ever found the bloke who invented roundabouts, he’d drain him dry and beg forgiveness after. Bloody stupid. He swerved right to send a row of blue plastic recycling bins tumbling, and let out a joyous whoop.

Truth was, all this domesticity was beginning to wear.

Not that he minded folding napkins any. Buffy’s delight alone was worth Sean’s ribbing and the perplexed side-eye he got from Angel. And even he could tell the white sweater was a hit. The look on Anya’s face was better than any mirror. Chit actually licked her lips.

But chasing Dru was the closest he’d gotten to a real hunt in months, and he missed it.

Buffy did her best. She found him something to kill most every night, but it wasn’t the sort of challenge he craved. Sunnydale baddies clearly favored quantity over quality, so many routine battles he wanted to sleep for an age. An Aurelian attacker or two would solve the problem, maybe, but he wasn’t so desperate that he’d take the tedium of the Order over it.

And he’d throttle the boy to dust before he let him kill Angelus.

A real fight, his to win or lose, instead of this interminable wash of fledglings—now that would hit the spot. A shame he couldn’t hunt Buffy, anymore. She was the best fight of his life.

A rumble of engines split the quiet night air.

Motorcycles. Harleys? Hard to tell. Mammoth machines, four of them, each carrying one of Cam’s Nazi demons, roared up on him. When they were almost at his flanks, he took a hard right across a lawn through a cluster of holly trees, bashed a picket fence to kindling with his front bumper, and pulled out onto the next street heading in the opposite direction.
Harder to dismiss debris on a bike—even a bike that big. They slowed, but not in time. All of them shimmied and lost momentum. One spun out and hit the ground. With a howl of fury, the downed demon hurled a picket like a javelin at his rear window. He picked up speed, again, and it fell short. The demon climbed back onto his bike and gave chase.

Spike pinballed from the left shoulder of the street to the right as he drove, singing over the smack and clatter that spilled a minefield of plastic bins behind him. Impassable for the bikes, but not even a dent in his bumper. By the time he reached five south, Cam and his demons were a memory.
“Does your friend know you left his classic Plymouth soft top at a back-alley chop shop?” The waitress grunted hello and slapped damp menus onto the table without making eye contact. A smear of mustard stained the gingham cuff of her uniform sleeve.

Something about the uniform made Buffy antsy.

The diner wasn’t better. Blocks of color covered walls and ceiling: red, yellow, green, blue, and white. The effect was oppressively cheerful, like being stuffed inside a Mondrian painting. From across the room, an overweight man in a trucker hat followed her with rheumy eyes. He gave her a gap-toothed leer when he caught her looking back.

She’d be out of there in a splintered second, but this was the only all-night diner the Angel Investigations team knew offhand, and the idea of putting Spike and her father together in a bar was nothing but badness.

“Buffy?”

“I’m sorry—what?” Her mind kicked over a couple of times, sputtering like a lawnmower, before it caught hold of the last thing he said. “Whoa—no. No chop shop. Nuh uh.”

“Are you in trouble, honey?” He pursed his lips. “I know you ran with a rough crowd in Los Angeles, but I thought moving to Sunnydale would—”

“No. Dad—”

“Do you need money?” He hitched his jacket up and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. Was he planning to throw cash at her? For no good reason? Where was this fatherly generosity when she and Dawn were eating ramen and generic pop-tarts alone in their disintegrating house?

“No.”

“Are you pregnant?”

She couldn’t help it. She laughed. “God, no.”

“What am I supposed to think, Buffy? You look like hell.” She tried to smooth her hair, but she hadn’t showered since before Thanksgiving dinner. Hairspray plus a day tossing and turning in a vampire nest equaled bad hair. She had bad hair, and she hadn’t even brought a brush. “You show up in the middle of the night—”

“It’s nine-thirty on a Friday. I’ve had dinner reservations for later than this.” She’d planned to break it to him gently, but now he’d pissed her off. “Chill for a sec and listen, okay?” He nodded once, jaw tight.

“They do restoration and retrofitting. Custom. They’re gonna replace all the glass, touch up the paint, and add a new sound system. It’ll cost me, but I owe Angel bigtime.” The waitress hovered at her left elbow, waiting for their order. She hadn’t even looked at the menu. “Uh...peach pie? Ice cream and... Do you have caramel sauce? Like, lots and lots of caramel sauce?” The girl actually smiled before turning to Hank.

“Just coffee, thanks.” He dismissed the waitress, then leaned in and asked in a whisper, “You owe a
private investigator?"

“That makes it sound so ominous.” He sat up straight, eyes wide and worried, and she was twelve years old, again, home late from a trip to the mall. It derailed her. She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “Angel, who happens to be a private investigator, is hunting down relatives so I can send them wedding invitations.”

All the color drained from her father’s face. “Wedding,” he said, and three whole seconds passed before he continued, “invitations?”

“Yup. And they’re scattered to hell and back.” Her mouth twitched but she didn’t giggle. “It’s a monster project. Making his car pretty? Least I can do.”

“And who are you...uh...you’re not marrying him?”

“My finance’s name is William. He and Angel are family—although the relationship is complicated. Like ‘second something by marriage twice removed’ complicated. Cousins?” She shrugged. “Close enough.”

“Oh.” He flagged down the waitress. “On second thought, I’ll have what she’s having—but more.” He made a mounding motion with his hands.

He was a few pounds heavier than she remembered. “Dad, are you stress eating?”

“Yes, damn it. Aren’t you still in school?”

“UC Sunnydale, for now. Transferring to Westmount in September.”

“That’s the Christian college? East, in the foothills?”

“That’s the one. They award credit for CLEP exams, so I’ll matriculate as a junior, declare my major, and have a degree in kinesiology in a year and a half.” Plus there were crosses everywhere, so bonus.

“What can you do with that? Physical therapy?” The waitress set their desserts on the table and strode away, white skirt swishing.

“Or nutrition,” Buffy said, eyeing her father’s heaping plate. “That’s a pile o’ pie.”

“Not one word from you, Missy.” He shook his fork at her. “I’ll have a heart attack on my own terms, thanks. So what are you going to do with kinesiology?”

“Teach martial arts.” It was a story she’d rehearsed, edited, and rehearsed again—plausible, but mostly imaginary. The degree and the certifications were real, of course. Her career goals, like Spike’s history, were half fabricated. Their short stint in a band was entirely invented, a nostalgic in-joke, though she could play drums, if anyone needed corroborating evidence. It was her public-facing self, almost as real to her as her actual life, and it was good enough for most people. Unfortunately, her dad was not most people. He would need the whole truth.

And the whole truth was so much harder.

“I’m going to open a school,” she said, which was true.

He’d stuffed his mouth so full his cheeks bulged. Gopher cheeks, like hers. Every ounce she gained went straight to her face. He chewed contemplatively and swallowed. “Do you know martial arts?”
“Several disciplines.” Several was a flexible word. She’d trained in fighting styles from a dozen worlds. After the first five or six, they got easier. Now she fought with a ramshackle patchwork of the most lethal moves from every style. “You haven’t been around much, lately.” And that was the understatement of the year.

“Buffy, that’s hardly fair. I’ve been—”

“Everybody wants to tell me what’s fair, today.” She shook her head. “Did you ever meet Giles?”

“Your high school librarian?” he said. “Tweedey guy with a stutter?” Which was weirdly dismissive. Was he jealous of Giles?

“Oxford PhD on sabbatical from the British Museum? That’s the one.”

“Really?” That part was completely true, so she nodded. Her dad’s shoulders slumped. “What the hell’s he doing in Sunnydale?”

“Writing a book. Anyway, he trained me. Every day after school, I pummeled things until I got tired enough to do homework. Then he helped. It worked. Fourteen thirty on my SATs.”

“That’s... great, honey.” He looked sort of sick, but he kept eating anyway.

“I’m surprised Mom didn’t tell you. I think my test results are still taped to the refrigerator.”

“Well, I’m impressed. Didn’t know you had it in you.” He cocked his head. “You needed to work off physical energy before you could focus?”

“Yeah. Giles is like that, too.” The corners of his mouth tightened.

“So’s your mother. Alright. Martial arts school. Sounds like a solid plan. Do you have funding?” He reached for the inside pocket of his jacket, this time. His checkbook?

“Yeah. Spike—” That was the wrong name. She had her whole complicated story straight to the last detail, but Spike would always be Spike in her head. And now her dad was looking at her like she was about to get grounded. “Damn it. William. William is paying startup costs.”

“I see,” he said, and dropped his hand. She cringed. “And what does Spike do for a living?”

“Uh, well—”

“And while we’re on the topic—you’re marrying a guy named Spike?”

“Just let me explain—”

“Buffy, what the hell is going on with you?” His fists clenched. “What are you involved in now? Is it a gang?”

Okay, no. “Dad!” She smacked her palms on the table. Their coffee shook.

“Fine.” He took one deep breath. “Explain.”

“William Pratt,” she said, and she felt the snarl on the edges of her words. If her father so much as sniffled, right now, she’d punch him in the face. “William Henry Pratt. Cambridge. Literature.” Classics, actually, but that only raised eyebrows in California, so the paperwork said literature. “He tutors a little, writes a lot. He’s working on materials for a class he’ll teach at the start of the quarter.” Which was absolutely true, but got weirder the longer she thought about it.
“Spike is my nemesis—my sparring partner. My ally in all things. When the school is finished, we’ll both teach there.” And that was the truest thing she’d said so far.

“Sparring partner?”

“We beat each other up. For fun.”

Her father sighed and shook his head. His body relaxed into the yellow vinyl of the diner booth. “Gym rats are a breed apart. Is there anyone else with an ominous name I shouldn’t be worried about?”

“Well, Angel’s name is actually Liam.” Giles’ past was of the past, right? No need to mention Ripper.

“Good to know. Did you beat him up, too?”

“Nope! I crushed him,” she said. Hank rolled his eyes. “Never could beat Spike.”

“Kids these days.” He swirled melting ice cream with caramel and spooned it over his pie. “So when do I meet this man of mystery?”

“Any minute now. He’s on his way.” She couldn’t feel where, exactly, but he was close.

“Some reason that didn’t happen before you planned the wedding?”

“Mostly? ‘Cause you weren’t around.” She pointed at him the moment he opened his mouth. “Don’t start. You weren’t there.”

“Buffy—”

“You checked out, Dad. You don’t get a say.”

“You’re so much like your mother.” He wasn’t angry or accusatory. He sounded sad.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Everything’s black and white. No room for disagreement—or human failure.” He stabbed his pie with the tines of his fork. “I didn’t look for you, so I’m the bad guy.”

“When I ran away?” To L.A. where she worked in a diner and had to wear a stupid white uniform with gingham puff sleeves, remarkably like the one their waitress wore. “Oh my god.”

“Not like quitting my job to scour the city would do any good. You were seventeen years old, for god’s sake. Nearly an adult. You’d come home when you were ready.”

The color blocks on the walls and ceiling were the same, but brighter with crisper edges, restored to their original pop art glory. The ancient brown booths had been replaced with modern reproductions in primary colors. The floors were so clean they sparkled. All good choices. So much better, in fact, that she hadn’t recognized the place. What was it called now? Ginger’s something?

“But Mister Giles was looking. Of course he was. He’s a high school librarian. He has the whole damn summer off.” At every pause, he stuffed pie into his mouth, barely chewing each bite before he swallowed.

“Dad, slow down. You’re gonna choke.”
“I will not slow down!” he snapped, but he dropped his fork. “So I kept working. That doesn’t mean I think money’s more important than you.” He didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands. He settled on pulling at the pie crust with his fingertips. “She didn’t have to return the checks.”

“Wait.” She grabbed his hand, made him stop moving. “Mom returned your child support checks?”

“And the alimony! I understand she’s seeing someone else—a goddamned Oxford PhD or whatever—but she didn’t even tell me you came back. I didn’t know until you called.”

That would have been a year and a half ago, from his perspective. Radio silence from her mom for a year and a half? She didn’t want to believe him.

I don’t accept that. Words sharper than the shards of glass on the living room floor. It stops now. She wouldn’t listen. She didn’t listen. You walk out of this house, don’t even think about coming back. And she hadn’t. Not for months. Everything’s black and white.

Damn it.

“That explains so much,” she said. True to form, her dad went with a hands-off, tough-love parenting strategy, while her mom, also totally in character, lost it and cut him out completely, like an after-echo of every fight they’d had when they were married. And so were born her twin adversaries: anger and emotional withdrawal. She knew them well. “You two are definitely my parents.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear and let his palm rest, for just an instant, on her cheek.

“Dad? There’s gonna be some stuff that’s hard to get your head around. Just don’t freak, okay?” She slid the wedding invitation across the table.

He picked it up and stroked the linen paper with his thumb, turned it over in his hands and touched one fingertip to the wax seal. “This is beautiful. It looks expensive, Buffy. How can you afford—”

“You’re welcome to bring Francesca, though I think you should wait to invite her until you know more. It’ll be a judgment call.”

With great concentration, he lifted the seal without breaking the wax, slid the card from its envelope, and stared at the shimmering text. “William of Aurelius.” He intoned the words as if they were a spell. “That’s a title. Your boyfriend has a title?”

“Fiancé.”

“Right. Fiancé. I don’t recognize it.”

“You wouldn’t.” She took a deep breath. Her hands were shaking. “It’s very old, kind of obscure, and...well...not human.”

Misery dragged his face down. “This better not be about vampires.”

“It’s gonna have to be, Dad. Vampires are involved.”

“Your fiancé—Spike—he’s a vampire?” His voice rose. The waitress glared at them. “And your friend Angel. He’s Spike’s cousin, so I suppose he’s a vampire, too?” He didn’t even let her answer. “Jesus, Buffy.”

“I’m trying to tell you—”
“Does your mom know where you are? Does she know the delusions are back?” He tapped the edge of the envelope on the table. “Is any of this real?”

“You know?” She shook her head. “I can’t wait for Spike to get here.”

“Alright. You can stay at my place tonight. I’ll call your mom in the morning. We’ll figure it out. In the meantime, let’s table this.” He tucked the invitation into his pocket, next to his checkbook. “And talk about something else. Anything else.” He stared glumly out the window for a moment before his eyes widened. “Like the mint condition DeSoto Fireflite that just pulled up. Fifty-eight or fifty-nine, I think.” He tapped on the glass like he was trying to get the car’s attention. “Would you look at that beauty?”

“Oh, thank god.” She felt him approaching, a demon hum low in her belly.

“The guy’s coming this way. Wow, he’s something else—the hair and the black leather. He looks like the human version of his car.”

“Mmm.” Human? Not quite. “He’s something else, alright.”

The door to the diner opened and Spike sauntered in, dressed in black from head to toe.

Doc Martens, of course, but also close fitting pants—not jeans—with a steel chain draped from belt to wallet across his right hip. He’d left his shirt unbuttoned at the top to reveal a slender triangle of smooth white skin, and skipped the duster in favor of a studded motorcycle jacket. He had two rings in his right ear, three in his left, and a barbell through the scar in his eyebrow. His hair was gelled to spikes.

“Hey,” her dad said. “Great car.”

Spike interrupted his stride to nod his thanks and caught sight of her. His presence heated up when she met his eyes. They were lined in black, savage, inhuman, and very blue. He dropped her bag on the bench beside her, tilted her chin up so she felt his breath on her lips, and smiled.

“’lo, kitten. You’re a mess.”
He folded her into his arms and inhaled the mind-melting scent of her. She was loose earth and sweat, peach pie, adrenaline, and so much power it made him quiver. Her hair was a tangled bramble, and there was a smudge of dirt above her eyebrow. He’d take her on the table right now if her father weren’t staring across it.

“We have got to upgrade Sam to the twentieth century,” she said, and pressed against him, soft and alive, her eyes bright demon gold. “His place is a hole in the ground.”

“We don’t need much, Buffy.” He’d slept through many a day on nothing more than a concrete slab. If her Othertime memories could be trusted, she’d slept through a few of them with him. Her lower lip stuck out in a pout.

“And I don’t need hair that doesn’t make me look like a homeless person, but it sure would be nice.” He pressed a kiss to the top of her horrible hair, trying not to smile. “Especially since you’re all fancy.” She touched the barbell in his eyebrow, the tips of his hair, caressed the punctured shell of his ear with blazing fingertips. “Did Sean do this?”

“Yeah. Rings were a gift—wallet, too. Christmas early, he said. Did me up to match.” He’d switched jackets himself. Once you punch that much steel through your bits, you might as well go all in.

“Ooh! You needed a new wallet.” She stroked his lapel and laid her palm on his chest, over his heart. “Good look for you.”

And wasn’t that a kicker? Buffy liked the white sweater. Picked it out herself even. But judging by the catch in her breath and the pitter-patter of her little slayer heart, she liked this a whole lot more. So what was the point of the cable-knit one-eighty? To make her bloody Scoobies happy?

“For the pictures,” she said. “Our first Thanksgiving together. I’m having one framed for Mom.”

She’d dressed him up to please Joyce.

Which pinned him square to a world of family dinners and mothers-in-law, Kodak moments and couples’ firsts, like a sodding rom-com, and he was unprepared. Made him want to hightail it home and retrieve the sweater from where he’d tossed it, balled up, on their bedroom floor. Or change into slacks and a button down, fix his hair, scrub his face, and court her father’s approval. Made him want to change his...to change his....

Buffy squeezed his hand.

“If you want, we can get you some more Mom-approved clothing options while we’re here.” She bit her lip, looked up at him through lowered lashes. “But not ‘til tomorrow.” Her hand slid to the inside of his thigh.

The world dissolved into blank white noise.

“Right, then.” His thoughts darted like tiny fish, and he couldn’t tear his eyes from the center of her soft lower lip. “Brought your sundries.” He fished a red file folder from her bag and set it on the table, dropped his hand to rest above her tailbone. “And this.”

“And this everything?” She flipped it open. “Oh my god—look at all this. You two...uh...introduce....” And, just like that, he was dismissed. She separated the paperclipped bundles into two stacks.
“Budget and calendar, fourth quarter nineteen ninety-nine. By month. Jeez.”

“Hank Summers.” Buffy’s father stuck out his hand.

“Will Pratt. Least lately,” Spike said, and shook it.

“Spike, right?” Hank said, and Spike shrugged. “Or is it William of Aurelius?”

“I try not to make too much of that. You don’t choose your family.”

“All...right.” Like Buffy, the man was blondish, though not exactly blond. A summer in the sun would change that. He looked like Buffy in other particulars, too. The taper of chin and curve of cheek, the way his eyebrows shadowed his eyes and hid his expression. The sturdy set of neck and shoulder, so different from Joyce’s willowy grace. And the way he watched the world, assessing without reacting. Stoic where Joyce was stormy. “The Fireflite’s a beauty. How long have you had her?”

“Since she rolled off the lot.”

Hank blinked. “What year was that?”

“Well...fifty-nine, o’ course.”

“Fifty-nine.” That warning glare was all Buffy, but less menacing without slayer strength to back it up. “Nineteen fifty-nine?”

“Yeah.” What’d he done? He’d introduced himself, shook the man’s hand and all, polite as anything. Hadn’t been rude. Couldn’t’ve been. Buffy would’ve said. “She’s a fifty-nine DeSoto Fireflite. V8. Four cylinder....”

“He doesn’t believe in vampires, sweetie. Can you tell me what I’m looking at?” Buffy tapped the printout of Sean’s calendar.

“He’s got it in layers, see?” He turned to the key on the back page. “Color coded. The red’s to be done by itself, whilst the green and the blue can be stacked, like—”

“Oh. Okay. Inside chores when you’re there for lessons. Outside chores...he’s learning Fyarl? Damn. This is some Willow-level multitasking.”

“Yeah. ‘Bout that. He’s a bright lad, but he’s no Willow.”

“Nobody is.” She stacked it all back up and closed the folder. “This is insane. I hate to say it, but I think we need to dial back on his lessons.”

“What are you—thirty?” Hank asked. “At most? You weren’t even alive in fifty-nine.”

“He was,” Buffy said. “Nineteen and eighteen. That’s two whole fifty-nines.” She turned back to him. “What’s the sitch with Dru?”

“In the wind. Least of our troubles.”

“I know—slayer dreams.”

“That, too.”

“That,” Buffy said, “too?” She rested her elbows on the table and dropped her head into her hands.
“Damn it. I have a too, too. A Mohra demon came after Angel.”

“What’s a Mohra want with a bleedin’ vampire?” He’d killed one, once. They were hunting the same slayer and it got in his way. You had to smash the stone, or they just came back.

“Now Angel’s a vampire, too? Everybody’s a vampire. Maybe I’m a vampire.” Hank said. “This has got to be from your mother’s side. And you?” He jabbed a finger at Spike’s face and kept it there, much too close. “You aren’t doing her any favors, tough guy. She needs help.”

“Remove your hand or I will.” It was a war conducted in eye contact, brief and bloodless. Hank looked away, dropped his hand to the tabletop. “Sodding hell, what crawled up your—”

“Spike?” She touched his cheek and he subsided to a growl. “Yes, Dad. Angel’s a vampire. Spike’s a vampire. There are vampires.” She gripped the edge of the table, white knuckled. “Vampires are. We talked about this. Now would you give me a minute?”

“Buffy, you can’t believe—”

“The Mohra,” she said over her father’s objection, “hunt Champions of The Powers.”

“Ah, so Angel’s named and noted.” Well, add that to the great long list of problems they had no means to solve.

“Looks like. Plus, he ran to Oxnard.”

“What—from Sean’s place?”

“Uh huh. With some vague something chasing him the whole way. When I found him, he was huddled in a doorway, waiting to die. So...thraal. Big thraal. But that’ll have to be okay, I guess. At least Tara’s already on his calendar.” She tapped the folder. “Twice a week. What’s your too?”

“Uh...which one?”

She knocked her forehead twice, sharply, on the surface of the table.

“You know what?” she said. “I miss bad guys like the mayor. You want to be a giant snake? Sounds like fun. Or the Master. Plunge the world into darkness? I’m in! Or...or you. We had some good times, right? A simple, straightforward fight to the death.”

“Fight to the death?” Hank repeated. They both ignored him.

“You wanna go all out, pet, I’m happy to oblige, only....”

“Only we don’t have time.” She sighed. “We’re gonna need a long honeymoon.” She waved over the waitress, who refilled her coffee and brought him a menu. “Okay. So tell me.”

“Briefly?” He ticked each point off on his fingers. One. “Lost Dru. Don’t think it matters.” The Shaftoe song meant something, but he didn’t know what. Two. “She led me to a pack of humans playing adopt-a-fledge in Everly Memorial. Called ‘em ‘The Wolves.’” Buffy mouthed an echo of the words and shook her head. “Best bit?” And three. “She’s not a bloody flower.”

“Which means what?”

“She’s not the Moon Vine. We’re back to square one.”

Hank’s hand shot out and caught his wrist, dug fingertips into its underside, between bone and
tendon, right where a pulse would have been. Spike shifted and bared his fangs.

“Dad!” Buffy tried to tug Hank away by the sleeve. The disbelief on his face gave way to fear and then to nausea, but he didn’t let go. “What are you doing?”

“Counting,” Spike said. “Isn’t that right?”

Hank nodded. “What’s the Moon Vine?”


“Damn it, Dad.” Buffy squeezed the bones of her father’s forearm until they bowed. “Let go!” He finally did.

“No pulse.” He glared at Buffy, rubbing his arm. “What the hell are—”

The glass front of the building shattered inward.

When the dust cleared, a parking meter lay in the middle of the diner floor, a chunk of concrete still affixed to its base like a root ball. It was followed by the hulking form of one of Cam’s Nazi demons.

Without a peep, the waitress dropped to all fours and crawled behind the counter.

Buffy was on her feet before anyone else, up from the booth bench, over the tabletop, diving, shoulder first, into the big beast’s ankles. It toppled backward, roared its rage, and swiped at her with hands the size of catcher’s mitts.

Spike grabbed the front of Hank’s shirt in one fist and Buffy’s go-bag in the other and dragged them both beneath the table.

“What the hell is—”

“Listen, Hank.” He rummaged in the bag. “So far, I don’t much like you, but Buffy deserves her second chance, yeah?” There, at the very bottom, beneath the...packing cubes is what she called them. He pulled the stake out and pressed it into Hank’s trembling fingers. “So we’re gonna keep you alive.”

Hank didn’t respond. His eyes were locked on Buffy as she spun and wove amongst her attackers. All five demons were in the building, but space was too tight for them to move freely. Buffy had no such difficulty.

A brutal side kick brought one to its knees, and she jammed her elbow into its eye socket. The thing let out a howl and groped blindly for her, seized her ankle and pulled her off balance, while another extended one colossal hand toward her head. She arched her back until the hand was above her face and bit down on the end joint of the creature’s middle finger.

There was a wet cracking noise and she spat the severed fingertip out on the diner floor. Hank’s mouth dropped open. “Go, Buffy!” he yelled.

“Shut your gob!” Spike shook him. “Stay down. I’m gonna go.” One of the demons ripped a table from its bolts and tossed it out through the shattered storefront, making room to maneuver. “She needs help.”

Buffy leapt, laughing, to the counter. She braced herself, hands on the ceiling, and kicked them in the
“Does she?” Hank asked.

“Unless we plan to be at this all night, she surely does.” A hand snaked up from behind the counter, clutching a hefty cleaver by the dull edge. Buffy crouched and took it, swept it across the throat of an encroaching demon. It fell, gurgling. One down. “Sides, looks like fun.”

From beneath the edge of the table, Spike scooped up Buffy’s forgotten pie plate and spun it like a frisbee into the back of a demon’s skull. It roared and thundered toward him. He flipped it the bird and sprinted for the door.

Cam’s truck idled halfway down the block, the bikes parked beside it in a nice, neat row. Spike jumped for the first one, landed with both feet square on the saddle, and leapt away again, laughing as the whole row toppled like dominoes. Cam laid on the horn, but it only summoned a second demon from the diner.

Cam plus these two made three for him. Fair enough for a fight. Spike wrenched a tailpipe from the closest bike and turned on his pursuers, leaving the fallen bikes—and Cam—at his back.

He spun a kick into a demon’s face, followed with the pipe end to its groin, and smacked a grasping hand away with his closed right fist. They weren’t scrappers, these. Those monstrous hands were built to grab and immobilize so they could shred their victims, headfirst, with cheese-grater teeth.

The trick was not to close.

They lunged and he retreated, scrambled to the top of the bike pile to gain vantage. As one they bent, yanked a bike from the middle of the pile, and hurled it away, before separating to come at him from two and ten. That left Cam at his six, with no bloody way out.

On the defensive, then. Time for a change.

He dove. Straight ahead between the demons, slamming the pipe into a kneecap as he passed. The thing howled and clawed at him, caught him by the belt and hauled him upward until he hung eye to eye with it. It opened its great toothy maw to serrate his head and he rammed the steel tailpipe down its throat.

It made a slurping sound and dropped him. He rolled away, narrowly avoiding the crush of its fall. The other demon screamed and grabbed his ankle. He kicked out with a booted foot. Once, twice. Heard the crunch and crack of shattering teeth. It howled but did not let go. It dragged him toward Cam’s truck.

“What are you doing here?” he heard Cam ask. “Who are you?” There was no reply. His head bounced against the curb. He twisted in the demon’s grip, but those hands were powerful things. He couldn’t get enough leverage to free himself.

“Back off,” Cam said, “and we won’t have trouble.” There was laughter, low and feminine, a whooshing sound like a furnace starting up, and then the rumble and crash of a forest fire. Flames erupted in a circle around him fourteen feet high. The demon let go.

He rolled onto his shoulders and slammed his heels into its backside. Without a sound, it tumbled forward and fell, half in and half out of the circle. Its legs twitched once and stilled. Where the body touched the flames was a line of seared meat no thicker than a shoelace. Its upper half had been cleanly severed, as though it were sliced and flash-broiled to seal in flavor, with fresh flesh two inches in.

The air inside the circle was cool and moist, while the asphalt puddled just beyond its edge. He
wouldn’t bank on surviving that blaze even with the ring, so he picked himself up, brushed the debris from his trousers, and waited.

Nothing else he could do.
A solid block of flame, maybe thirty feet square and half as high, covered the width of one lane and the adjacent parking spaces. From a foot away, she could feel no heat. She might have assumed it was illusion if the blacktop beneath it hadn’t liquified.

“What the hell is that?” her dad asked, which was a really good question. He extended a hand toward the fire. She didn’t have to stop him. The flame *indent*ed, withdrew, like a living thing, from his fingertips.

“Weirdness,” the waitress said, curling her arms over her chest and shivering. “Fuckin’ L.A. weirdness.” Her dark eyes fixed resentfully on a smudge of tar on the toe of her left shoe. “I gotta get outta this place.”

“Yeah? And go where?” He moved closer to the flames, palms outstretched like he stood before a campfire instead of a raging, inexplicable inferno.

“My mom’s, maybe? Cutler’s lookin’ pretty good right now.”

“There are people in Cutler?” Hank grinned.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, there are people in Cutler. Jesus. Forty-five hundred of ‘em, and every last one knows me. No fuckin’ escape.”

He leaned into the flames and they parted around him until he stood in a fiery, man-shaped alcove. “After this?” He turned to face them, arms outstretched like a sacrificial god. “Could you really go back?”

“I dunno,” the girl said. “I mean...this shit gets in, right? Back home, they’d all think I was crazy. Crazy Allie went to L.A. and came back weird.” She scuffed her foot. “Weirder.”

Deep creases furrowed his brow. “You’ve seen this before?”

“Not this, exactly, but this, if you get what I mean. Monsters. Demons. Whatever. I work nights in L.A. You see shit.” She nodded at Buffy. “Her picture is stapled to the breakroom wall. We know what to do if she shows up.”

“Wha—huh?” Buffy said. She’d only been half listening, puzzling over the problem of Spike and the wall of flames, but that got her attention. “My picture is where, now?”

“In the breakroom.” The girl shrugged. “And the new hire packet.”


“My manager’s thing. She shows, we go on alert. When the crazy starts, we take cover and punch the panic button.”

“But how did you even know to—.”

“People know, Dad.” A few of them, anyway. She’d have to figure out who Allie’s manager was. Do some damage control, maybe some recruiting. “As I go, so goes bloodshed, mayhem, and fiery demon death. Remember?” She held her father’s eyes until his face went ashen, then turned to Allie. “During my first big battle, I burned down my high school gym—to the ground, I mean. Nothing left
but beams.” She smiled. “I won.”

“So crawling behind the counter....”

“Solid plan,” Buffy said. “Smart manager.”

“I guess. Until tonight, I thought she was paranoid, but....” She glanced over her shoulder at the shattered ruin of Ginger’s Grill and then at the wall of flame in front of her. “I gotta drill more. Hide faster.”

“You do that. It’ll keep you alive. In the meantime....” Buffy took a deep breath and plunged into the flame. It jumped away like she’d slapped it, but the ends of her hair were singed. Half-melted blacktop stuck to the soles of her boots.

“Goddamn it,” Allie said, and came in after her.

The fire rubber-banded away and coiled into a roiling spiral on what had been its furthest edge. Buffy couldn’t shake the feeling that it was watching them, although there’d been nothing to suggest that it even had eyes. The spinning arms tightened, shifted inward to its center, became denser, heavier somehow. Orange-gold deepened to scarlet, to wine, and finally to black. It stood for a moment, a column of living basalt veiled in sparks, and then it winked out.

It left behind a field of ash and twisted metal, within which lay a circle seven feet across, its edge as clean as if it had been cookie-cuttered from some other place and dropped, whole, in the center of the devastation. And this is where Spike knelt, rifling the pants pockets of half a demon.

“Fuckin’ vampires.” Allie said it absently, like vampires were an everyday nuisance instead of rare and lethal monsters. Spike grinned up at her, fangs glinting. A clatter spun his gaze to a battered blue hatchback that sputtered towards them along the silent street, headlights dark. “Boss lady’s here.” Those three words held more apprehension than everything she’d said so far put together. “Time to grovel.” She lifted her arm high and waved. “I half-assed crisis drills last week, and now I—.”

She said something else. Buffy was sure of it, but she couldn’t hear over the whoosh and thrum of her own heartbeat. She was aware only that Spike had stopped moving. He’d slumped over beside the demon remains, legs splayed gracelessly behind him. She would have run to him, but her feet wouldn’t cooperate. They felt like they belonged to someone else. For an instant, swarms of red gnats clouded the edges of her vision. Then the world flickered and went out.

When she opened her eyes again, he was the first light she saw.

“Rise and shine, kitten.” Cool fingertips stroked the fur of her muzzle. “Reckon this one’s mine. Put the lights out again.” He raised his face to the night, skin as pale as moonlight, hair a shade paler. “Sorry ‘bout that.” He stood and spread his arms wide, an echo of her father in the flames. “But I think I’m gettin’ the hang o’ this.”

He was starlit black from toe to collar, barely distinguishable from the sky above him. The hem of his coat tossed and fluttered, impatient to be on its way, but the labrys lay quiet against his right hip, so pleased to be unsheathed that it was willing to wait. “Got the hair, even. But Buffy—” He shook his head. “Why are you a cat?”

And what kind of question was that, anyway? She’d had a cat or been a cat since they started coming to this place, whatever it was. She hauled herself up onto her haunches, looked him straight in the eye, and whuffed. Loudly.

“Fine—a lion, then.” He took one cautious step backward, not quite out of striking distance, the
spark of a smile in his china blue eyes. He knew: She could catch him on two legs; she could catch him on four. She could always catch him. “It’s my dream. I don’t see you as a bloody lion.” She whuffed again. “No offense intended, love.”

She wouldn’t have an answer for him even if she could talk. Which she couldn’t. Because she was a goddamned lion. Her chest rumbled.

“Uh...yeah. So here’s my wonder: If I put the lights out whenever I change something, can you turn ‘em back on? Can you change?”

Another excellent question—to which, again, she had no answer.

She meant to tell him she would try, but what came out was a mournful wail that trailed off into a rattle. It was a big, impressive noise, but not even a little bit useful. Words. Why did she suck so much at words?

“Shall we?” He shook out his shoulders and stepped onto the path. She followed.

They walked upward along a narrow path through a field of moon vine—always with the goddamned moon vine—but this time the stuff was different. Before, it coiled and grasped, tripped her whenever she took a step and trapped her if she stood still long enough to let it. This time, it caressed her feet, slid between her toes and around her ankles without holding on. Wrap and release.

The Forest of Watching Gods rose around them as they crested the hill.

With every step they took into the Forest, the ground cover became denser, deeper, so thick in places that it trailed up over the feet of the stone gods. The longer they walked, the more threatening the stillness around them became. At the beginning, there had been the usual sounds of nighttime—drawn from Spike’s memory, maybe? Now she heard nothing but her own breath and the slow thud-thud-thud of her heart.

After what seemed like hours, they reached a rough circular clearing, in the center of which stood a massive stone building, its imposing gray columns wound waist-high with moon vine.

Oh, hell.

Spike was three steps ahead of her before he noticed she’d stopped. “Somethin’ wrong, pet?” He followed her gaze. “Somethin’ about the building?”

Her legs gave way beneath her and she slumped to a crouch.

She’d never been inside that building, never walked its marble halls or sat at its polished mahogany tables. Slayers weren’t taken to visit its library or allowed to speak from the podium on its auditorium stage. She’d never even seen it in person. It was destroyed before she left California.

But she knew what it was.

“Late nineteenth or early twentieth,” Spike mused. “Near as I can tell. Old glass—thicker at the bottom, see? Not as old as it’s pretendin’, though. Lines ’re too straight. Hundreds like it in London.”

He picked his way through the vines toward the building. With great effort, she hauled herself to her feet and followed, wobbling.

“Ostentatious,” he said. “Sort of place Angelus’d play house in.” He shook his head. “Wanker. Look
at all those windows.”

A dozen or more six-paned windows, each at least six feet tall, stared blankly back at them from the ground floor, sills host to clusters of white flowers but otherwise an easy entry point.

Probably how that Bringer got in to set his bomb.

“Significant, is it?” Spike peered into a window. “Dark inside. Empty—no vine in there.” Good. That was good. And the front door was still closed, which was also good. “This Marcel Marceau routine? Bloody inconvenient.” Her response was more growl than whine. He scruffled her ruff. “Not your fault, love.”

Except that it was.

The lion was her; she was the lion. One and the same. Not even a new story. Ben is Glory, Glory’s Ben—one tragic tale among multitudes, and they all seemed to end in sacrifice. There’s no one else.

Was that the lesson she was supposed to learn? That she alone was responsible for everything that happened here? There’s no one else. It was her decision whether to fight or not. She’d learned that in a dream. Maybe she had to learn this in a dream, too.

But could she change? Was she hobbled because it wasn’t her dream? Spike seemed to think so, but she’d walked the dreamlands before: It didn’t work like that.

The dreamlands were built of the subconscious beliefs, ideas, hopes, and fears of all thinking things, a subtle magical haze around the waking world. Despite the name, hardly anybody human got there in their dreams. On those rare occasions that someone did dream their way in, they woke from the kind of indelible experience at the heart of new religions.

The more power you had, the larger your presence, the greater your control. Someone of great power, like a trained witch or a sorcerer, could seize control of the reality and create their own little empire—become Godking of the Dreamlands, if that’s what they wanted. They usually knew better. Occasionally, an untrained adept would get in and make a great big mess, spinning the world into seething tendrils of chaos that swallowed all comers and disappeared the moment they looked away.

Only someone more powerful could wrest control from the dreamer and bring an end to the nightmare—someone like her. She’d had to clean up a few too many of those messes.

That’s why Billy Palmer needed training.


She stopped. She hadn’t noticed she’d started.

“It’s moving, yeah?” He pointed at the leading edge of the moon vine. “Least an inch higher since we got here.” She felt the pacing start, this time. Back and forth, back and forth, like a caged tiger, trapped and panicked. Not good not good not good. Her tail slashed through the darkness. “Don’t know what I’m lookin’ at, but I can’t see as how that’s a good—.”

She roared.

It was a bloodcurdling bellow that bounced off the stone walls of the building and the stone gods behind them. It wrenched the bones from her body and shattered the dreamland quiet.
When the sound subsided, she curled naked amidst the moon vine, shivering. Spike knelt beside her. “Hurts hurts hurts,” she said, clutching her head. She thought her eyes might melt out of their sockets. “God, you’re strong. When did you get that strong?”

She hadn’t overcome him. It was still night, still his dream. He was still black and white, a monochromatic study in contrasts. He pulled the coat from his shoulders and draped it over hers, wrapping her in starlight.

“What’d you do?” He raised one hand to her hair but didn’t quite touch it, like he was afraid to. “You look....” His eyes fastened on a stray lock peeking out from beneath the collar of his coat, and she looked, too. It was the swirling luminescent gold of the Well.

She shook her head. “Tell me, and we’ll both know.”

“Right.” Gingerly, like he was afraid he’d break her—or maybe that she’d break him—he tugged her into his lap and held her, his cheek resting on her hair. Her skin shone another shade of gold. “What’s the building?”

Before she could answer, the door opened to reveal the slender figure of the slayer, *The Slayer*, the white skull of her painted face gleaming. Spike scrambled to his feet and laid a hand on his ax, but she only nodded and strode with slayer grace down the grand front stairs toward them. A second figure filled the doorway.

“Bloody buggering....” The Turok-han came down and stood beside her, the rattle of a growl in the back of its throat. Then *The Slayer*, the progenitor of her kind, ancient, solitary, and implacable, did something completely unexpected.

She smiled.

First at the two of them, but then at the monster beside her. She leaned down and took Buffy’s hand.

“Buffy? Buffy!” Her father’s voice seemed to come from a long way off. The warm hand clasping hers didn’t belong to him. She blinked up into Allie’s shell-shocked face.

“Oh,” the girl breathed. “Oh. My. God. What are you?”

“The Slayer,” another voice said. “She’s the Slayer. Allie, let go.”

“Right. Okay. I’ll just be...oh, *fuck*. I’ll be by the car.”

“Hey, Buffy.” Chanterelle...Lily...*Anne* extended a hand to help her up. “Been a while.” Spike limped toward them, leaning on her dad for support. He moved like he’d been beaten, although there wasn’t a mark on him.

Buffy nodded. “Spike? That building?”

For one that comes with a pencil to sketch or sing, a thousand come with an axe or rifle.

~ Henry David Thoreau, The Maine Woods

“Oh, no. This is definitely a lair.”

Sean passed him a third (or perhaps fourth) glass of beer and reached over his head. He pulled back the curtain beside the couch to reveal floor to ceiling shelving—timeworn cedar planks bolted to a concrete wall—outfitted with labeled, color-coded bins. They were alphabetized. “Converted root cellar. I’m a cellar dweller.”

When he smiled, a dimple notched his right cheek, just above the corner of his mouth.

“In a remarkably well-organized cellar.” Giles sipped from his glass and licked his lips. “With excellent beer.”

“Brewer’s name is ‘Chilge,’” Sean said. “Or that’s as close as I can get. Rhymes with ‘bilge.’ Sort of. Willy carries his stuff.”

“Mmm.” Now that was disappointing. He’d made few trips to Willy’s in the past and planned to make even fewer in the future. He couldn’t fathom Buffy’s decision to live there. “He doesn’t sell it directly?”

“He...does. From the brewery. But....” He shook his head. “You shouldn’t go there.”

For one long moment, Giles was mystified. Why on earth shouldn’t he go to a brewery? Then, “He’s a demon?” He shouldn’t have been surprised, but the longer he spent in Sean’s company, the less likely nefarious connections seemed. His acquaintances should have been college students and aspiring artists, not monsters.

Sean stopped, lips parted like he was about to speak, one hand raised. Then he laughed. “I can’t tell if you’re serious.” So quickly his hand blurred, he snatched his drink from the table and downed it. “An hour ago, you were totally shocked that my roommate was human.”

“Yes, well.” Giles leaned into the cushy bolster, repositioned a pillow, and stretched out his legs, more relaxed than he’d been in months—perhaps years. Perhaps since he’d come to Sunnydale. “I’ll admit I’m having some difficulty placing you.”

“You mean pigeonholing me.”

“That’s an uncharitable description.”

“It’s an uncomfortable feeling.” Sean leaned forward, hands clasped, elbows resting on his knees, and met his eyes directly for the first time since Thanksgiving. “Look, Giles—.” His face puckered like he’d tasted something sour. “Does everybody call you by your last name?”
“Virtually everyone, with rare exceptions. A few old friends. Joyce. Spike.” Angelus, when he’d made his unwelcome appearance. And Olivia, whose last-minute cancellation was the reason he had time free to meet with Sean this evening. Best not to dwell on that. “Since I began secondary school.”

“Wait—that’s at, like, eleven. People have been calling you Giles since you were eleven years old?” Giles shrugged. “Uh, no. No. That’s just—.” He rose abruptly and stalked to the kitchen. When he returned, he carried a silver tin as big around as a dinner plate and six inches deep. He set it in the coffee table and removed the lid.

“Help yourself.” The tin contained cookies in a dozen varieties. Giles chose one with pecans and nodded his thanks. “So, you didn’t pick it? It’s just sort of a default thing?”

“Mmm,” he said through a mouthful of cookie. “The way things were done.”


“I haven’t heard that name in thirty years.” A knot in his neck that he hadn’t known was there came quietly undone. He took another cookie.

“You’ve used it before?” Sean’s eyes were wide and hopeful. “And it doesn’t piss you off?”

“Eons ago.” It recalled golden summers and tall grass, short pants and bare feet cooled in the narrow stream that coiled through his family’s wood—barely an acre and a half, but big enough to lose himself in—and time: Time stretching out endlessly in front of him, free of lessons, responsibility, and the burden of destiny. It made him smile. “Why would it?”

“Okay, then. That’s settled.” Sean leaned forward and met his eyes again. “Look, Rue. I know I’m weird. I get that I’m different. I don’t know why, for sure—I just am. It’s the great mystery of my life. There are others like me, and they don’t know why, either.”

“Very well.” He sat up and leaned forward, too, leaned into Sean’s pale gray gaze. It felt warm. “But given that, it seems strange you’d frequent places too dangerous for me to visit.”

Sean pressed his fingertips to his temples. “They’re only dangerous because you’re food.”

“Now there’s a statement.” He should have been counting steps to the door. He should have been reaching for a weapon. But he felt no danger. He was safe, here, safe as houses, safe as bedtime stories read next to a wintertime fire. Safe as the child he’d once been. “You consider me food?”

“God, no,” Sean said, “but I’m very careful with my guest lists. What kind of host would I be if one partygoer ate another?” He rolled his eyes. “That’s so rude.”

Giles choked on his beer.

“Watch the bedspread,” Sean said, passing him a cloth napkin. “It’s handmade.”

“Your sense of humor is...dark.” If he were to hazard a guess, the napkin was handmade, too.

“Morbid and absurd,” he said, “like Buffy’s.” He took the dampened cloth and pitched it underhand through the open bathroom door. Despite the fact that he hadn’t turned to look, it landed neatly in the laundry basket beneath the sink. “There’s something for your notes. That’s new.”

“It happened when you were turned?” The room went cold.
“Jesus, I hate that word. *Turned.* Think about what it means. Turned. Turned away. Like turncoat, gone to the other side. Turned against.” He shuddered. “I didn’t turn against anyone. I didn’t go to the other side. You can’t choose a side in a war you don’t know about.”

“I didn’t mean to imply—” Sean swept the blade of his hand to the side like he was knocking the words out of the air.

“Look. Late at night, in a bar, after a few too many drinks I was not old enough to buy for myself, I met a guy and followed him outside.” He closed his eyes. “Yeah, it was stupid. I’m a walking, talking PSA. I get to regret it forever.”

*I’m. I. I get to.* The language was troubling.

According to Council lore, when Sean was turned, a demon stole his form, his face, and his memory, and wore it like a shell—a mockery of the person he once was. Sean himself, equated entirely with his human soul, was gone. But if Sean were to be believed, it was the other way around.

In this view, he was the same person he’d always been, hollowed out to hold a demon. His essence had changed, but his identity had not. He’d been made a monster against his will, and Sean the person, separate from his soul, was blameless but for his youthful poor judgement. Unfortunately for Council lore, Sean was quite believable.

Giles took a shaky breath. That story could have been his own.

“So yeah,” Sean said. “My sense of humor changed. I don’t know if it’s part of being a vampire—I mean, Spike’s not like that—or if it’s because everything I worked for, everything I wanted, my family, my friends, my classes, my whole goddamned life was ripped away in one stupid night.” He sighed. “I could just be bitter.”

“Are you saying vampire behavior is a response to trauma?” A novel notion. He jotted it down on his notepad.

“Yes.” He cocked his head. “And no, not completely. Like I said, I am different. My priorities have changed. My diet has *really* changed. I’m....”

Whatever he’d intended to say was lost to the hideous, grating shriek coming from the kitchen.

“Time to bake the bribery.” He scrubbed his eyes dry with the edge of his sleeve, waggled his eyebrows, and headed for the kitchen. The alarm cut off and blessed silence was restored. Giles leaned back into the cushions on the couch, scribbling notes as fast as his hand would move. “Well?”

Sean peeked around the steel and cloth screen that separated the space into two rooms. “Are you coming?”

“I don’t mean to impose. Am I keeping you from something?”

“Nope!” A manic light crackled in his eyes. “Today, I told a client to find a different videographer.” He schooled his face to exaggerated innocence. “I might also have told her where she could stuff her bouquet. Not best business practice, maybe, but now I have the night off. Come help me and you can take one home.”


“Nope.” Sean passed him a metal whisk and a bowl filled with milk and...maple syrup, maybe? “Beat this until it froths. It’s a wash.” Then he carved an elaborate design in the top of each loaf with
a razor blade. “Done? Now brush it on.”

Giles brushed the wash on with a pastry brush, then watched while Sean sprinkled the loaves with coarse salt, pushed them into the oven, and set the accursed timer once again.

“Full sized oven, thank god. No one has time to bake in small batches,” Sean said, leaning against the counter with a dish towel over his shoulder. “I don’t eat the bread, Rue. I trade it for stuff.”

“A demon barter system?” He reached for his notepad.

“Yes. I bake a lot for trade, some for gifts, some for gatherings, but that’s mostly about maintaining my contacts—staying on people’s radar. That’s how I find work and food and clothes and...and everything.” He gestured broadly at the elegantly appointed space and its handcrafted décor. “Everything. My network keeps me alive.”

“Marketing one oh one?” The demon world was stranger than he had imagined. “Is this something you learned after you were tur...er...changed?”

“Nice save,” he said, “and no. I learned it in high school.” He began methodically wiping down the counters, straightening the shelves, and washing the tools they’d used. “If you’re done eating cookies, could you get them for me?” He tapped an empty spot on the shelf. “They go here.”

Giles retrieved the cookies. It felt good to watch someone this organized work, particularly someone so young. He wasn’t much older than Xander and Willow, but worlds more adult. “What kind of high school teaches that sort of thing?”

“Oh, yeah.” He chuckled. “I forget that’s weird. It’s a private arts school in Portland. Low acceptance rate. Everybody there was...pretty good,” a self-deprecating duck of his head, “in their area of focus. We had to present portfolios to get in. Sterrressful, my god. I was thirteen. Some kids came in later. But the theory was that we were artists and always would be. As such, we’d probably never need calculus, but....”

“But you would need business networking.” Sean nodded. “Unusually practical.”

“Most useful class I ever took. I can get just about anything you can think of through my network—obscure, illegal, otherworldly, whatever. I can get it. And now,” he patted the oven door happily, “thanks to Buffy, I can get tapir blood again.”

“I....” Tapir blood? He’d no idea what to make of that statement. “I don’t think I follow. What about Buffy?”

Sean slouched against the edge of the counter, his expression soft. “I didn’t think she liked me, right? I thought she tolerated me for Spike’s sake. I mean, she’s nice enough, but not friendly. Stern. Distant. Slayery.”

“Kali Ma.” She has me awestruck, Rupert. The minions worship her.

“Yeah, poor Rudra. The Oxnard crew is terrified of her. I’m pretty sure she won’t stake me, and I’m still kinda scared.” He narrowed his eyes at something on a shelf and moved to re-alphabetize his spice rack. “So. She came by this morning to yell at me about you.” He tapped an empty spot on the rack with one fingertip and scanned the kitchen counters. “Aha.” The crushed peppers were replaced on the rack with care.

“But I was sorta mad at her when she got here—there’s something for your notes. I get mad so fast, now. And happy and sad. Big swings. Plus, I’ve turned into The Incredible Id-Boy. Way, way more
likely to do something stupid without thinking. One impulsive move—one—and my whole life becomes one big hasty decision. It’s no fun. Well.” Sean licked his lips and looked up at him through lowered lashes. The room heated up several degrees. “Except when it is.”

“I see.” Emotionality and impulsivity as vampiric personality traits. That tracked. He’d seen much the same behavior from Spike—although Spike did not project it outward the way Sean apparently could. The emotional contagion alone was exhausting. He couldn’t imagine living it. He added it to his notes. “Why were you mad at Buffy?”

“I thought she sent Angelus to dump me.”

Oh. “I wasn’t aware the two of you were—”

“We weren’t.” Giles’ stomach knotted with borrowed anxiety. Sean couldn’t be projecting that deliberately, could he? Surely, broadcasting fear and uncertainty carried no advantage. What could he possibly gain? “Or maybe we were. God, I don’t know—can we just skip this part? Buffy didn’t send him. He came all by himself.”

The anxiety intensified, bringing with it a powerful impulse to soothe it away. Perhaps there was some advantage, after all.

“Sean.” He laid a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “You’re neither a servant nor a child. You’re not required to answer any of my questions.”

“Thanks.” Sean squeezed his hand. His skin was smooth and cool. “I’m a little scared of you, too.”

“Why would you be—because of the Council?” Sean shrugged and looked away. “I don’t work for them anymore.”

“Good.” He took one trembling breath. “Good. So Buffy came and I was in bad shape—with Angelus and Thanksgiving, work deadlines and all the stuff she and Spike have me doing for the Order. Plus, finals. Finals. It’s a lot. And I’d just been dealing ‘cause I thought she didn’t care.”

“Ah, she wasn’t aware.”

“I think she knew about each individual thing, but she never put it all together. Now Spike’s giving some of my Order stuff to Mark and Sandy, and Buffy’s arranging for me to get an allowance, so I won’t have to work so much.”

“And you have time to bake bread, which you trade for....” He’d said Tapir, of all unlikely things. “Exotic animal blood?”

“Yeah.” Sean’s smile grew broader and a tear slipped down his cheek. “Plus, she sent this.” He opened the small freezer compartment at the top of his refrigerator. Inside hung five pint-bags of blood, all labeled neatly with Buffy’s name.

Sean stroked each bag in turn, a worshipful caress, as though they were sacred.
Thistle was her real name.

“She’s older than I guessed.” Twenty-three, according to her chart. He’d have put her at sixteen or so, given her small stature and slight frame. Reasonably healthy, three pages of neurological abnormalities notwithstanding. Seizures since she was eight.

“Why are we in this girl’s room?” Jason asked from the doorway.

“We’re not. I am.”

“If you think I’m going to just let you—”

“I’m in this blasted chair, as directed. I’m not straining anything. I won’t pull my stitches. I’ve agreed to let you follow me around like a nursemaid for the foreseeable future. I’ve made my concessions in exchange for my freedom. I do not plan to curtail my activities to make you yet more comfortable. Now bugger off. I’m busy.”

Jason tipped his head back and murmured something under his breath—a prayer for patience, perhaps, or perhaps an incantation. He’d never seen him throw a curse, but blood will out.

“So who is she? Long lost cousin? Debt collector? Old flame?”

Ethan rolled his eyes. “A client. Remember my missing person case?”

“Something about a flower, right? Like a morning glory?”

“Same plant. More poetry. The Moon Vine. Thistle is part of the coven footing the bill.”

“Uh huh. And why are we reading her confidential medical information?”

“To see if there’s anything I can do.”

A long moment passed before he responded. “Ethan,” he said, yet again. Not Doctor Rayne or even Uncle Ethan. Just Ethan, as though they were peers. Were they? Ethan frowned. “Are you getting attached?” Confusion creased Jason’s ample forehead. “You are. You like her.”

“She’s a prophet,” he said, going back to his reading. As he’d expected, neither home address nor next of kin was listed in the file. Aside from a fleet of neurological specialists, one Allie Sorrel was her sole emergency contact—no relationship noted. “Her visions hold the key to resolving the mystery of the Moon Vine. I need her to help me finish this project.”

“And that’s it?” Jason grinned, exposing the understated but brutally expensive porcelain veneers covering his awl-sharp teeth. “You’re holding her hand.”

He glanced down. “So I am.”

“Uncle Ethan.” A softening of his smile folded away the Gaelic angularity of his features, making him look simultaneously more and less like his father. There was the Stubbs roundness at cheek and jawline, certainly, but Hubert Stubbs never looked so kind. “You know, it’s alright if you’re worried
about her. Anybody would be. She had a seizure in your hospital room.”

“While I was strapped to my bed. Helpless.” To his horror, the peevish whine he’d affected to annoy Jason settled into the cracks of his voice and left it querulous, faded. Old. He ached from hair to toenails, and he was still half drained, despite hours of sleep. What was meant to be a narrow trickle of power from his hand to Thistle’s, nearly undetectable even to the initiate, was more like the spray from a garden hose, uneven and uncontrolled. Thank Janus the man was not a sensitive.

“Don’t start with me.” Jason crossed his arms over his chest and donned his best defense attorney game face, though the smile didn’t fade from his eyes. “You know what you should say right now?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “You should say ‘Thank you, Jason. I’m grateful I didn’t wake up in the psych ward.’ That’s what you should say.”

He had a point. That was an ever-present danger for any practitioner, particularly those who practiced blood magic—with bonus lockdown points for using their own blood. The seventy-two-hour evaluations he’d endured were too numerous to count.

“Thank you, Jason.” He singsonged the words. “I’m grateful I didn’t wake up in the psych ward.” He waited a beat, smirking. “This time.” Beneath the edge of the blanket, he twined his fingers with Thistle’s and pressed their palms together, tried to smother the hitch in his breath. He thought his skull might burst. “I need a duplicate key to the Los Angeles building. I presume you still have yours?”

“I....” Jason shook his head. “I don’t get you. Yes, I have my key. I used it yesterday. You need a duplicate for....” He leaned over to read the name on the file upside down. “Thistle Mazur?”

“Perhaps. It’s a contingency.”

“Check.” He pulled a notepad from the inside pocket of his jacket and jotted it down. “Will she need anything to get through your security?”

“Just gave it to her.” With one deep breath, Ethan severed the connection and released Thistle’s hand. He slumped back into the wheelchair and closed his eyes, shivering.

“You just...you....” Jason sputtered to silence. The steady beeping of Thistle’s heart monitor had lulled Ethan nearly to sleep when he heard the footsteps cross the room.

“Great Gla’aki, Ethan.” Warm hands rested on his shoulders and kneaded gently. He was so cold. “Do you have a death wish?”

“Quite the opposite.” Death was his final foe, the machinations of decades poured into preparation for that singular battle. He simply had priorities that took precedence over physical comfort. “Why is it you revert to the religion of your fathers whenever I annoy you?”

“Habit, and I’m worried, not annoyed. You could have died.”

“While that’s always true, it’s not currently on my agenda.” Something Jason said was out of order. His mind ticked over the anomaly a few times before discerning its shape. “How did you know I had security?”

“I sent a retrieval team to your location in North Dakota. They combed the scrub for an hour and couldn’t find you.”

“My location? How precise was—”
“Five meters. I gave them coordinates.”

Well, then. “Finally, some good news.” The staples in his skull itched, his head throbbed from re-draining his not-yet-recovered power, and his body was one enormous purple bruise, but Ethan smiled anyway. This day was looking up. “Do you have any more for me?”


They weren’t connected to each other, of course, but to his Sanctum, each a hidden door from this world into his, into the absolute center of his power. “Something like that.”

“All remote—or abandoned. Where it won’t be obvious something’s missing when they disappear. The terrain’s part of your security.”

His security measures were manifold. Location was the first line of defense, architecture the second. Every location was built of concrete and steel bounded in five directions—sometimes six—by earth, and none of them had windows.

Then there was the magic.

He’d laid spells in layers, baffles and obfuscations on entrances, barriers facing both outward and in, and wards. A dazzling array of wards.

Burrs that stuck to astral travelers and followed them all the way home, zappers that delivered a stunning jolt, deafening klaxons that sounded only in the invader’s mind, and—his crowning achievement—rebounder wards. They took eight long years to master, but any magical attack would deliver back a snootful of instant karma.

And all of that before they got to his Sanctum door. He said, simply, “Yes.”

“That’s...actually pretty smart.” He shook his head, chuckling. “I’m impressed.”

“So, did you get—”

“Yeah, I got Nova Scotia. You paid through the nose for it, by the way, and I had to throw in a pair of passes to Disneyland. Don’t suppose I can get you to stop making enemies?”

Ethan closed his eyes once more and rested his head against the cushion of blankets covering the cold metal frame of his wheelchair. “Most of my enemies are already made.”

It was several seconds before Jason spoke again. “Gods, I’m sorry. I knew what he was doing to you and—”

Ethan waved him away. “Much of it deserved, I assure you. Now, find me something in Tibet.”

“Tibet? I—”

“And Greenland.”


He ignored the gibe. “I’ll also need transportation to the property in Nova Scotia.”
“Shouldn’t you wait until you’ve had time to—”

“One week.”

A telephone jangle ended their standoff. “Stubbs here.” Jason listened, nodding at intervals and scribbling on his notepad. “I can do that.” He glanced up at the clock. “Be there in twenty.”

“Who on earth has your cell phone number?”

“A client.” Ethan raised an eyebrow. “An important client. Uncle Ethan—go back to your room. Get some sleep. I gotta do damage control.” His eyes skimmed the clock again and widened. “Now.” And then he was out the door like a ginger-haired whirlwind.

“Uncle Ethan?” The girl watched him from beneath a fringe of lashes the color of thistledown.

“How long have you been awake?”

“Since you put that pattern in my head.” She stretched one too-slender arm from beneath the blanket to squeeze his hand. “Thanks.”

He nodded. “Did it work?”

“Chased the dream away.” She cleared her throat, rough voice rougher even than he remembered. “I hate breathing tubes. What’s he giving me a key to?”

“A recently renovated basement studio in an otherwise derelict building.”

Her eyes unfocused like she was staring at something in the distance. “With a truckload of protection spells. Holy...wow, I can feel them all.”

“Good. You’ll need that to get through them.”

“It sounds a lot better than where I’m staying now, but...I don’t have any money,” she said. “I can’t pay you.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

She shifted scant millimeters away from him. Her expression stiffened but didn’t change. “Do you...what do you want in exchange?”

“The space is unused most of the time. This costs me nothing and allows you to recover in peace.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “I won’t even be in the country.”

“Nova Scotia.”

“Yes. I’ll come back if there’s some revelation in the Moon Vine puzzle, but I’ll knock. I promise.”

“On the door inside the apartment?” He nodded. “I don’t have the pattern for that one.”

“No,” he said. “You don’t. Now if that’s settled, there’s one other matter I’d like to discuss.” She waited with the patience of the powerless. “Your visions.”

“Oh...kay.”

“The seizures. No organic cause has been discovered?”
She shook her head. “I stopped trying to tell the doctors they were magic.”

“I imagine so. And they always accompany the visions?”

“Some big, some small, but yeah.”

“As I guessed. My question, then: Would you like me to make them go away?”

“You can do that?” She sat up abruptly, triggering a cascade of beeps and buzzes from the machines at the head of her bed, shook her head at the nurse who appeared in the doorway, and leaned back against a pile of pillows. “Oh wow. How?”

“Feel the pattern in your head?” She nodded. “Like that, but more. I’d change it, shift blocks and create new channels until the power flowed around but not through you. The seizures would stop. So would the visions.”

“You’d burn out my magic.”

“Not the intent, but the effect.” Damn the defeated cast of her eyes. His intent was to keep her alive. “Yes.”

“Whoa, that’s a lot.” She pulled the blankets up to her chin like a child. It made her look fragile.

“When I was a kid, I’d’ve done it in a heartbeat. I wanted so much to be like everybody else. Even five years ago, probably. Just to be normal. But....” Her eyes were the color of sand at low tide, bits of green and shimmering blue, flecks of gold and seafoam. Light, but not bright. Misty. “Magic is a gift, right? I didn’t ask for it. I don’t know why it was given to me, but I know there’s a reason. Do you understand?”

He did. He didn’t want to. “You’ll just lie down and take whatever it throws at you? No matter what damage it does?”

“It’s not like that,” she said. “It’s what I was made for.” She still held his hand. “Gam zu l’tova.”

Nausea pounded his stomach in waves, and his head throbbed. “This, too, is for the good.” Blast and damn, he felt so old.

“Oh, wow. So Rayne's your real name?” she asked, yawning. All he could do was nod.

The words came unbidden, then, dredged up from the deep past, grew stronger and more present in his head until he had no choice but to finish them out loud.

“V’yishlach lah bim-hera r’fuah shlemah, r’fu-at hanefesh u-r’fu-at hagoof, b’toch sh’ar cholei Yisrael v’cholei yoshvei tevel, hashta ba’agalah u-vizman kariv, v’no-mar—” As he spoke, a smile lit her pale skin to radiance.

“Amen,” she answered and pressed his palm to her cheek.

“They’re going to kill you,” he whispered. He didn’t know why his chest hurt.

“I know,” she said. Her eyes fluttered closed. Hardly a moment passed before she slept.

Ethan pulled his hand away.

Chapter End Notes
Moon vine and morning glory are, in fact, different plants. They just look the same. Ethan's imprecision annoys him even more than it does me, but he's unwilling to sacrifice understanding for accuracy.

Toften

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