The Long And Winding Road

by Ezagaaikwe

Summary

Spike time-travels on a mission of mercy to rescue Tara, courtesy of Willow.

Notes

Post BtVS and AtS. This fic's not big with the 'splainy about how Spike got out of the pickle he and Angel's gang were in at the AtS series finale. You just know it was damn heroic, though.
The Long And Winding Road
By ezagaakwe
Pairing: Spike/Tara
Rating: up to NC-17.
Warning: character death
Spoilers: Seeing Red, Villains
Author Notes: Post BtVS and AtS. This is a novel-length AU fic that begins post-Not Fade Away. It's a very long (you have been warned!) time travel fic in which Spike and Tara are thrown together in the nineteenth century. If you like long, description-laden romances with elements of sci-fi (think: Diana Gabaldon's Outlander) then this is the fic for you. This was beta-ed by a cast of thousands, who have my deepest gratitude. I'm currently combing the SpikeTara community on LJ, where this was first posted, to make sure I properly credit all the help I had. Feedback feeds the muse. I won't say there's a sequel in the works, but I have a telltale tickle in the back of my mind...
Summary: Spike time-travels on a mission of mercy to rescue Tara, courtesy of Willow.
Disclaimer: None of these characters belong to me. I'm just having fun with them.
"So let me get this straight, witch. You want to magick me back to the past to rescue Tara." Spike scratched his left earlobe. "Haven't you ever heard the word 'anachronism'? Or 'changing history'?

"That's three words." Willow set her jaw.

He gave her his best look of disdain. "Well, now. I don't know. Your track record for magickal solutions to life's problems isn't exactly stellar."

"Come on, Spike," she urged. "You're recovered from the big fight... getting the seat of your pants scorched by Rodan. Aren't you up for a little excitement?" She tried on a persuasive smile, with notable failure.

Spike decided to be blunt. "Red, I know you loved her. But she's gone. There're some things you just have to accept—"

She burst out, "I can't!" and then lowered her voice. "I can't. I've tried, really I have. I thought maybe Kennedy... but there's no one like Tara. I loved her so much. I still love her. Please help me. Please!" She began to cry, her nose turning red and starting to run.

"Here, now." He patted her awkwardly. Spike hated crying women, well, unless you counted the good old days when he was actually trying to make them cry. Ah, those were the days, came the
nostalgic thought. "Don't cry." He rummaged through his pockets and found a crumpled napkin with a phone number on it. After a moment's hesitation, he put it back in his pocket. "Come on." He heaved a sympathetic sigh. "Put your head on my shoulder and have a good cry, pet." He minded snot on his shoulder less than losing the bird's number. Buffy wasn't the only one who had moved on.

"Now, I'm not sayin' I'm convinced, but tell me your little plan. Maybe we can come up with something else. Talk to me."

Unseen by Spike, the face hidden on his shoulder took on a sly smile, but she sniffled and began in a hesitant tone, "Well, you know—or maybe you don't—that bullets were flying that day. I've experimented, and can travel in time, back and forth a bit, but it'd take a lot more power to send you back three years. I'd go back myself but I don't want to get shot, too." She raised wet green eyes to his in appeal.

Spike snorted derisively and raised an eyebrow.

"I don't mean it like that!" she backpedaled hastily. "It's just... you're already dead so if you got clipped, you could just, you know, soldier on, and I'd pull you both back. It's a threefold problem, sending you back to the right time and place—that's teleportation—and then astral-projecting so I can keep an eye on you and make sure you have her and she's okay, and then bringing you both back safely.

"What about changing the past? I've seen Star Trek. Never turns out to the good."

"What about it?" she began stridently, and then backed down. "Can you imagine someone like Tara bringing anything but beauty and goodness back into the world? So much was lost when she left it. It hasn't been the same since. It's like the sun were snuffed out." She lowered her voice even further. "Please, Spike. I don't want to beg, but I would do anything, pay you anything, get you anything. If it's Buffy, I know she still loves you, and I can—"

He cut her off. "Now, that's enough of that. No need to compound all these magickal nips and tucks you're contemplatin'. Not sayin' I won't help. I think she was a right sweet girl, and for the record, I'm right there with you flaying robot boy and I wouldn't have minded helping, but I'm going to want a lot more assurance you can do this and not send me back a million years BC."

In a thoughtful tone he added, "Although the thought of those fur bikinis isn't altogether unappealing."

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They had a long discussion about ways and means, and exactly how much power it would take to send him, a non-living vampire, back in time. Apparently it was easier for a living person to time-travel—something about their life-force being a charge to the "battery." Spike's main concern was that she wouldn't have the means or the power to control it. The it being how far back he was supposed to go, and if Willow could, in fact, return them both to the here and now if he actually found Tara.

"Don't worry about that," Willow said eagerly. "When you tell Tara what I'm trying to do for her, she'll help you. We used to cast spells in linkage. The combined power is synergistically greater than either of us individually."

"Are you sure she'll approve?" He was skeptical of telling Tara much of anything except, "Come
"with me if you want to live," à la The Terminator.

"What do you mean?" There was that strident tone again.

"Well, my thought is that she was never a big fan of the easy magickal solutions. When she learns that you've undone her death—"

"That doesn't matter! She'll be coming back to me. She wants me, just like I want her."

He was doubtful, but kept it to himself. Red was right about one thing, though. He was up for a new adventure.

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She provided proof that she could do it. A library book materialized on the coffee table, bookmarked with its withdrawal slip, dated a week in the future. Spike gave a low whistle. A small thing, but still! The plan began to take on reality for him.

"Now, here's the deal. It'll take time to summon the power to do this. It's a two-part process at this point. You'll be traveling in space as well as time, from LA back to Sunnydale, which as you know, doesn't exist anymore."

He gave her a look that said, Duh. "I remember, pet. I was there."

"And it's longer than I've ever time-traveled. I should experiment and try sending you on a couple of trips, just to make sure."

"Yeah, how about back to 1929? Got some stock I want to sell short before autumn. Keep me in Silk Cut and Type AB for the rest of my unlife."

"That's a ways, Spike. Let's just focus on the problem at hand."

"You focus, witch. I'll grab your bird for you. Just you bring us both back, safe and sound."

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Spike paced while Willow pottered in the next room. He wasn't interested in the minutiae of witchcraft. Presumably she knew what she was doing. Oh, bloody fucking hell, what had he gotten himself into? A creeping sense of unease made him want to call it off. He had a clear sense that this was not one of his more well-reasoned decisions. He was long on the grand gestures and short on the good sense, he knew that about himself. It wasn't Willow's tears and pleading that had softened his initial refusal. It was his empathy. He had loved and lost more than once and he understood wanting it back, whatever the cost.

A growing hum like a dynamo began to emanate from the next room. Put him in mind of a road trip out west he'd taken with Dru, back when tourists could go into the bowels of Hoover Dam. Fine sport coming across unsuspecting tourists in the corridors, their screams masked by the roar of the turbines. Funny that in spite of the soul, he still had euphoric recall of their kills. (This never happened to Peaches, he was sure). He had enjoyed the power, felt himself the equal of the roaring machinery channeling the rushing water.
It was like that—a hum of overwhelming, unimaginable power. A voice sounded in his head. Spike, get ready. Protect Tara. Don't let go. I'll bring you both back safe.
Chapter 2

It was like being born.

Spike was shoved through a tight passage that didn't quite... fit. It wasn't a smooth passage; he was pushed along, and then would appear to stall for whole minutes at a time, grateful he didn't need to breathe. He wished for sight, but perhaps this was something outside of the realm of the normal five senses, hyper-acute vampire senses though they were.

Willow's voice sounded again. *You're almost there. The time's right, but where is Sunnydale?*

Bloody buggering hell!

*Oh, right. There you go. I can't see very well—I'll say goodbye for now. Take care of—*

And out he popped, right into Joyce's bedroom. The witches', he corrected himself. "Uh, hi."

"Spike, what are you doing in our room?" Willow demanded. Tara just stared at him, round-eyed.

Spike didn't answer Willow's question. He looked at the living, breathing Tara. He could well understand Willow, (the future Willow, he corrected himself), wanting her back. She looked beautiful, smelled delicious and well-fucked, and so alive.

He wanted to keep her that way.

He stared back, completely nonplussed. What could he say? 'I'm from the future and I'm about to reshape the past, by keeping you from getting killed'?  

From the back yard, a popping sound like firecrackers going off made him realize that Willow, his three-years-in-the-future cohort, had cut it too fine. No time for explanations, so he did the only thing he could. He tackled Tara.

"Spike!" Willow yelled, "Get off her!"

From the floor, holding down the struggling Tara, he yelled back, "You don't understand! You sent me—I'm supposed to prevent Tara getting shot. Get down! Don't want you buying it instead. Now get down!"

An eddy of the current of power that had swept him back to this time, May of 2002, rippled and pulled him once more. He held Tara tighter.

Willow—*his* Willow, future-Willow—didn't know her own strength. He felt the tight, pushing sensation of time-travel once more and lifted his head to catch a last glimpse of Willow's outraged face, her hand outstretched to zap him off her girlfriend. Spike saw her spin as Warren's bullet took the side of her head off in a shower of blood and bone.

The power of outraged-Willow's blast combined with the too-strong power of future-Willow sent Spike hurtling through time again, Tara locked in his arms.

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They tumbled to the ground... where? Spike tried to take the brunt of the fall on knees and elbows. He had his suspicions where they might be, but preferred to keep them to himself for the moment.

At the mouth of the alleyway, a gas-lit streetlight shone yellowly through thin, smoke-tinged fog. The familiar smell was as distinctive as a fingerprint. Tara clutched his neck, hyperventilating with fear.

"What is going on?" she gasped. Her eyes were squeezed shut, as though she were afraid to open them.

"Easy, pet. We're out of harm's way for now. No bullets flying, at any rate." He fervently hoped she hadn't seen that last spray of her lover's shattered skull. "Breathe easy. Breathe."

Cautiously, she opened her eyes. "Okay. Explanations, p-please. You were saying something about keeping me from getting s-shot? And where are we? Where's Willow? What just happened? Has Willow been up to...? Oh, no." Her voice dropped an octave and she closed her eyes, shaking her head. "And you can get off me any time."

"Sorry, pet." He let her up. They were lying in a dank alleyway. They sat up and rested their backs against a wall, and she looked at him expectantly.

"Explanations?"

Where to begin? "Well, yes, in a manner of speaking. Willow... Well, let me take it back a step. Or forward. Oh, hell. Time travel screws with language." He felt foolish, but bulled ahead. "You died. That popping noise was gunfire. One of the nerds' bullets went wild and hit you. Alternate universe, get me? You were killed, Willow went crazy and badness ensued. Long story. Three years later, Willow's better. It's 2005, and she wants you back. She's not over you." His eyes softened toward her, and Tara looked away. "Can you blame her? She sends me back, I grab you, no bullet and you don't die." He felt like a complete fool, and looked at her for encouragement, belief, something. "It's nice, isn't it, being alive again?" he ended lamely.

She looked at him skeptically. "I didn't die this time because you're from the future, sent to save me."

Her voice was flat with disbelief.

He held her eyes. "Yes."

"But I died then? I'm supposed to be dead? Willow can't change that."

He shrugged. "Afraid she did, pet. It's a fait accompli. Here you are."

Tara looked troubled. "No. No! She can't do that. Matters of life and death. She's got no right..."

"Well, it's not like she hasn't done it before," he pointed out.

"Buffy." She sounded grieved.

"Yeah."

"That was serious black magick. Although I suppose you could argue the end justified the means. The world needed the Slayer," she admitted. "What did she—how did she do this?"
"Buggered if I know, pet. You know more about that sort of thing than I do."

"I'm supposed to be dead. And here I am. If you shoved me out of the way of that bullet, we should still be on Joyce's bedroom floor. So how did we wind up here? And where's here?"

How to break it to her? "I was getting to that. Got a lot of power, that girl of yours. She sent me back three years, and across distance. It wasn't a smooth journey, sort of fits and starts, if you know what I mean. Well, I guess you do; you were on the second leg of the journey with me. Point is, she's strong, and doesn't have the... gas pedal... fine-tuned like she should've. Maybe she sent us a bit... far. I don't think we're in Sunnydale anymore. And I know it's not 2002, either."

"Keep talking."

"Like I said, your girl is powerful. And jealous and protective. So Willow—your Willow—2002-vintage Willow—fuck, this is complicated!" He shook his head. "She didn't understand me popping in like I did, throwing you to the ground. Probably thought the worst. Can't say I blame her. (Evil, soulless killer here. Well, not soulless any more. Remind me to tell you sometime). Anyway, just as she was about to fry me for touching her best girl, the... trip... got underway again. Willow, future-Willow's gas pedal got goosed. And your girl's slapping my wrist just... pushed the pedal to the metal, to mix a metaphor." He reached for her hand, but held back, apprehensive.

"There's more. There's something you're not telling me." She bit her lower lip.

Bloody girl was too smart for her own good. Reluctantly, he said, "That bullet. The one that killed you. Previously, I mean. Willow—"

She gasped and choked back a sob, her fist over her mouth. "No!"

He pulled her against him, held her and crooned, "Now, hold on. The Willow where I came from is nowhere near that bullet. She's fine and probably looking for us as we speak."

"B-but, if my Willow died, then how could she be okay in the future if she didn't live to... to 2005?"

That puzzled him. If you traveled back in time and murdered your parents before you were born, how could you be born and live to travel back murder your parents before you were born...? Paradox!

He shook his head. "I don't know, pet. But we've bigger fish to fry right now." He nodded to the mouth of the alley, which was filled with hulking shapes.
"Lookee there. What do you make of it, Jack? Twist or Rob Roy?" This was spoken in a distinctly lower-class English accent by a greasy, loutish man approximately twice Spike's size.

Jack, three times Spike's size, answered, "Oh, it's a girl, right enough, lad's clothes or no. Lookit them charlies—" He didn't finish, as Spike's fist smashed into Jack's mouth. Jack reared up and lunged for Spike's neck, but Spike sank the other fist into Jack's beefy abdomen. Vamp-faced, Spike roared at the rest, "Who's next?"

They scattered like blown leaves, leaving Jack doubled over, cupping his ruined mouth, wheezing. Spike hauled him up by his shirt. "All right, Jack, answer one question if you can. What year is it?"

Jack just blubbered, spraying blood, mouthing hate.

Spike asked again, "One more time, big man, or I make your nose disappear like your teeth. What year is it?" He grabbed Jack's windpipe and started to squeeze.

"Ay-ee! Ay-ee!"

"Did you say 'eighty,' you great pile of shite? Eighteen-eighty?"

"Aye! 'Emme go!"

"Give us a kiss first." And he kissed Jack's bleeding mouth and then threw him away.

Licking his lips, Spike turned to Tara. "We've got to get out of sight. But I know more than I did five minutes ago and I've a plan of sorts."

She stared at him round-eyed. "Your chip..."

"Is gone," he stated flatly. "And a good thing, too, or those tossers would be taking turns with you right about now. Willow sent me to protect you and that's what I'm going to do. Now, let's get going."

She got up, hands clutching her elbows.

He looked her up and down. "Nothing against trousers on women, but the way you're dressed is breaking the law here, as well as making you as conspicuous as hell."

She said, "Your hair—"

"Won't be in style for one hundred years," he finished for her. "Point taken. We need to blend in. But I know where we are, when we are," he glanced around him with a frown, "more or less. Got a plan."

They started out the alleyway, only to have Spike pull her back into the shadows. "This won't do. We need to cover up. Stay back there out of sight, and I'll be back in a few moments. I'll listen for you. If anything threatens you, scream."
Tara nodded speechlessly, and retreated into a doorway.

Spike was gone too long. Something terrible pushed at the boundaries of her mind, and she pushed back, refusing to think about her death, Willow's death, or the cataclysm that had turned her life upside down within short minutes. *This shouldn't be happening. This is Willow's doing. She could never leave it alone.* Tara forced herself to stay calm, focusing on her breathing, and remaining still and as invisible as she could make herself.

She listened to her would-be attacker crawl painfully away, the sound of his scrabbling movement fading as he disappeared in the yellow fog. She let go an inaudible breath that she did not even know she had been holding.

About half an hour later, Spike returned with an armful of clothing. "Won't *they* be embarrassed when they wake up?" he asked no one in particular. "Here, wrap up in this." He handed her a long cloak and threw another cloak over his shoulders, stuffing a jingling pouch into his jeans' pocket in the process. "There's coin of the realm, and I've got something more for you to put on when we get home."

Tara shook her head, uncomprehending. "When we get home?" she asked, not sure what home Spike was referring to.

"My home. Where we're going, nothing will fit you, and there's no such thing as ready-to-wear." He rolled the rest of his booty into a neat parcel and tucked it under his arm. He offered her his other arm. "Milady?"

They set out on foot. It was not raining, but the damp fog made her skin clammy. They hurried. Spike's talk took her mind off the impossibility of their situation. Don't think of Willow. Can't think of Willow.

Spike said, "If I can get us a carriage, I will. I know where we're going, but the question is 'when?' Too early, and we risk running into my bad self, and it'd be just peachy explaining that one. Too late, and the house will probably have gone for taxes. Always wondered what happened to the old place."

"Spike, stop. I can't... wrap my mind around this." She squeezed her eyes closed, trying not to cry.

He looked at her with pity. "It is as it is, sweetheart. You've got to face facts. I'll do my best to protect you, but if something happens to me, you can't stand there saying, 'This can't be happening.' Because it *is.* Your girl got us into this, and while I admit it's a bit of a pickle, it's better than you being dead, innit?"

She opened her eyes and pressed her fingers to her temples. "Not sure I agree with you, Spike," she said faintly.

He put his arm around her and squeezed her shoulders. "Buck up, love. I'll get you back, safe and sound."
A hansom never did turn up. After walking about an hour and a half, they reached a row of substantial brick houses and Spike stopped in front of one. The house was dark and the windows shrouded. "That's it. That's the old place. Now the question is, 'Who's home?"

He cocked his head and listened. No Drusilla or his former self, and happy entrails to you. He let out a breath he'd been holding and whispered, "Let's swing around back." They walked around to the alley and he pushed Tara back into the shadows once more. "Don't come out until I call for you."

Making sure he was not observed, Spike grasped the back doorknob, and with a twist and a hard shove, forced it open. He beckoned to Tara.

She whispered, "I thought you needed an invitation."

"I used to live here, before." He frowned at the memory. "Been here since—me and Drusilla."

He wedged a chair beneath the broken door's knob, jamming it shut. They walked through the dark larder, into the pitch-black back hall and toward the front of the house. "Hang onto me—I know you can't see as well as I can." In the front parlor, he said, "Can't risk lighting the gas. If I open one of the curtains, will the light from the street lamp be enough for you?"

"Who are we hiding from?" she whispered.

"I said me and Dru came back here." He was matter-of-fact, but she sensed pain behind his brusqueness. "Blood got spilt." He shrugged. "Scotland Yard's probably looking for me for the death of the servants and the disappearance of my mother."

Tara looked at him without comprehension, her eyes welling with tears.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said with compunction. "It's a lot to take in, isn't it? Your girl, and all this. Why don't you sit and let me find you something to eat and drink?"

"I need a bathroom."

"Then you're in luck. We were very progressive, mum and me. All the modern conveniences." He led her upstairs, saying, "Don't want to risk gaslight—too bright. But I'll light a candle for you in the bathroom. There're no windows in there to give the light away. Blow it out before you come down, will you? Or maybe I should wait and walk you down?"

"I'm fine."

Spike held the door for her, and set the candle on the wide rim of the sink. He laid one hand on her upper arm, gave it a little squeeze, and left her.

Tara closed the door softly. The pain was unendurable. She did not cry but held herself together with gritty determination. A man's straight razor sitting on a narrow shelf caught her eye. She reached for it, then dropped her hand and looked away.

She had a better idea.

Avoiding looking at the hollow-eyed girl in the glass, she ran water in the basin, splashed her face, took care of the necessary, and felt her way back downstairs to the parlor.
With a huge effort, she asked, "What happened? Why here? I don't understand. Why not last week? Or 1965? None of this makes sense. Obviously, you're the connection. Your house, around the time of your death, but why?"

"Told you, Willow sent me to fetch you. When the 'pedal got goosed,' we shot back further than three years. She said something about it being easier to transport the living, something about their energy. Maybe you bein' along, full of life force as you are, aiding the spell... unwittingly, I know. Not saying I know what she was talking about, but the connection between me and the man I was—maybe that's the pull or focus. Why we wound up here. Call it 'the Spikean theory of time travel'." He looked absurdly proud, but his smirk turned to consternation when she didn't answer. "Sorry, love. Promised you something to eat and here I talk your ear off instead of feeding you."

She shook her head. "I'm not hungry. But you said there's something to drink?"

He became all business. "Let me see what I can find. Meanwhile, if you want, try on the skirt I nicked. I had a hell of a time finding a tall enough woman to mug. You're bigger than most women here—they feed you better in the colonies nowadays. There're waists of my mother's but I don't think they'd fit you unless she kept old ones from her fleshier middle years. She was a little thing toward the end." He handed her the rolled-up clothes they had brought with them.

Tara was glad when he left the room. She knew he was trying to see to her needs and distract her from the horror that she still refused to think of, but she desperately needed time alone... to make plans. Willow—no, can't think about Willow. Home? No. That was solvable, maybe, but she couldn't think about that either. I'm like Miss Scarlett, she thought a little hysterically. Maybe we can make clothes from the curtains.

She gave herself a mental shake and told herself firmly to get a grip. She took the opportunity to try on the skirt. It was a long soft garment fastened with hooks, gathered in the back. She couldn't make out the color in the dim light from the street, but she could tell it was a fairly good fit. She practiced walking up and down. It trailed behind her. She tried to smooth the wrinkles out of it, and finally changed back into her jeans and laid the skirt flat along the back of the horsehair sofa.

Tara could hear Spike rummaging around in the kitchen and then upstairs, and he finally came back to her with his arms full. "Here, take the tray. Don't wanna drop it. In spite of what you said, you need to eat. There's cheese and some bread. A bit stale, but it smells okay. I made sandwiches. Take the bottles from under my arm, there." Divested of food and drink, he unrolled bundles of clothing. "My mum did have some bigger waists—"

"What's a waist?"

"Sorry. A blouse. And Cook was a good-sized woman. Her Sunday best included this." With a flourish, he presented a lacy blouse with a fluffy jabot.

Tara shut her eyes briefly. "It's too much. Do I need so much?" She thought it'd be hard wearing a murdered woman's clothes but it seemed tactless to say it.

"We're going to have to 'pass' here, pet. Look at us. You in trousers and me in peroxide. We kind of stand out. And we're an unmarried couple under the same roof without chaperonage." He paused. "How would you feel about passing ourselves off as a married couple, if anyone should ask? No saying how long we're going to be here. Don't know how long we can stay here, even. May be some kind of investigation going on—cops come back to see if they overlooked anything and find us. Wouldn't be pleasant."

She answered faintly, "Whatever you say."
"Eat now. You can put on a fashion show for me later."

"What's there to drink?"

"I think you should eat first. Don't want you falling down or getting sick."

"Okay." Obediently, she picked up a sandwich and took a bite.

They sat on the hearth rug in front of a fire grate filled with dead coals. Spike talked while she ate. "I might risk a fire later if you're cold. Upstairs, though. Don't want it to be seen from the street."

She did feel better after eating. Physically, anyway. Spike drank whiskey, and when she was done eating, he offered her sherry. She didn't care for it, but drank it down, then asked for another. She wished she hadn't eaten—wished she could get drunk. She could feel herself heading for some kind of an emotional blow-up, but didn't know what shape it would take. If she could have, she would have picked a fight with Spike just for the release. She kept cupping her forehead, holding it as if to comfort a suffering child, or keep an explosion from occurring.

Spike looked at her with sympathy. "You want to talk? You look all pent-up. If you want to talk, or cry, I'm here. I've lost loved ones myself. Know it's no good trying to keep it inside."

"Please don't," she whispered. "I know you're trying to be nice, and you are nice, but I can't talk about it right now..." Her mouth wobbled and turned upside down.

"There you go." He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him. "I even brought hankies. Knew this was coming. You have yourself a good cry now for your girl." He extracted several hankies from his jeans pocket and pulled her onto his lap while she cried almost silently, his one hand cradling the back of her head, the other making comforting circles on her back.

They sat for a long while, Spike rocking her and making comforting sounds, and Tara enjoying a deliciously empty feeling in her head as her tears slowed and her muscles relaxed. She sighed.

She turned her face into his neck and spoke softly, "Spike, you know what would help?"

"Anything, sweetheart. I can even shut up." He gave her a lopsided smile.

"Do you really want to help me feel better?" she whispered, her breath warm against his ear.

Startled, he drew back and looked down at her. Her lashes were lowered and he couldn't read her expression. "Yeah. I do." He put a finger under her chin and slowly raised her face to his, her eyes still closed and the lashes wet. He thought he hated a woman's tears, but hers were having a positively aphrodisiac effect on him. "Tara?" he whispered, hesitant, not certain he understood what she was asking. "Oh, Tara, I don't think so. Are you sure?"

"I want to." She kissed him, softly at first, but the temperature rose quickly.

Her kisses had a frantic quality that reminded him uncomfortably of l'affaire Buffy. And just like then, he tried to communicate gentleness and comfort with his touch, but she would have none of it. He'd always secretly fancied Tara, with her soft eyes and soft mouth, and a favorite fantasy of his involved her, Willow, and himself. He knew what she was doing had nothing to do with love, lust, or even liking, and everything to do with grief and loss. He wanted to help her—God knew he wanted nothing more than to enjoy her, give her pleasure—but this parody of passion was a huge mistake. Wrong for her, and wrong for him. Because holding her like this, feeling her against him, was touching him way beyond the physical. He could see himself falling for her, far too easily. And honestly? That wasn't going to help either of them.
What was it with him and emotionally unavailable women?

She reached for his zipper, but he held her hands away from him. "Stop. Hold up, love. No. Earth to Tara. Spike to Tara. Stop it!"

"No!" She struggled with him but he hugged her tight to pinion her arms.

"'No' is right! This is \textit{not} gonna happen." He could hardly believe it, hearing himself say, "Not gonna do this. You'd hate yourself." He made an appeal to both their common sense. "\textit{And} me. Not gonna take advantage of you in this state."

She turned miserable, pain-filled eyes toward him and held his eyes. "You said you'd help me."

"\textit{I will} help you," he said. "I'll be here for you in any way you want. Except that. There's a big job ahead for you and you're going to need help. I'll keep you safe."
Chapter 5

Tara hated herself.

Oh, how could she have? And the look in his eyes, his empathy, and his sorrow for her! His pity hurt worse than his refusal, but neither as badly as the loss she still could not face. Her mind skittered away from that horror.

What he must think of her! Her soul writhed in humiliation. This was a desecration. She should be dead herself. She had been shoved aside and the bullet that should have killed her had killed Willow. Tara had wanted Spike to do that one thing and allow her to join her love. Sex with a vampire had to be lethal for someone not imbued with slayer-like powers. He'd probably end up draining her. She was just plain Tara, nothing special. Willow had been the luminary, and Tara had bathed in her light. No, don't think of Willow!

She wished he would drain her. She could give him that small thing and he could give her oblivion. But he refused her!

Her anguish must have shown in her eyes. He took her face in his hands. "Not saying I don't want to. It'd be... heaven, but I'm not going to use you. Not going to let you hurt yourself." He stroked her hair and spoke softly to her. "You've lost so much. It's got to be hard. Just got back together with your girl, only to—"

She couldn't stop the tears that welled in her eyes again and she felt them spill over.

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Well, that went well, Spike thought as he thumbed away her tears. Girl's half round the bend, and no wonder. He flashed briefly on Victorian facilities for psychiatric emergencies, then suppressed it. "Shhh," he said, pulling her to him, wrapping his arms around her trembling body. "You're cold. I wish I could keep you warm. Let's go upstairs and I'll build us a fire."

Spike picked her up and carried her as though she were a child. Upstairs, he deposited her on the big bed in his mother's room, pulled the covers back on the other side and said, "Slide in and cover up." He tucked her in, made sure the heavy velvet drapes at the windows were securely closed, and built a small fire in the grate. When it was burning well, he came to bed and lay on top of the covers opposite her. "Would you rather lie by the fire? We could camp there and then you'd be really warm."

She shook her head. After a moment's hesitation, she asked quietly, "Would you get under the covers with me?"

Spike understood her embarrassment and was pleased that she still wanted him close. "Love to," he said, careful to keep his tone casual.

Tara held open the covers and he climbed in next to her. She settled against him and hid her face against his chest.
Spike said, "I swear to you I'll make this right. I'll get you back home if it's the last thing I do." He lulled her to sleep with comforting words, telling her how important she was, how he felt about her loss, that he would keep her safe.

He watched her until finally, sighing like a child, she fell asleep with her head pillowed on his arm.

Fuck, it hurt! And not only lover's balls. Where did this attack of nobility come from? The soul? Damned inconvenient to have a conscience sometimes.

Too late now. He'd been on the receiving end of getting used sexually and it wasn't fun. (Well, yes it was, but that was love's bitch talking. He thought far too much of Tara to do that to her). He looked down at her as she slept. The worry lines in her forehead smoothed out and she looked peaceful.

Spike was not used to sexual frustration. In the days after Prague and Drusilla's illness, he'd slip out for a private wank or to relieve himself with a handy minion. This resolve to put Tara's best interests ahead of his own meant only one thing. There was nothing in it for him except the desire not to hurt her. He looked at her soft mouth parted in sleep and imagined himself sinking into her. Best not think about that. He gritted his teeth and adjusted his jeans to a slightly less uncomfortable tightness, willing his erection to go down.

She stirred and said sleepily, "I'm sorry I made a fool of myself. Thank you for being so nice to me." She nestled closer, soft and trusting.

"It's my pleasure," he said without irony. "Oh, I forgot, I found a nightie in Cook's room. It'll be warm and it's bound to be more comfortable than those damp jeans. I'll bring it to you and then get some more coal." He tucked her in and left, returning with a flannel nightgown. "I'll give you a few minutes to change."

He went into the bathroom and relit the candle. Why did a lack of reflection still surprise him? He sighed and turned on the tap to cover any sound he might make, and tried to summon his old fantasy of himself and the two witches, but Mr. Happy was having none of it. Buffy didn't fill the bill, either. The dark little bird from the poetry slam? He couldn't remember her face, let alone her name.

He thought of the disbelieving Tara in the alley, one skeptical eyebrow raised, stunned Tara, fearful eyes pleading with him, begging him to say it wasn't so, anguished Tara asking him to help her forget, her desperate kisses, his pushing her away. Holding her in bed as she slept. Her murmuring in her sleep. The smell of her hair. He stroked himself and thought about making love to her different ways, hard and fast, slow and languorous, having her in all ways, loving her, being loved in return.

Oh, no.

He willed the fantasy off the high road and back to the carnal. Just finish! he thought roughly, pulling even harder. That was some kissing, before he had come to his senses and pushed her away. That mouth. What if he'd given in to her, fucked her senseless on the hearth rug? He imagined the two of them writhing before a blazing fire, their passion hotter still. Finally he came, groaning her name.

He mopped up with one of the hankies. He'd been gone too long. Tara might feel alone and worry. He fetched the coal hod from the parlor and lugged it upstairs.

He found her sitting at his mother's dressing table, brushing her hair. She had put on the voluminous nightdress he'd found her. It flowed over her knees and onto the Persian rug. He watched as she smoothed the soft flowery fabric.
"Thanks for this," she said. "It's pretty. And warm."

"Um. What?" He couldn't think straight, suddenly embarrassed by his earlier fantasies. "Let me build up the fire."

Tara asked with diffidence, "Are you uncomfortable sharing a bed? Because I can sleep by the fire and you can have the bed. I mean, it's your house and your bed. I'm just a guest."

Toying with the notion of telling her the truth: it's torture sharing a bed with you, I want you so much. He said instead, "I don't mind. You're nice and warm."

She smiled, the relief washing over her face.

When the fire was burning well, they went back to bed. Spike was glad he'd taken the edge off his frustration in the bathroom. "Turn away and I'll rub your shoulders."

She sighed her approval as he squeezed her shoulder and neck muscles, and finally relaxed back to sleep.

Don't think about the warm fragrant girl in front of you. Think about this fix you're in, you and she. Spike racked his brains about the logistics of time travel—how could Willow have sent him back if she had died in 2002 and therefore didn't live to 2005 to do it in the first place? He gave it up as pure speculation and a waste of time. Time for practical matters when Tara awoke. Clearly, witchcraft was their best hope. Perhaps she could sniff out other witchy types, get their help sending them back. His job was keeping his paws off her and getting her back safely.

Tara turned to him in her sleep, put her arm around him and pulled him close. "You cold, sweetie?" she murmured. "Ooh," she crooned, "let me warm you up," cuddling him against her breasts. He knew it was Willow she was speaking to, before subsiding into deep sleep. With a sinking feeling, he realized what he felt for her was not mere lust.

You're doing this to yourself. Stop it right now! he told himself. You were right—it's never gonna happen, so get it out of your mind.

Spike made plans, then went over them again looking for flaws, trying to tighten them up. His usual fist and fangs approach wouldn't work where they were going. Finally, satisfied he had a workable plan, he allowed himself to drift off.
Spike was startled awake.

The small fire had burned out and the room was cold. An intruder? One of his and Dru's minions? A faint cracking noise floated up the stairwell. Someone was forcing the door to the silver safe. A burglar, then. Human.

Soundlessly, he slipped out of bed, and making sure the bedroom door was closed, Spike quietly made his way downstairs. The burglar was a teenager, no more than a boy.

Spike clamped a hand over the boy's mouth and turned him around. "Tempting, isn't it? Empty house. Nice stuff. Sorry, mate, can't let you have it. Tell you what, though. Make you a trade. I'll let you live and you give me a... taste." He held the quaking boy's eyes and willed him to be silent. Spike had always disdained Drusilla's use of thrall—thought it unworthy of a "real" vampire. He had been all about the slashing force, not mental trickery. Not that he possessed that skill. He just wanted the boy's silence, compliance, and well, blood. He didn't know when he'd be able to feed again, and needed to keep up his strength.

The boy's eyes were glassy with fear. Keeping one hand clamped on his mouth, Spike carefully turned the boy's head to one side, fanged out, and bit him. He took what he needed and kept his promise. Wiping his mouth on his black tee shirt, Spike said briefly, "Thanks. You can let yourself out." His features returned to normal.

He didn't worry about the boy telling anyone. He would not be believed. The stunned boy scrambled to the dining room window he'd pried open, fell in heap to the ground, and staggered away. Spike closed the window and locked it.

When Spike returned to the bedroom, he cautiously parted the curtains and looked at the sky. It was a pale ash color, though the sun had not risen yet. He could make out lighter plumes of smoke coming from neighbors' chimneys and was relieved that the previous night's fire had gone out. He could see the burglar reeling down the street, hands clasping his neck. He'll live, Spike thought callously. He needed to put Tara first and stay strong for her. Already he felt stronger, almost warm.

Tara was stirring. With a gasp, her eyes flew open and she said, "I thought it was a dream!" She sat up and blinked at the overdecorated Victorian bedroom.

"Sorry to disappoint you, pet."

Her mouth drooped. "I don't know what to think. Willow shouldn't have done this. Sent you back... This shouldn't be happening." She whispered, "I don't think I should be alive."

"Stop that! Here you are, alive, and I'm going to see you stay that way! And no backchat from you! It is as it is." Spike fixed her with a stern look.

She lowered her eyes. "You say Willow's... ?"

"'Fraid so, pet. I don't want to go into details, but there's no doubt. However, that was then, 2002. Where I came from—or when, she was fine. Crazy to get you back, though."

Tara's mouth drooped even further. "Crazy is right," she muttered. "I was crazy. I had my doubts about going back to her, but I guess wishful thinking got the better of me. I thought she had
changed." She shuddered. "What's happening to me? 'Dead.' Let's say the word. Willow's dead, and why am I not throwing myself out the window?"

"Well, last night..." Spike cleared his throat delicately.

Tara lowered her lashes. "Sorry." She pinkened. "And thank you for not taking advantage, but my point is, there's this, this, numbing effect. Is it time travel? I mean, I know she's dead, you told me she is, and I can imagine the rest. A stray bullet—I know what it can do. The knowledge is there, but the feeling is 120 years away." She shook her head, and the horror on her face was at her own lack of horror.

"Tara, love—"

"She was my lover, Spike. She was my lover." Tara shook herself hard, as though to shake a proper grief into her heart. "It's like reading a really well-written description of a punch in the nose... instead of feeling it." Finally, her eyes welled up. She put her face on her knees.

Spike stroked her back. "It's shock, probably, and maybe a, a boomerang effect when we get you back. But I'll be there to pick you up when it knocks you down."

Eyes still closed, she turned her face toward him, lips stretched in a thin, insincere smile. She did not answer.

He went on, "It's a tragedy, love, but if you're right, if Willow didn't survive, then it's even more important to get you back. She did a hell of a job in the last show-down with the Big Bad. Turned the trick—used some magical Slayer-scythe-gizmo to turn the potential slayers into the real thing. Made all the difference."

Tara shivered. "That's what you meant. When you said there was a big job for me? Then you don't think she survived."

He sat on the edge of the bed and took her hands in his. "Not sayin' I know how these things work. I'm here, you're here; someone sent us. Just sayin', I'm going to do my best to get you back. If she's alive, so much the better. No big job for you then, and you get your lover back. Feel better?"

Tara shook her head. Spike didn't know what she was trying to say. With anguish in her voice, she muttered, "You don't understand. I'm not grieving her death, although I will someday. It's terrible." She was silent for a long moment while tears ran down her cheeks, her teeth clenched. "I'm grieving the loss of a relationship. Again! I would have broken up with her, this time for good. The magick, she could never leave it alone, even after—" She gave a bark of humorless laughter. "I wonder if there's a 12-step program for 'Women In Love With Magick and The Women Who Love Them Too Much'."


She smiled at him through welling eyes. "I could almost see it. You're so good."

"Hey! No call for insults!"

That fetched a lopsided, tremulous half-smile from her.

"I'm not good, love. But I'd be good to you."

The tears threatened to spill over again. "Don't you know that rebound relationships don't work?" She put her head down on her knees again. "It's not right," she said in a muffled voice.
"What's not right, sweetness?" he said, still petting her back.

"That the strong one should be killed and the weak one left to do her work."

Spike didn't answer, but only chafed her cold hands.

"You feel warmer," she observed, sounding surprised.

"Do I?" he said lightly. "Wish I could offer you a cooked brekkie, or at least some hot tea, but we can't have a fire now that it's light," he said.

"What about you? You need to eat, too." She wiped her eyes and sat up straight.

"I'm fine. I don't have to eat every day," he evaded. "But I'll make you another sandwich if you want."

"Maybe later." For the first time since they arrived in London, she truly smiled at him.

Not letting himself be distracted by her, he said briskly, "Then I'm going to change clothes. You change, too. No telling if someone will stop by asking questions, so no jeans, okay? I'd pitch 'em, if I were you."

"Okay."

Before heading to his old room to find something to wear, he looked around his mother's room. He remembered Drusilla rifling the jewel case. She was like a jackdaw with shiny objects. The case stood open upon the dressing table's velvet throw, the odd pieces of amber, jet, and crystal that Drusilla had missed lay scattered on its plush surface and on the floor. It wasn't his mother's good stuff. That was still locked in the silver safe. He decided to go check it for damage.

They met on the stairs, Tara's arms full of clothes. She refused his offer to help carry. Downstairs, he found the silver safe unopened. The burglar hadn't had time to finish the job, but Spike pried the door open easily and removed a second jewel case. His mother had not been mistrustful of banks, but there was a goodish sum of money in the safe as well. That, and what he'd taken from the couple he'd mugged last night, would be enough to see them through for a while.

Stopping in the pantry, he trimmed mold off a round of cheese, found a joint that didn't smell too bad—thank God, it was so cold this time of year—and made Tara another couple of sandwiches. Figuring that she must have finished dressing by now, he decided to look in on her.

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Tara found that the creases in the skirt had smoothed out of the damp fabric. It was nearly dry. She'd been unable to make out the color in the dim light the night before, but now saw that it was dark blue velvet. Her shoes were heeled slippers that didn't show beneath the skirt's voluminous length, but the blue tee shirt she wore would probably not work with the rest of the outfit. She set about picking out a blouse to wear.

Spike knocked on the bedroom door. "Come in," she called.

He frowned at her outfit. "That won't do at all. You look too... comfortable. And it's not proper to show your neck during the daytime. That tee shirt will do for underwear, but you need something high-necked for day."
Tara straightened up and threw him a fake-military salute, and modestly held his mother's flowered blouse up to her bosom and neck.

"Let me see your shoes," he said mock-sternly.

She pulled the long blue skirt up to her knees, and gave him a questioning look.

"That's fine. They'll do, but you can't show your legs here, pretty though they are. Not even your ankles. If the street is muddy, you can hoist up your skirt slightly to keep it from trailing in the mud, but that's all."

"I remember that little girl in Titanic. Her mother wouldn't let her back touch the back of the chair. It was a little scene, but made me think of how I was raised. Strict, you know?" She shook her head at the memory.

"Remember that and you'll do fine. I'll dress your hair. Used to do Dru's back in the day. No reflection, know what I mean? Say, maybe you can give me a trim? Cut off most of the peroxided part?"

"I thought of something else. I can cast a little spell, a glamor, to make your hair appear its natural color."

"Brilliant. I'll go change now. Think about what you need to find others like you."

Her mouth quirked. "Lesbians?"

"Very funny. No, witches. Witchcraft got us here and it's our best hope for getting home."

"All right."

"This weather is not favoring us. Too bloody bright," he said, glancing out the window. "But there's a mass of clouds in the west. If it gets dark enough, I can go out, get you what you need, and we can travel late today or tomorrow. No telling how long we can stay here safely."

"Let me look in the kitchen. Probably most of what I need is right there. Oh, I'll need a crystal. For focusing."

He hefted a crystal paperweight from a side table. "How's this?"

"Perfect!"

"I made you breakfast, too. It's down in the dining room."

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After changing clothes, Spike tapped a reminder on her bedroom door. "Soup's on." Tara heard him go downstairs.
Over her tee shirt, she put on a high-necked flower-sprigged blouse with huge sleeves, and tucked it in. It needed a belt. Looking through Spike's mother's wardrobe, Tara couldn't find anything that fit her healthy twenty-first century frame.

Spike's mother must have been corseted within an inch of her life. Perhaps plump Cook had owned something she could wear later, but right now, Tara wanted to eat. She improvised a belt by wrapping a length of crimson silk around her waist several times, tying it in a square knot, and tucking the ends in. Not too bad, she thought, looking at her reflection. She picked up her long skirts and hurried downstairs to join Spike.

His eyes flickered up and down. "You'll do."

She smiled at him. "That suit looks familiar." Very Randy Giles, she thought, although it seemed tactless to tease him since he seemed uncomfortable about his appearance.

"Not one word out of you, missy," he warned. He gestured at the table. "Sorry it's sandwiches again."

"It looks good. Thanks."

"I opened the silver safe and found this," he said, pushing the jewel case across the table to her. "There was some cash there, too. If we run short, we can sell some of this, but I hope we don't have to, because I'd like to give you these. Family heirlooms. Should have gone to my bride, if and when, but I never married. Before, I mean. Before Drusilla."

Tara noticed that his voice was carefully neutral. "And not likely to tie the knot now, so they're for you." In a half-joking tone, he said, "Always wanted to shower a girl with jewels."

Tara put her sandwich down and opened the case. Her eyes widened. "Oh, Spike. I couldn't possibly. This is too much."

"I wish you would. You'd be beautiful in them."

She picked up a necklace of small red stones set in a floral design. "Are these... rubies?"

He shrugged.

"Oh, now I really can't. It's too beautiful. And too valuable." She felt almost frightened.

"Suit yourself. Still say they're yours, whether you wear them or not. At least let me give you this." He pulled the case back, selected a ring, and said, "Now hold out your finger, Mrs. Southwood."

Tara was confused. "Mrs...?"

"Remember last night, I said we'd have to pass ourselves off as a married couple? Don't want folks here thinking the worst of us, especially you—thinking you're the kind of woman who'd stay with a man, unchaperoned. Thinking you're a fallen woman, I mean. Not that they'd think that long. I'd sort them out, naturally. But I still say you should wear it. Think of it as part of your costume," he said, giving her a way to wear it without feeling embarrassed or obligated.

"All right," she said shyly, and held out her left hand.
He slid the ring, a huge square-cut diamond, onto her finger. "Mum stopped wearing this after she so got so tiny. Always meant to have it sized for her little hand, but now I'm glad she didn't." He swallowed, and changed the subject, but he was still holding her hand. "Glad you don't paint your nails. Kind of hard to explain here. Nice ladies don't paint."

Tara looked up at his face and thought she detected an effort in his voice. Her eyes widened slightly as she realized that Spike had feelings for her. She blushed, thinking about the pass she made at him last night. Don't think about that. Another thought occurred to her. "Southwood?" she asked, and unbidden, she started to giggle. The harder she tried to stop, the more she giggled.

Spike gave her a twisted half-smile. "Yeah. Funny, eh? Angelus would tease me, call me Smallwood. Entirely without justification, I might add." Tara sensed that if he could blush, he'd be blushing, too.

Tara subsided and finished her breakfast, thinking about Spike. Her discovery didn't worry her. She'd always liked him. It might have felt uncomfortable, with an uneasy sense of obligation or resentment that he was attracted to her, nowhere for them to go to escape one another, cooped up in the house on a sunny day, but all she felt was grateful to him, safe with him, and in an odd way, attracted to him, too.

She wondered if it were fair to him to ask him to share a bed now that she knew that he liked her that way. What if they'd slept together last night? Well, they had, but what if they'd had sex? She shivered. What was that pungent expression? "Coyote sex"? Where you wake up appalled, and want to gnaw off a limb to escape your partner? But for all her embarrassment last night, she felt he'd done right by her by not tearing her throat out, and put her as quickly at ease as she could be under the circumstances. She was comfortable enough around him to have fallen asleep in his arms. Uneasily, she wondered where they'd sleep tonight.

Willow. Think about Willow. That was the saddest thing about this. She had gone back to Willow as an act of faith, believing that if she showed Willow she trusted her, Willow would be trustworthy. They had never seen eye to eye on witchcraft. For Tara, it was an aspect of her overall reverence for life, and she had felt with humility that she was privileged and somewhat burdened with this gift, which should above all else be used wisely and sparingly.

Willow had looked at it as a rush.

Now, because Willow could not let go, and had had at her disposal this powerful—dare she call it a weapon?—Willow had brought her back. Tara had a hard time with this. She knew that in some sense she should not be here, not just the nineteen century, but here at all. Alive.

She supposed she was over her initial I shouldn't be alive thoughts. Now, all she felt was angry that Willow had played God again, and Tara was left to do right by her own lights. She would grieve later, but for now, she would just have to do her best with the mess that Willow had made.

Spike left Tara alone with her thoughts, and she heard him muttering to himself as he wandered around the dining room. "Don't know how we can travel today. That mass of clouds isn't shaping up into the storm I'd hoped for," he grumbled.

"That's okay. We still have to figure out where we're going, right? I'll do a locator spell after breakfast. But talk to me now. You said Willow played a big part in the last showdown. Tell me about it. I need all the help I can get it I'm going to have to pinch-hit for her."
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spike looked at Tara in admiration. His girl was shaping up into a hero in her own right. (Well, not his girl, but a man could dream). He'd expected more disorientation and grief from her, if last night were any indication. It was only to be expected, but she was stronger than she looked. He gave her an admiring nod. "Right, then."

He gave her the lowdown on the last Sunnydale big bad, told her what Willow had done, how things might go differently a second time. They speculated briefly on the wisdom of changing the future, and almost immediately gave it up as fruitless speculation. Tara needed facts, and Spike armed her with them.

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They took a break. Tara found the herbs she needed for her spell, and Spike fetched the crystal and found her the map of England she asked for. "I know there's a coven somewhere in the West Country," he told her. "Course, that's twenty-first century. No telling if they're there nowadays. Would have been. You know."

"I know." She smiled at him.

Spike felt flustered. "Well. Let me give you some space so you can work your magic. Or do you want me to stay?"

She gave him her crooked smile again. "You can stay. It's not private. I can use your energy."

"Huh. Thought I didn't have any. According to some."

Tara lifted her chin. "You might not be alive, but you have plenty of energy."

"I have, at that," he agreed, and sat down to watch her.

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First, Tara pulled several long threads from the length of red silk at her waist, which she twisted into a rough string and tied to the crystal. She lit candles, burned herbs in a saucer, and murmured unfamiliar words in a soft voice. For long minutes, she was still, eyes closed, casting about in her mind for another mind or minds like her... not so much summoning power as trying to pinpoint its location. Sinking into a trance state, she sent out feelers west, and making contact, pulled back her essence so as not to make her presence felt. She just wanted to know where they were. Reaching for the crystal, Spike hastily put the string in her fingers. She lifted the string and held the crystal suspended over the map, swaying gently. Tara made a minute adjustment to her hand's location over the map, and waiting for the crystal's movement to still, gradually lowered it until one sharp facet touched the map.

"Westbury!" crowed Spike. Tara shook herself like a swimmer coming out of the ocean and blinked her eyes to clear them. "It worked?"
"Bingo," he stated in a triumphant tone. "Westbury it is. Let's pack."

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Spike urged her to make free with whatever she could find that would be appropriate to wear and promised to come fix her hair later. He retrieved the cash from the silver safe, the money pouch from the previous night's mugging, then packed a basket with bread, cheese, apples, and wine. He made a pile by the back door. No telling when Scotland Yard might come back, or his heirs with a solicitor in tow. He tried to remember who had wound up with the house. Didn't matter. Back then, it was a cast-off chrysalis, after Drusilla set him free to rampage his way through England. Now, it was only a temporary shelter. Didn't fancy getting trapped there with Tara to protect. The sooner they got to the witches, and back to the twenty-first century, the better. He didn't think his chances of playing the proper Victorian gentleman for long were very good.

It occurred to him, not for the first time, that the witches might not send them back, might not believe them at all. He felt an unfamiliar helpless sensation as he thought, they must! It was no exaggeration to say that the world would end if they did not.

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Tara packed what little fit her into a small carpetbag. She knew that she needed to adjust her costume, add petticoats, and probably allow Spike to lace her into a corset. She sighed in resignation. Seeing the massing clouds in the west, she made a mental note to add umbrellas to their getaway kit.

Spike knocked. "You decent?" She called, "Come in." She was frowning at her reflection in the mirror. "All these clothes! If it rains, I'll be as heavy as ten bushels of wet laundry. Can't I pass as a boy? Surely you have something that will fit me."

He only looked at her chest and snorted with laughter.

With an effort, she did not cross her arms over her chest, but stared him down.

"That's a good look on you," he admitted. "If anyone tries anything ungentlemanly, Mrs. Southwood, just give him that look. Now, I know you're not looking forward to this," and he pulled Cook's corset from behind his back, "but you do want to fit in here, don't you?" He smiled wolfishly. "Now get out of those clothes and down to your knickers and tee shirt."

With a sigh, she removed her outer clothes, holding on to the thought that, after all, underpants and tee shirt were more than she'd have on at the beach. This is Spike, she thought. No need to feel embarrassed. Oh, hell, what was she thinking? She remembered their kissing last night, and turned even redder.

Based upon the wicked look he gave, Tara suspected that he was enjoying her embarrassment. She put her nose in the air and tried to look unflustered. "Do your worst," she said in a credible damsel-in-distress voice.

Spike put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around gently. He helped her step into the loosely laced corset and pulled it up around her middle to just below her breasts. Segueing into Hattie McDaniel's voice, he said, "Now hang onto de bedpost and suck in!"
With a gasp of laughter, the air was forced out of her lungs as he laced her in. She spoke breathlessly, the words jerked out of her between his tugs on the laces. "I hate this! Can't I just wear it kind of... not-too-tightly, so I look like I have it on, only not so tight?" she begged.

He eased up. "Good thing your waist is naturally small. Don't need to be laced all that tight. You'll find it's easier to get in and out of, now it's laced. It hooks up the front, too, you see. Easier, since you don't have a lady's maid." Spike avoided looking at her and seemed eager to leave. The corset emphasized her breasts, which did not need it.

Before he left, he said,"What you need now is a corset cover and half a dozen petticoats. Oh, and a purse stitched to the bottom of the corset."

"Why?"

"We need to run or get separated, I want to know you have most of the money on you and no worries about Artful Dodger. What we don't need for train fare, I mean. And the jewelry where you can get at it if you need it. Want you to be taken care of, something happens to me."

He left her to finish dressing.

The rest of the day passed in conversation and peeking out the window, hoping for a break in the sunny weather. Spike told her why he had left Sunnydale, about getting his soul, about the madness. He told her about the build-up to the Hellmouth and the aftermath, about living in Los Angeles now. He found he could talk about Buffy calmly, almost dispassionately, reassuring himself as much as Tara that, while he still cared about Buffy, the love had faded. He had put aside any thoughts that they might one day be a couple and for the first time he could honestly say he felt good about that.

In the afternoon, Spike reminded her to sew a money pouch to the bottom of the corset. He found his mother's sewing basket and a length of canvas for the purse. When she was through, he made her hike up her skirts while he loaded the purse with jingling coins, currency, and the jewelry, which he had transferred to a soft velvet pouch. She lowered her skirts and smoothed them.

"How is it you know so much about ladies' underclothes?"

"Helped enough of them out of theirs, didn't I? How does it feel?" he asked. "Too heavy?"

"A little, but it's okay. I can walk." She demonstrated, by walking up and down.
"You can walk, but can you run?"

The weather favored them by clouding up, and it began to rain around seven. The time of the year and the lack of moon made Spike willing to chance a fire again, and they cooked slices of joint and had hot sandwiches and hot tea. Spike laced his with whiskey and Tara pushed her cup toward him. "Me, too."

He gave her a dubious look. "Well, okay, but in this time and place, ladies don't partake of spirits."

"Come on, Spike," Tara coaxed. "It's just you and me. I'll behave when we get around people."

He obligingly poured a slug into her cup. "If you get too out of hand, I'll just tell 'em it's how my mad American wife normally behaves," he suggested.

"I know if I get tipsy, you'll take care of me." She gave him a conspiratorial smile.

He looked shocked. "Witch, are you flirting with me?"

She only smirked.

They were both a little uncomfortable as bedtime neared. Tara wanted to confront their unspoken attraction but found herself too shy to bring it up. Perhaps he would just join her in bed? But if he were as attracted to her as she suspected, then maybe she would be teasing him with her nearness. She just didn't want to be alone. They'd been here only twenty-four hours and more had changed than the preposterous fact of time travel, the planet shifting on its axis and dropping them halfway around the world, and Willow's death. Tara also knew she was about to shoulder more responsibility that she'd ever imagined she'd have to. Was it wrong to want to lean on Spike a little?

What if she were using him? She didn't necessarily want to have sex with him, did she? Hoping he didn't notice, she slid frequent glances his way. He was still wearing the old-fashioned brown suit, reasoning that they might need to hastily decamp out the back door if the authorities came in the front. He'd taken off the jacket and loosened the tie, however. It wasn't that absurd-looking, but it made him look oddly vulnerable. He'd filled out in the last 120 years, and his shoulders were bigger than William's must have been. She'd overheard him muttering, "narrow-chested, pencil-necked little prat," as he pulled at the neckband in a vain attempt to loosen it. He seemed glad to get unbuttoned and let his hair down, as it were.

"Your hair! I just remembered. I was going to do a glamor. What color is it, really?" She reached for his hair and smoothed it, trying to get a look at the roots. "How can it grow, if you're not, you know, alive?" She blushed the moment the words left her mouth, thinking that the question sounded rather personal.

Spike smiled at her, appearing to enjoy being touched. "It grows. Slowly, though. It's sort of a light brown. A little lighter than my eyebrows."

Tara looked away and made herself look back at him. "I'll do it now, but you should stay close to me." She hesitated, looking for confirmation that it was all right with him. "You're the focus of the
spell, but I'm the originator, and if we get separated for long, it'll change back."

"Like a pumpkin?" he teased, then sobered. "Staying close sounds fine to me."

She murmured a dozen or so words and then smiled. "Looks good," she said, reaching out to stroke his hair once more.

"I wish I could see. I used to use a Polaroid to see if I'd got the dye right. How does it look?"

"I told you—good. Feels softer, too. It's like it's natural again."

Spike grimaced and raked his hair with his fingers. "That's no good. I was a curly-topped little moppet for far too long. My mum kept me in curls and dresses until I was six." He looked embarrassed by the admission, and changed the subject. "Well, let me clear up and I'll bring up some more coal then, shall I?"

After her offer to help clean up had been declined, Tara climbed the stairs and thought more about what she wanted from him. Strictly speaking, she supposed she was bisexual, leaning more toward women due to unpleasant history with men. Spike had been nothing but good to her, and since they'd come to this strange place, she had come to rely upon him more and more. She trusted him and felt safe with him. Was that enough to base her choice on?

The last thing she wanted was to lead him on, give him false hopes. Spike deserved more. Her own feelings were still too confused to be able to freely give herself to him with any certainty that it was good for her and good for him. She sighed. To use one of Spike's own phrases, she thought: Oh, bugger.

Tara was dying to get out of the corset. Fortunately, it was easier to get out of than into. Ignoring the laced back, she unhooked the front, shed it with relief, and changed into her nightdress. She got an extra couple of quilts from the other bedroom. Her mind was made up now; she decided to camp before the fire as he'd suggested the night before. She was sure he'd take this as plausible; it was certainly cold enough. She couldn't imagine him trying to pressure her to share a bed.

Spike returned with a filled coal hod and set it by the hearth. "Dark as Egypt. I checked outside. You can't see your hand in front of your face, let alone smoke from a chimney." He built a fire and said rather flatly, "So you're going to curl up by the fire instead of coming to bed? Good idea; you'll be warmer. I'll take the bed."

Despite her earlier resolution, her heart sank.

Spike left her briefly and returned wearing his jeans and tee shirt. "Much as I think we should be ready for a quick getaway, I can't see sleeping in that sissy suit. I'd sleep raw, but I have too much respect for your sensibilities, Mrs. Southwood." He sounded very much the Victorian gentleman. Face averted, he stoked the fire.

When the fire was hissing, Tara said timidly, "Wouldn't you be warmer down here by the fire? I brought lots of quilts."

Spike came straight to the point. "I know you're trying not to lead me on and I appreciate it. I can be close without wanting to—" he stopped himself. "I really do respect you, Tara."

Blushing hotly, she said, "It's not just you, you know. It's me, too. I don't know what I want from
you. I do know I don't want to sleep alone here. Okay?" The words sounded ungracious, almost angry, and she felt she'd just made a fool of herself again, but they couldn't be unsaid.

A muscle jumping in his cheek, Spike said, "That suits me right down to the ground." He took one of the quilts, wrapped up, and spooned up to her back.

Tara could feel him holding his hips away from her. He did put his arm around her and pulled her back to rest against his chest. His arm was around her waist, his hand inches from her breasts, and she heard him sigh.

Tara was just as uncomfortable. How had they gotten into this? It was almost as though they'd had a fight. But she wasn't mad at him and he'd been nothing but lovely to her. You got what you wanted, she thought. So why this distance and tension? She tilted her head up and pushed the crown of her head under Spike's chin, rubbing herself against him like a cat. He accepted her caress, and resting his jaw on her head, pulled her closer.

It was a long time before either of them fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Graphic of Tara in corset by Eternal_love78.
Tara awoke in a cocoon of warmth. It was still dark. The fire had nearly burned out, but Spike must have piled extra quilts on her in the night, and he now lay asleep next to her in their nest. He was curled toward her, one hand heavy on her hip. In the faint light from the coals, she studied him as he slept. His face looked innocent, the lashes shadowing his pale cheeks. His lower lip was full and his mouth slightly open. She found his stillness was a little unnerving. Without thinking, she leaned forward and brushed a feather-light kiss on his mouth. His lips were as soft as a woman's. Since she didn't want to wake him, she pulled back.

In his sleep, Spike's hand tightened on her hip, and he grasped the nightdress as though to pull her toward him. The skirt rucked up. He was still asleep, but starting to mutter in his sleep. Tara could make out her name and the odd phrase: "want you so much... don't want to hurt you... at least let me taste you." Tara was too fastidious to remain, eavesdropping, while he talked in his sleep. Besides, hearing him dream about her was affecting her in ways that, if she stayed, were going to get embarrassing. She disentangled her nightdress from his hand, slipped out of their makeshift bed on the floor, and hurried to the bathroom.

Shivering, Tara stripped and washed, a little too vigorously. She wasn't sure if what they said about vampire senses were true, but if one kiss could make her this— Stop it! You're a lesbian, remember? She paused and took a steadying breath. But the way she was feeling—was it really so wrong? She looked at her reflection in the mirror. You like him, he likes you, you're both a long way from home, so if you take comfort in each other, who's it hurting?

Willow? Willow was gone. Willow could not be further away, and even if she wasn't... Tara knew that she could not have stayed with Willow and her capricious tinkering with the world and Tara's life. It hurt to admit it, but their relationship was as good as over even before all this. She would grieve later for what might have been. But in the meantime, that was all thousands of miles and one hundred and twenty years away, and Spike... Spike was here and now. There was no disloyalty in wanting him, was there?

The gay thing? Lesbian, right? Well, not entirely, as it turned out. She thought about her first boyfriend, Billy, and her father's ugly suppression of their relationship. Girlfriends were acceptable. Safe. Adolescent experimentation in secret had given way to her few grown-up gay love affairs. Women were great—beautiful and sensuous. What was not to like? Tara thought about Spike's features, his body, the intense way he looked at her, and his protecting her their first night here, even from herself. He was vastly different than her usual choice and he wasn't safe, but he was no less attractive. It was obvious that he cared deeply about her. Her feelings were confused but undeniable. She wanted him, too. She put the flannel nightdress back on and hurried back to the bedroom.

Spike was awake, looking suspiciously at her. He rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth. Oops, Tara thought. Vampire senses.

Too brightly, she said, "It's starting to get light. Do we dare add coal to the fire? Or should I just come back to bed and snuggle? It's still too early to get up."

He gave her another dark look. "I vote for snuggling."
Shyly, she came back to bed and he held the covers open for her so she could crawl in. It was still warm from her body. Spike settled the covers over her and tucked them in around her. "You smell different," he observed. "Don't smell Willow on you any more."

"I took a sponge bath," she admitted. "I wish we could fire up the boiler and have real baths. I suppose it's too near dawn to risk another big fire."

"You smell fine to me." He looked at her narrowly. "But is it my imagination or did you—"

"I did. I'm sorry," she said, not sorry one bit. "Acting on impulse, I guess. It was nice," she admitted.

She looked up at him shyly and Spike watched, the glow of the fading embers on cheeks already blushing red. God, she was beautiful... The desperation of the first night had gone—what had that all been about? Must get to the bottom of that some time. Her smile was gentle, inviting, and only a little apprehensive. Enough talking. He brushed his lips softly over hers, just like in his dream. She sighed, and he took the opportunity to deepen the kiss slightly. Kissing her was an experience that needed to be enjoyed in its own right, without rushing it along. Each kiss was a question: Do you like this? Can I do this? Do you want me, too? And her response was Yes, yes, yes.
Chapter 9

Spike pulled Tara on top of him and kissed her hungrily. Her hair caressed his cheeks as they kissed, he felt the fullness of her body under the folds of her nightdress, and stroked her silky skin through the worn fabric. She made little moans of pleasure as they kissed.

After about a decade of sensual bliss, floating on sensation: smell, taste, and slippery texture, Spike heard the front door open downstairs. He jerked up, growling, "Oh, they are so dead."

Tara whispered, "No, don't kill them!"

He was already out of bed and reaching for a dressing gown, muttering in an undertone, "No, I won't kill them if I don't have to." He smiled grimly. "Bloody bad timing, know what I mean? Get dressed. Now. We may have to make a run for it."

In spite of wanting to kill them for disturbing his and Tara's lovemaking, he hoped he could bluff his way out of this. Halfway down the stairs, he realized that his 21st-century jeans stuck out from under the padded dressing gown. Couldn't be helped. Putting on the manner of the sleepily-disturbed master of the house, he saw two well-dressed men leaving the front hall, going into the dining room.

An official-sounding voice floated up to him. "What did I tell you, Jarvis? Someone's been here recently; I distinctly smell cooking."

Spike said, "Of course someone is here; I own this house. What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

The one appearing to be in charge said loudly, "William Southwood?"

Spike put his nose in the air. "That is I. You haven't answered my question or introduced yourself. What do you mean by--"

The officious man interrupted, "I am Detective Inspector Fordyce. Mr. Southwood, there has been murder committed in this house. I'd like to ask you a few questions. Can you give an account of your whereabouts during the last week?"

"Murder?" Spike pulled a shocked face. "I only returned from abroad last night. My wife can attest to my whereabouts. Where are the servants? And the elder Mrs. Southwood, my mother, is missing. What has happened? Where is my mother?"

"Abroad, indeed? That's not what I am told." Fordyce tut-tutted him. "I'll ask the questions, if you please. Mr. Southwood, I will give you ten minutes to get dressed. You're coming with us."

Spike briefly weighed continuing the bluff, which would give Tara time to finish getting ready, or just ending it.

Just then, Tara appeared at the dining room door. "William, what is going on? I heard voices. Oh, hello, gentlemen." She was in her costume but her hair was down. Spike could see their bags on the bottom step behind her. She smiled graciously at them, but they appeared unmoved by her. She asked, "Do you have any word about what has happened here? We came home to an empty house. So disturbing. Mrs. Southwood would have left word if she were going traveling. Has she taken ill? And where are the servants?"

"Mrs. Southwood, we're taking your husband with us. He's wanted in connection to the deaths of Maisey Brown, Emma Stallings, Martine Chambon, and Robert Stayne. And his mother's
disappearance. You'll forgive me if we borrow him for a while." He looked grim.

Not playacting any longer, Tara turned frightened eyes to Spike.

He smiled briefly at her, then sucker-punched Fordyce, who dropped to the floor, wheezing from a paralyzed diaphragm. Jarvis opened his mouth to shout, but Spike laid him out on the carpet just as quickly.

"London's finest," Spike commented with a sneer. "Looks like we travel today whether we like it or not."

Tara looked pityingly at the gasping Fordyce, and apprehensively at Jarvis. "Please tell me he's not dead."

Spike's lip curled derisively. "Dead? Short nap is more like it. Question is, what to do with them now?"

"Tie them up?" Tara suggested. "Well enough so they stay tied up long enough for us to get away, but can free themselves later? Or do a good job and hope someone finds them?"

"Oh, I imagine they'll come looking for them in a few hours. Or sooner than that," he added, looking out the window beside the front door. "They came in a carriage. If I can persuade the driver to come in here..."

"Let me. It's cloudy, but the sun might break through."

Spike didn't answer, but just hefted a cop apiece under each arm and headed for the cellar.

Tara opened an umbrella and slipped out the side door. It was beginning to rain.

The driver was wrapped in a wet ulster and huddled atop the driver's seat. He looked cold, and if his red nose was any indication, thirsty. Tara called up to him, "Mr. Fordyce will be occupied with Mr. Southwood for some time. Why don't you come around back for a drop of something to warm you while you wait? They'll be a while."

She lowered her heavy eyelids demurely, with the merest suggestion of a wink, and walked away, hips swaying.

"Don't mind if I do!" he said with alacrity. "But where did they find you, so far from home?"

She only smiled coyly, glancing back to make sure he was following her.

Spike was behind the swinging dining room door as Tara led the driver to the kitchen. The driver's hand was reaching for her bottom as Spike grabbed him from behind. He frog-marched him through the kitchen, and pushed him, howling, down the cellar steps. "That's for touching my wife!"

Spike leapt after him and stuffed him in the storeroom with Fordyce and Jarvis. He piled heavy boxes in front of the door, and satisfied it'd keep them contained, at least long enough, went back upstairs.

"I saw you flirting with him, you minx. You're good at this," he said admiringly, pulling her into his arms.

"Spike, let's go. I'm scared. They're starting to make noise down there," she said worriedly, then put her hands on his cheeks and kissed him softly. "I don't mean to put you off, but let's get somewhere
"That's my sensible wife." He smiled ruefully. "I promise you we'll finish what we started when we can give it our full attention." He shook head as though to clear it. "Right. The real question is, do we steal the carriage and get to Paddington quickly, and have them know we took a train, or walk to Paddington and take forever to get there?"

"Why not take the carriage and get out near Paddington?"

"Same difference, but I suppose it avoids the, 'You can't stop here' and 'Where's your driver?' They'll know eventually that we're traveling by rail. That glamour business--is there any way to disguise us?"

Tara shook her head. "I'm not that good. Willow, on the other hand..." She was surprised to find it hurt less to think of Willow. Perhaps time travel had a softening effect on the emotion of grief--an accelerated "time heals all wounds."

"Think positive," he urged. "You made my hair brown. Can you do something like that for you? Not that I want anything to change about you, but want you to be safe."

"Spike. Wait." She shut her eyes briefly, as though summoning strength to say something difficult. "Before we go, do you need to take care of...eating? I mean, downstairs? You wouldn't have to kill them."

His mouth quirked. "It's nice of you to offer them to me, pet, but I'm good for a while."

She looked deeply relieved. "Then we'd better take the horses. Skip the train, drive west into the country, and you can...eat one of them tonight?"

Spike smiled gently. "You're a good girl, Tara, but I'm not hungry enough to eat a horse. Yet. You let me worry about me. Maybe I'll find a nice fat puppy tonight."

"No!" Her voice took on a "don't hurt the puppy" tone.

He smirked, wanting to tease her. "'Oh, Big Bad, don't eat the puppy! Have Holmes & Watson instead. Or Barkis! Or how about a nice tasty horse?' He stroked a stray wisp of hair off her forehead, trying to coax a smile from her.

"How about a nice tasty girl?" she said seriously.

He sobered instantly. "I don't want to talk about this right now. Now let's go."
Chapter 10

Spike patted Tara's skirt. "Got the money?"

"Of course; can't you hear it jingle? What's this I hear about vampire senses?" She tried for a light tone, but she was too preoccupied to banter.

"Just wanted to pet you." He put his arms around her. "We're going to be all right. You'll be all right. You handled them magnificently. Wasn't sure of you at first, but you were great."

"I don't know about that. Shall we go? If the sun comes out, I'll have to drive and I don't know how to."

"Too right. Bags (I packed the map and your witchy stuff), the picnic basket, umbrellas, oh, and a pistol that belonged to my father. If you have to drive, I want you to have it. No telling who you'll run into. I may not be able to protect you."

"It's too late to travel at night, I guess." Tara was not at all sure she wanted a gun, but it wasn't an issue yet. She felt a brief sense of the unreality of it all, then shook it off. As Spike said, it is as it is.

Spike said, "No, we should go now. Take the small stuff--I need to pick up some things from the stable." He opened an umbrella and headed toward the kitchen door.

Tara picked up the two small satchels and the picnic basket and carried them out to the carriage. From a neighboring house, curious eyes watched her, and from several houses across the street, curtains parted. Debating whether or keep up the bluff or keep a low profile, she decided that a low profile was not possible at this point, so she waved and smiled shyly.

Spike came down the walk from the mews, carrying two saddles and an armful of tack. "You have no idea how bad the roads are. We may break down, and I want to be able to ride if that happens. Do you know how?"

"I love to, although I can't ride sidesaddle." She nodded toward the aforementioned in his arms. "What happened to your horse and carriage?"

"Dru and I stole 'em making our getaway. Regular desperados we were. Did you carry all that? Is that all you're bringing? You're going to freeze--let me fetch my mother's furs and pay our guests one last visit. See how they're making out."

Tara spent the next ten minutes worrying that neighbors might be encouraged by her wave and come out to ask awkward questions, that the weather would clear and Spike would be caught out in the sun, and whether or not their "guests" had broken out of the storeroom. Despite what Spike said, she really wasn't cut out to be a moll.

With a deep sigh, she totted up their crimes: lying to the police, assault, imprisonment, horse theft. Attempted fornication--was that a crime here? She shivered. All she wanted was to get home, but sharing a soft bed with Spike someplace safe ran a close second. Was it only an hour ago that they were curling up, kissing? Thinking about kissing him took her mind off her troubles for a few minutes.

Spike returned carrying the evening cloaks from their first night there, a soft dark armful of furs, and the other umbrella. He chuckled. "That'll hold them for a while. I nailed them in." Tara gave him a reproachful look. "What?" he said innocently. "They're locked in with the hock. They'll be fine. They're English." He tossed her the wraps. "Bundle up and get in. I'll drive."
Spike helped her into the carriage, and then with a tip of his hat to the gawping neighbor woman, he climbed up to the driver's seat and freed the brake. He made a smooching noise to the horses, snapped the reins, and they were off.

In spite of his warning her of the road conditions, Tara could not believe how slow their progress was on the congested streets. There were few traffic signals, and the only rule of the road seemed to be "catch as catch can." The carriages of the well-to-do appeared to have the right-of-way, but huge freight drays barreled down the center of the road, and one gave way to them or risked a smashup. During one long wait for a traffic jam to clear, she exited the carriage and climbed up to join Spike. She opened the larger umbrella and held it over both of them. The rain had subsided to a few fitful sprinkles, but she wanted to protect him from the sun should it break through the clouds.

"So that's the last of the old place," he said with a final backward look at his boyhood home. "'When I became a man, I put away childish things.'"

"Corinthians," Tara said automatically. "Sorry. Whatever became of it? Did you ever go back?"

"Think Sting lives there now. Or Jude Law. D'need an invite and I don't have that entrée anymore."

"Entrée to what?"

"Fame 'n fortune. Don't travel in those circles anymore. Dru 'n Darla liked to. Even before Dru cuckolded me, the bloody--" He was silent a moment, then burst out, "Well, she wanted to turn Sid Vicious, if you please! I liked him the way he was, poor sod. 'Sides, he only had eyes for Nancy."

"That whooshing sound you hear is what you said going right over my head."

"Sid 'n Nancy?" he prodded.

Tara looked blank.

"You are a young thing, aren't you?" He smiled fondly at her. "You've got an old soul, though."

She gave him a half-smile.

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The smell was revolting. Everywhere, horses shat freely, and the odor made Tara's eyes water. Spike gave her a sympathetic look. "Just be glad it's damp out. You wouldn't believe the dust when it's dry. 'Course, it's worse for the horses. Treacherous footing." In the traffic ahead, another horse fell to its knees in the slippery muck. Spike sighed and resigned himself to another long wait.

Through her glove, Tara said, "Where are we?"

"Leaving Hampstead on our way to the West End. Have to get south of the river still. The bridge I was going to cross hasn't been built yet. Then west out of Greater London. Well, it's not called that yet. Still country there. And no A303 built yet, worse luck. Hang onto me. Don't want you jouncing off," he said as they started up once more. Tara grabbed his arm and slid closer. "At this rate, it'll take a month to get there."

"Where are we going to spend the night?" she asked.

"Someplace with a bed." He gave her a sidelong look. "Know a little inn we can stay--knew--out at Kingston on Thames tonight."
Tara looked away. Kissing Spike had been a revelation. Tara would never have believed it would be possible to feel attraction to anyone under these circumstances—on the run, as far away as it was possible to be from the familiar things of home. By nature, she was as conservative as a cat, and felt exposed and jumpy here. She thought longingly of her bedroom at home, and the familiar everyday evil of Sunnydale. She risked a sideways glance at Spike, and felt that low tingle again. This was so not her. She sighed.

"Trouble, sweetheart?" Spike seemed to sense her confusion and disorientation. "It's a lot to take in, I know. The smell is enough to fell an elephant."

"Spike, the coachman seemed surprised that I'm American. I'm going to let you do the talking if we're stopped. What do you think?"

"I thought you were great back there. Very believable. Why shouldn't I have a beautiful American wife?" He winked at her.

So not her.

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They crossed the river, Tara holding her nose. It smelled like one great open sewer. "Bit grim, isn't it? Hard to believe they manage to clean it up in a hundred years or so," Spike said. "Even got salmon back, if you can believe it. Right now, though, makes me glad I don't have to breathe." The air improved the farther they got from central London, public buildings and factories giving way to parkland and suburban villas.

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Tara should have relished the weird experience—time travel! Spike kept up a running commentary, pointing out landmarks to her, but Tara kept thinking about Willow, her magickal disruption of space and time, how she and Spike were going to fix it, and how they were here, together, and what exactly did that mean? If Spike were right and she had a job to do back in her own time, then she was going to have to find strength she did not currently possess. In the meantime, Spike was not exactly chopped liver in the protector department. She felt an atavistic thrill at the thought that he was hers. This was immediately followed by a feminist scoffing at the mere idea! She shook her head.

"You're awfully quiet," he observed.

"Sorry. Trying to solve matters of space and time and getting no-place fast," she said, deciding on a partial truth.

"I do the same thing. Think what happened, how to fix it? Kind of fruitless. We'll do what we've been doing."

"What's that?"

"Doing what's right. Doing what's expedient, sorry to say. Helping each other. You're my main concern."

"Speaking of which, when are you going to eat? You shut me up earlier, and now I want to talk about it. What about you? You're my concern," she said in a firm voice.

"Ooh, I love it when you go all, 'you must take care of yourself, my William.'"

She rolled her eyes, but smiled.
"Look, I wasn't going to mention this, but I did eat. I said 'what's expedient'... Didn't want to bring this up, but we had a visitor our first night. Burglar. I took about a pint. Sorry. I didn't know what else to do with him. Put the fear of God into him. Probably never burgle again. So I'm good for a while." He looked at her sideways. "Like me any less than you did?"

She was unfazed by his admission. "Are you just saying that to put me off?"

"S'truth! Look, I'm bein' honest here."

"How often do you need to eat?"

"Honestly? I like to eat every day, but I do fine every couple of days. So don't worry. Trust me, okay?"

"I do trust you. I just don't want you sacrificing yourself. I'm a volunteer, here. It gets too bad, think of me."

"I do think of you. Constantly. I don't want to do that to you."

"Why not?"

"There's a lot more to it than just eating. It's...intimate. And dangerous. Some vamps have had relationships with humans, with the sharing of blood, and some humans..." He shook his head. "Never works out for the human."

Tara said hesitantly, "Did you ever...with Buffy?"

"Not bloody likely! She could barely stand me in her bed, let alone share that with me. Didn't really want to, anyway. Great shining Slayer. Didn't want to sully her."

"Willow told me--she shouldn't have--it was spoken in confidence, but she told me before I could stop her--that Buffy said...when Angel bit her, she--" Tara blushed furiously, unable to finish the sentence.

He said flatly, "Yeah, well, there is that. Said, it's like sex. Usually winds up with the human dead." He stared at her. "You shouldn't be asking me about this. Should revolt you."

Her eyes were truthful and tender. "How can it? It's you."

He gaped at her. "It's kinky!" he sputtered. "I don't have anything against kink, but that's not me and it's not going to be you, either! I want you--not saying I don't. I dream about you. I want you in all ways. Except that! Now can we stop talking about this?"

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The sunset turned the sky the color of blood. After many hours on the road, marked by mud and minor mishaps, they finally approached the outskirts of Kingston. They pulled off the road, and in the privacy of the carriage, Tara withdrew some money from the cache under her skirts. Spike pinned up her hair as promised and resisted kissing her neck as he did so. He wasn't sure he could stop, and wanted to give her his complete attention when they got to their room for the night.

"'Red sky at night, sailor's delight,'" he quoted. "Gonna be clear tomorrow. I like your idea of traveling at night. We'd better spend tomorrow indoors and set off tomorrow evening. Sound good?" He gave her a smoldering look.
Tara ducked her head and nodded, thinking about how they might occupy themselves all day. She shivered with anticipation.

Spike pulled up to the inn, climbed down, and helped Tara down. He handed their meager luggage to the porter and turned the horses and carriage over to the stableman. They went into the inn to learn with chagrin that it was booked. The innkeeper's wife took pity on them and whispered to her husband, "Now, George, we have to find them something. Can't you see they're newlyweds?"

George harrumphed, and she cut in, in a motherly tone, "There's room over the stable. We use it for overflow accommodation in the summer when we're busier. Not so luxurious as you might be used to, but it's clean and comfortable. And nice an' quiet, so you can have a bit of privacy." She smiled meaningfully.

Tara turned even redder but the landlady only said conspiratorially. "You're not the first young couple on their way to Scotland."

She said to Spike, "Your missus looks a bit peaky. You do, too, if I may be so bold. Why don't you go next door to the chop house, have a bite, and meanwhile I'll send my girl up to dust and make up the bed?"

Spike smiled back, thanked her and said that would do very nicely indeed. He paid her for two days, since they would need to stay undercover the next day. Tonight they would eat, rest up, and finish what they started this morning. Both he and Tara were thinking about bedtime. He collected the key and they walked next door. They hadn't eaten a proper meal since yesterday, only stale bread and cheese eaten during the long ride.

Baffled, she whispered, "Scotland? I thought we were going west."

"Gretna Green. She thinks we're eloping."

"Oh. Like when Lydia ran away with Mr. Wickham."

"Right."

Tara felt excited and apprehensive. At dinner, every time she looked at Spike, his eyes were on hers, alight. She wanted to talk about their relationship, define it, because she knew that they were rushing headlong to a place from which there was no return. Was it just physical attraction or something more? The innkeeper's wife had taken them for a couple. Tara knew didn't want to be separated from Spike for an instant. Her stomach was jumpy from excitement, and she could barely touch the hot food set in front of her.

They finished their meal, paid up, and Spike offered her his arm. "Mrs. Southwood?" Tara took it and blushed. She couldn't look at him and couldn't not look at him. She was so full of anticipation that she did not notice the couple sitting in the rear of the restaurant, eyes fixed upon them.
Chapter 11

The couple in the restaurant did not eat. They had wine set in front on them, but did not drink. The man, a large, hulking fellow with bad hair, glowered darkly at Spike. He had the look of someone kept from his rightful property. His blonde companion, dainty as a porcelain shepherdess, twirled her wineglass and said with a quietly mocking air, "Careless of Drusilla to let him get away. Shouldn't he be kept on a leash at this stage of the game?"

"Whelp's got plenty to answer for, no lie there. I like the lady friend, but he's got some explaining to do. Leave that. Let's go."

She set down the wine she was pretending to drink, and they followed Spike and Tara. The man took her elbow. "Slow now. Give them a few moments to get her blood up."

They walked slowly across the yard, Tara clinging to Spike's arm and leaning on him. Her heart was hammering in her breast so loudly he could hear it, and her fragrance made his head swim.

The wrought-iron stairs leading up to the quarters over the stable were narrow, so Tara ascended ahead of him. Spike watched her bottom swaying in the blue velvet and restrained himself from grabbing her on the stairs. This was going to be perfect. They'd had a good meal, he'd build her a fire and allow her to wash, but not too much. That fragrance! He hurried to catch up with her. The outer door was open, and Tara led the way in.

He reached her and pulled one hairpin out of her chignon. She laughed softly and fumbled with the key in the door to their room. He pulled another pin free.

He'd snagged a third one, laughing too, and it was just as he was closing the outer door that he felt a sinister presence.

Without missing a beat, he pushed Tara into their room and pressed her against the door. He locked the door and bolted it. Not that it'd do much good. Between kissing her, and trying to hear the almost undetectable sounds in the hallway beyond the door, Tara could sense his distraction. She opened her mouth to ask if something were wrong, but before she could frame the words he silenced her with another kiss. She pulled her mouth free and tried to catch his eye. He held one finger to her lips and pointed to the door. She looked mystified. He made an exaggerated pointing gesture to the door, indicating beyond the door, then briefly let his true face show. Her eyes widened. Vampires outside the door.

Spike lifted her skirt and pawed the canvas pouch open, pulling out the velvet jewelry bag. Careless of the sound it made, he fumbled through the tangled jewelry, and hissed as he pulled an ornate cross out. He dropped it into her hand, wincing in pain. She hastily put it on.

Sensing an explosion, Spike pushed Tara away from the door as it burst open. He shoved back, but it came off its hinges and he went down with it. He rolled, about to bounce up to face the intruder, but was caught like a snared rabbit, a wire wrapped round his neck and held tight by the big man's fingers. The female vampire was nowhere to be found. The male said, "Where's my girl? And what are you doing on the loose?"
Spike struggled to speak around the cruelly tight wire. "Angelus. How...nice."

The wire only tightened. "Answer the question, boy. Where's Drusilla?"

Spike choked, "She's...off. More ways than one. You should know."

Darla snorted with laughter. She had broken in an adjoining room the same time Angelus broke into Spike and Tara's room, and had entered through a connecting bathroom. She now held Tara by the throat, carefully avoiding touching the cross Tara wore. "Well, she is, Liam," she said in a semi-apologetic tone.

Angelus glared at her, before turning back to Spike. "Off where?"

"With another fella," Spike choked.

"Another fella?"

"Who looks like me. Can't...talk...here."

Angelus loosened the wire. "This had better be good."

"You stupid Mick, I don't think you'd understand it if I spelled it out," Spike began contemptuously, before caution got the upper hand. He thought quickly, then backpedalled, jerking his head toward Tara. "I was bringin' her to you." He counted on Angelus, a creature used to thinking with his appetites instead of his brain, not noticing.

Tara was certain this was a bluff, and knew she'd better play up. She gasped and struggled.

"Look at her," Spike urged. "What's not to want? She's gorgeous. You've got the little and blonde, the slim and dark, and here's lush and corn-fed. All you need is a redhead to complete your hareem."

Angelus stroked his chin, considering. He said to Darla, "Let her go."

He gave Tara an appraising look. "Come here, lass." He cautioned her, "Don't run. I've got yer feller fast." He jerked the wire. "Have you ever seen what happens to our kind when the head's taken off? Nothing left but dust."

Tara approached slowly.

Angelus looked her up and down, and said to Spike, "You've a pretty taste in women, William. Does she taste as good as she smells?" Tara tried to back away but Angelus stuck thick fingers in the high neckline of her blouse and jerked. The neckline gave way, breaking the chain she wore, and the cross flew off. Her neck was exposed and unmarked. He bared his teeth at Spike in a feral grin. "You were saving her for me! Almost makes up for you losin' Drusilla. Maybe I should kiss you instead of killing you."

"Let go of him." Tara spoke for the first time. Her voice quavered only a little.

Angelus hooted. "Another colonial! You'd have a lot of reminiscing to do, wouldn't you, my darlin'?" he said to Darla. "She'd be a real companion to you. I say we keep her! William me boy, I do thank you!"

Tara spoke in a lower voice. "I said, let him go."

Angelus spoke in a mockery of a considerate tone, with laughter brimming just below the surface of his grave words. "Why? D'ya love him? He is a comely lad, I'll give him that," he admitted. "Think
"he loves you?" Again, that sniggering below the words. "You've got funny ideas. Think we're capable of love?"

"For the last time--" Tara began, but Angelus interrupted her coldly. "Don't you threaten me, lass. It's like the lamb threatening the butcher."

Tara heard a roaring in her ears and her vision tunneled to focus on Spike. He twisted like a hanged man, and one powerful tug on the wire that held him would be the end of him. She realized that she might faint, and knew that if she did, she would die. Angelus's words rang in her ears, "Think he loves you?" Her focus narrowed further and she saw Spike's eyes alone, and she looked for a cue, but only saw his agony for her, his inability to protect her. But she saw the love there, too.

One hand held vividly upright, Tara spoke the incantation, "Impero veneficium igneus," and her fingers were alight. Her eyes had gone dark blue. She pointed at Angelus. "Let him go."

"Or what? You'll set us both on fire?" he giggled, pulling Spike closer and holding him like a shield.

"No. Her." She pointed at Darla. "Increbresco!" The flame grew into a torch.

"I don't care. What makes you think you won't replace her?" In an aside to Darla, he said carelessly, "Sorry, darlin."

Darla said to Angelus, "I think your nose is broken. Or it will be, very shortly." Her voice contained a veiled threat. She sniffed at him. "Don't you smell the soul on William?"

"Eh?"

"Something's rotten here. I say, leave this for now. There're plenty of fish in the sea, or lambs in the pen, and I want to feed. Now!" She backed away from the flame. "Leave them. She's a witch and your boy has gotten himself a soul." Darla turned on her heel and stepped over the broken door.

"Liam! Are you coming?"

Angelus fixed Spike with a black look. "This isn't over. You've a lot to answer for." He followed his sire.

Tara doubled up, cradling her right hand. She whispered softly, "Ow, ow, ow," hissing in pained breaths and rocking back and forth.

Spike eased her to the floor. "How bad is it?"

She just made soft wordless noises of pain. He sucked her reddened fingers into his cool mouth. After long moments, she said, "That is a help. Like a cold pack. Well, cool, anyway." She withdrew her fingers.

"It stops bleeding, vampire saliva does. Never tried it on a burn before."

"It's better. Thanks. I never tried that spell before. Don't know if I want to again. That's more Willow's speed." She laid her hand on Spike's cheek. "How's your burn?"

"My burn?"

"Your hand. When you handed me the cross. I could hear it sizzle."

"Oh, that. It's nothing. Are you all right? Good to travel? Because I don't think we should stay." He helped her up, and opened her bag. "Better put something on. Angelus won't rest until he's paid us
back. Making him look foolish like that. He won't forget.”
"Let me do up those buttons. Never'd a thought that mystical fire would burn you. Although I'm glad for our sakes you could drive 'em out with it. For now. Don't think we have a lot of time. Angelus 'n Darla'll feed, have a bit of sport, then he'll get to feeling mean. Come looking for us."

Spike kept up a chatter, while buttoning the back of her blouse, picking up jewelry from the floor and stuffing it into its pouch, and worrying about how pale and unfocussed Tara looked. He twisted the bent link in the cross's chain back into shape. "I want you to wear this." He laughed dryly. "Felt like a religious experience there, pet. Like the archangel guarding the Garden of Eden you looked. All fierce and protective." She wasn't listening. "Glinda, are you going to be able to travel? 'Cause you look like you're about to fall over."

Tara finished dressing and tried to speak reassuringly. "I'm okay. That spell kind of...took it out of me. But I'm all right. My hand's better. Thanks." Her words were disjointed and her pallor belied her words.

"We'll take the carriage. You can't ride, let alone ride sidesaddle, and I may need to get undercover tomorrow, if it's fair. Don't want to tell the hostler to harness the horses. Don't want to leave you, I mean. I'm not leaving your side until we're shut o' that pair. Don't want to leave you even then." He realized he was chattering and she was not really paying attention.

He helped her to her feet and held her for a long moment. "I'm a brute, but I wanted to make love to you. Getting damn sick of this *coitus interruptus*."

Tara pressed her face to his neck and murmured, "Oh, me too."

Spike squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. "Now I just want to get you safe, get us back home, take proper care of you. We've got to go."

He looped a belt through the handles of all their baggage, and slung the lot over his right shoulder, while putting his left arm around Tara's waist and half-carrying her down the stairs. He found the stableman sitting smoking on a bale of hay, and told him to harness the team.

Tara protested that she was all right, but her voice had almost no volume. Spike threw the bags in the carriage and said, "I hate like hell to put you in here, but I don't think you should climb. What if Darla 'n Angelus snatch you while I'm atop? They're fast and tricky. Could happen."

"I can climb," she said, starting to climb, but slid backward. He caught her and said, "Put your arms around my neck," and climbed one-armed, holding her, and gently placed her in the driver's seat. He tipped the stableman for making a fast job of it, and snapped the reins. They pulled out.

The night air was cold and penetrating. Spike pulled her close and held on tight, driving one-handed and inwardly cursing his lack of body warmth.

"How long does this last?" he asked.

"How long does what last?" She sounded foggy.

"This after-effect of the spell."
"Willow... used to get headaches and nosebleeds. I never did this one before. Not sure how long... I need to rest," she whispered, and fell forward at the waist. He clasped her across the torso and pulled her onto his lap, holding her as the carriage swayed along the rutted road.

Spike let her rest as he drove. He wasn't sure where they were, but wanted to head west and put miles between themselves and the inn. He cursed himself as every kind of idiot for not taking better care. All googly-eyed over the girl, and not noticing the Scourge of Europe and his equally dangerous mistress in the same room as them. Some protector!

So much couldn't be helped. When it was light, he could consult a map. He had almost never driven himself. Robert had almost always done so, and whenever William or his mother traveled any real distance, Robert had simply driven them to the train station. When it was light out...! They'd need to get undercover before morning. How far could they get from Angelus before it got light? They needed a place to stay. Too bad about the inn back there. He mentally promised Tara a luxurious stay somewhere romantic, complete with champagne, a proper bathroom, and a big bed. He allowed himself to wander into a brief fantasy of them in that big bed, and then sternly reminded himself that woolgathering was what had gotten him into this. Well, perhaps not. What could he have done differently—confronted Angelus in the chophouse? Asked politely for one night's amnesty so they could make love? Perhaps Tara could have asked prettily for a head start. It is as it is, he reminded himself.

He stopped flogging himself and worried about Tara. She was sprawled across his lap, long limbs flung out like a discarded doll, deeply asleep or unconscious. What if she should die! He held her closer, and briefly allowed himself to imagine slow ways to punish Angelus. That wouldn't do, either. Whatever his feelings about Angelus, he (or rather, Angel) had a big part to play in the coming years, and Spike was beginning to feel that the fabric of time would be disrupted enough without removing a key player on the side of good. So killing him was out.

He drove all night. The moon moved across the sky and dawn approached. Spike estimated that at about six or seven miles an hour, they'd come about fifty miles. Not far enough to rest easily, but enough to draw a deep breath. Time to hole up. It was farm country and life was beginning to stir. The sky was lightening in the east, though full daylight was still about half an hour away. If Spike couldn't persuade a farm family to put them up, his only choice was to drive like hell into the countryside and hide from the sun inside the carriage until sunset.

This time of year, though the harvest had passed, farmers still had chores and animals still needed to be fed. Spike pulled into the yard of the nearest farmhouse and waited for the farmer to emerge. He could see the farmer's wife at the kitchen window. He made sure Tara was supported and wouldn't fall, then alit and approached the back door.

Spike knocked and waited. The woman of the house opened the door. "Yes?"

"Good morning, madam. Pardon me, but my wife is ill. Do you know of lodgings hereabouts?"

"There's naught but the inn back at Kingston, about fifty miles that way." She jerked her chin in the direction that they had come from.

The sun was just breaking over the horizon, though filtered by morning haze. Spike said in desperation, "If you have a room to let, I'll pay you double what you would normally ask if I may bring her in. She's not well."

The woman looked doubtful. "What ails her?"

"Nothing contagious, I assure you. She had a bad burn, and the... doctor gave her something to help
her sleep. She's quite drowsy and I didn't want her in the carriage where she might fall. I was holding her up, but if you have somewhere I can lay her down, I'd be very grateful and pay you handsomely."

"Very well. Bring her down."

"Much obliged. Much obliged."

Spike drew the hood of the cloak up, as the sun's rays were licking out like hungry tongues. He climbed up to the driver's seat, and roused Tara enough to get her to hold onto him, and he lifted her and carried her down.

"Bring her in," said the woman. "Hello, dearie. You look a bit done in." She held the door for the sleepwalking Tara. Spike held her up by her elbows. The woman led them through the kitchen into a back hall. She gestured to an open door. "My Mattie's just got married, so I have the room free. I'm Mrs. Cobb. Get your missus comfortable and then come out for a bite and a cuppa."

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Spike sat Tara gently on the bed, and helped remove her damp clothing. She was groggy but anxious to reassure him. "I'm fine. I'm just so tired," was all she could say. He put her in the flannel nightdress and tucked her in warmly. Before dipping into slumber, he thought he heard her sigh, "I'm sorry," but he couldn't be sure. His mind was racing. Perhaps he should take her to a doctor? He pictured it: "Ah, yes, mystical burns and the enervating after-effects of unaccustomed spell-casting. I prescribe vampire saliva and bed rest." Christ!

As promised, Spike paid Mrs. Cobb double the agreed-upon price and paid up-front. Mrs. Cobb cooked him porridge and served hot tea. He learned that she was a widow whose nearby sons worked her land, and that she only kept a kitchen garden and chickens. She assumed he was a useless aristocrat, and consequently unable to unharness his own horses, so she said she'd attend to the team shortly, thus sparing Spike a visit to the sunny yard.

Spike was grateful for her assumption and lack of curiosity. So many awkward questions could be asked--about Tara's condition, their lack of luggage, their missing driver, and the fact that he'd driven all night long. One might think that they were on the run! He decided to tell her Dartmoor rather than Westbury, should she ask where they were going, and be questioned about it later. He felt that he and Tara were probably beyond the reach of Scotland Yard, but he couldn't be sure.

After breakfast, he pleaded fatigue, and Mrs. Cobb urged him to "have a bit of a lie-down." In their room, Tara was deeply asleep on the small bed. Her lips had lost the bluish chilled look they'd had, and her skin felt warm. When was the last time she'd eaten? She only picked at her dinner the night before, so excited was she at the prospect of finally-- He debated whether or not to wake her and feed her or to let her sleep. Sleep won out, and he decided to join her. He removed his shoes, spooned up to her back, and held her close.
Chapter 13

It was late afternoon when Spike awoke. Tara was smiling at him. He had gotten under the covers at some point, and she had turned to him and put her arm around him. He was surrounded by blissful warmth.

Before he could stop himself, he blurted out, "I could love you." Her smile grew dimples. She didn't answer, but only kissed him. Like a fool, he pulled back after a moment and said, "You look better. Are you better? Are you hungry?"

Tara chuckled throatily and kissed him again. "Hungry for you."

Never one to turn down a golden opportunity for kissing when it presented itself, Spike kissed her back, careful of her previous weakness. But in an unaccustomed moment of mindfulness, he pulled away again. As much as he wanted her, he didn't want their first time to be in the good Mrs. Cobb's spare bedroom, with her overhearing them. It had an inhibiting effect on him.

"Glinda, girl. Let me catch my breath, here."

"You don't need to breathe," she protested, kissing him again.

"Well, maybe I'd like to talk. Haven't answered my declaration yet."

"What declaration?" She pretended to pout.

"That I could love you," he said almost reluctantly. He was afraid of getting shot down. Not for the first time, Tara's ardor uncomfortably reminded him of Buffy.

"Oh, that."

Spike waited with trepidation.

Tara said, "A little part of me has loved you for quite some time now, since you hit me. When you saved me from going back home with my family. But last night, when Angelus had you and I saw your eyes..." She gave him a sweetly intense look, then said mischievously. "I don't set myself on fire for just anyone."

Spike relaxed in relief, head collapsing to the pillow, a goofy, happy smile on his lips.

"Can we kiss some more?" she asked, then answered for him, "I suppose you're worried about our hostess overhearing. Well, okay. I can wait." She sat up. "Wow. That spell. Willow liked doing that stuff. Strong stuff, you know? She liked doing that. Weird." Tara noticed, not for the first time, that it hurt less and less to think or even talk about Willow.

She pulled a hairbrush out of her bag and began to brush her hair. "I'm sorry I wasn't more help to you last night--"

Spike stared and interrupted, "Hello? 'Setting yourself on fire'?"

"I mean with the driving and all. I hope I don't need to cast anymore of those Willow-esque spells, because I felt like a sawdust doll with the stuffing falling out, afterward. All limp and empty."

"I hope you don't, either. Was beginning to be afraid I'd lose you." It was hard to talk about.
Tara smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. I've got a good feeling about this. Good night--well, day's--

sleep, a good breakfast, or supper-- Do I smell cooking? I'm famished. Help me into this dad-drated
corset." She finished dressing with Spike's help, and went out to meet the lady of the house.

Naturally incurious, Mrs. Cobb did not seem surprised to learn that Tara was an American. During

supper, Tara and Spike spun her a tale that was a mixture of fact and fiction, heavy on the fiction.

They told her they were newlyweds heading west to visit some friends' country estate in Dartmoor.

Since it was a honeymoon trip, they preferred to be alone, and therefore had no driver. Tara disliked

trains, thinking them noisy and dirty. They'd lost most of their baggage during the same fire in which

Tara burned her hand, and traveled mostly at night because of Mr. Southwood's skin condition.

Finished, they looked at one another, beaming, pleased that their story held water. Though not

naturally analytical, Mrs. Cobb was no fool. She looked as though she believed maybe one-tenth of

it, specifically in the gold sovereign that Spike had given her. That was good enough for her.

"Right. Who wants second helpings?"

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Not wanting to make a slip-up during polite conversation with their hostess, Spike and Tara retired

early. Mrs. Cobb provided them with a jug of hot water and Tara took the first bath. She poured half

the water into the flowered china basin, and promised to save the other half for him. She unpinned

her hair and started to undress, smiling sweetly at him. No shyness or false modesty. Spike

desperately wanted to watch her bathe but feared that he would not be able to stop himself from

making love to her immediately. He left the room and went outside to cool off. The night was cold

and damp. The moon had risen and hung ruddy on the horizon. The air was very still and smelled of

burning leaves. He thought of Tara with a sharp longing and thought, perhaps if we're very quiet...?

He hurried back in.

Tara had finished washing and stood naked by the washstand. Her skin was golden in the

candlelight. She pulled the nightdress over her head, and as her head popped out the top, she caught

Spike's eye. Her face lit up.

Crossing the room in three quick strides, Spike caught her in his arms and they strained together.

Kissing frantically, they sank to the bed and tried to keep kissing while unbuttoning Spike's frock

costume, waistcoat, shirt, and removing his cravat and shoes. The hell with the trousers, he thought and

pounced on her. He had to kiss her now! They lay back and held each other, kissing and fondling

one another.

From outside their window, a faint scratching noise intruded upon the sounds of their kissing. At

first, Spike didn't even notice--it seemed to be part of the almost inaudible night sounds: the house

settling, the creaking sound of the cook stove cooling, and far-off sounds from the barn. The sound

intruded upon the music Tara was making: happy little whimpers, moans, and sighs. At first, Spike

thought it was a twig scratching the windowpane, when he thought at all, but the sound got louder.

He heard a faint, familiar sniggering.

Spike jerked up and flung the curtain open. A brougham, with a thoroughly cowed-looking human

driver, stood on the drive between cottage and barn. In the yard, Angelus held the hapless Mrs.

Cobb, hand clamped over her mouth, while Darla retreated from the window, still holding the twig

with which she'd been scratching the window. She waved it like a wand at Spike. "Look, I'm a

witch, too," she said in her mocking voice.

Angelus called, "Come out and play. Or invite us in. We've unfinished business, you and I."

Spike bellowed, "Don't invite them in, Mrs. Cobb, whatever you do. They're vampires!" To Tara, he
said urgently, "Do exactly as I say. Stay indoors. I can't protect both you and her, 'cause there's only one of me but two of them. I will try to get her back without getting killed. Harmed, I mean. Don't leave the house. No mojo, either; you're not strong enough yet. I can't lose you. You got that? Now stay put!" Finished buttoning his shoes, he broke a chair leg into a hasty makeshift stake. To hell with altering the future.

"Let's see you take him, m'darlin'," Angelus suggested to Darla. "'T'wouldn't be sportin' if I stepped in yet. Perhaps you should use Marquess of Queensberry rules as well." He laughed at his own wit.

Darla sauntered toward Spike, daintily lifting her train with one hand and flirting her stick like a fan in the other. He could see lethal-looking pointed boots and a wicked little knife sheathed above the right boot. She neared Spike, moving as gracefully as though dancing a minuet. He could not help but admire her beauty and delicacy of movement, but he was not fooled. She could be as blindingly quick and deadly as a striking cobra.

Spike was glad of Angelus' suggestion. Spike had the advantage of strength and reach on Darla, and wanted to take her out of the game before dealing with Angelus. Darla and Spike circled each other warily. Spike knew he should focus only on her, but couldn't help but also think of all that was at stake. The future. How important was it, really, if he took these two out? If he could have borne it, he'd have sacrificed Mrs. Cobb and stayed indoors with Tara, but he could never live with himself. Nor would Tara forgive him. What did Americans call it--a Mexican standoff? Staying indoors was no real solution, anyway. Angelus would simply set the house on fire and drive them out. Spike forced himself to concentrate. He hadn't fed in days, not since that pint of burglar's blood, and so very much was riding on this. Neither he, Mrs. Cobb, nor Tara could afford for him to lose.

As he circled Darla, he looked around his surroundings for something, anything, to give him an advantage. He hadn't taken notice last night, so urgent was the need to get indoors before sunrise. Now, the moon had risen and he looked around the farmyard: barn, chicken coop, haymow, well. The well! What better place to put these two? They couldn't drown and it would hold them long enough to get well and truly away. Right. Darla, after you. Now let me help Angelus in. Comfy?

Darla intruded upon his racing thoughts, with feints at his eyes with the stick she still held. She gestured toward the stake he held. "You wouldn't stake your grandsire, would you, William? Angelus wouldn't like that. Why don't you just bring your girl out and we'll all have a nice feed and frolic."

"Belt up, Granny." Spike knew he needed to act soon, before Angelus tired of holding the feebly struggling old lady, came over to give Darla fighting pointers, and then pound him into the ground like a tent peg. Spike imagined Angelus would be surprised, though; Spike's technique had improved in the last 120 years. But Spike had the disadvantage of the soul, and the unwillingness to make crucial sacrifices, like the unfortunate Mrs. Cobb. She hung limp in Angelus' arms now, not dead yet, but overcome. Spike could hear her irregular, laboring heart. He knew he had to act now.

Without warning, Spike charged. Expecting a blow, Darla stood her ground, about to parry and strike viciously, but Spike did not give her the chance to move. Instead, he moved her, carrying her along with the force of his charge. She was borne hurtling along, like a heifer on a train's cowcatcher, legs tangled in her long skirts. Screeching and flailing, she tried to get to her feet, but Spike's forward movement did not allow her scrambling feet to get a purchase on the ground rushing past. Legs pumping like pistons, within seconds Spike was at the well, then over it. Darla toppled in and landed with a loud splash as Spike vaulted over the edge, and wheeled to face Angelus.

Spike pretended to be tired and slowly circled back, not giving Angelus an opening.

"Darla my darlin'. You all right down there?" Angelus called down into the black hole.
There came no answer but the furious scrabbling sound of Darla trying to get a handhold on the wet mossy stones, before falling back with a distant *plap*.

"Hold on, my girl. I'll sort out the whelp, and then pull you out. Patience, darlin'."

He turned to Spike and fixed him with a black stare. "I'd say you were dead, except, well, you *are*. Won't have the pleasure of killing you the first time, but I'll by-God be the finish of you."

Spike sidled past Angelus cautiously, looking for an opening, not giving him one. He blurted out, "Enjoy it."

Angelus seemed caught off guard. "Eh?"

"Enjoy it while you can. A day of reckoning is coming."

"What the hell kind of rot is that? That that soul Darla was talkin' about? I thought she was funnin' me."

"It's true. William was the seventh son of a seventh son. I'm the only vampire with a soul. *For now.* You're in for a big surprise, you dim sod."

Angelus snorted, "Codswallop! I don't smell any soul on you. All I smell is your girl. Heh. That's how we tracked you. Delicious girlflesh, medium rare, just as I like it. Darla was all for letting you get away, but she's just jealous." He lowered his voice evilly. "Knows what I've got planned for your girl."

They exchanged blows, parrying and falling back. Angelus' technique was to simply wear Spike down, the one hungry and weakened. Angelus toyed with Spike, using words to torment him, telling him of his plans for Tara. They were fairly evenly matched. Spike was smaller, quicker, and a more experienced fighter, but Angelus was stronger and more recently-fed.

Spike bent over to rest his hands on his thighs, simulating a winded pose, and gave Angelus an opening. Obligingly, Angelus charged him. Spike went down, grabbing Angelus' coat, pulling him with him, using his feet to flip Angelus, and the bigger man wound up flipped arse over elbow, landing heavily on his back with an *Oof!* Using their forward momentum, Spike landed atop Angelus' chest, punching him mercilessly. Enraged that Spike got the better of him, Angelus heaved Spike off, and bulled at him again, grabbing at Spike, only to have the momentum of his charge used against him once more. He landed painfully on his hip, and Spike landed a good kick to Angelus's kneecap -- not breaking it, from the sound of it, but damaging it abominably.

Angelus was not a complete fool. He controlled his anger, and by wearing Spike down with a series of powerful blows and not giving him an opening to strike back, he finally gained the upper hand. Angelus finally knocked Spike down, pinning him, and rained punishing blows on face.

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With growing dread, Tara could see the fight going against Spike. The yard was dark, but the moon showed her well enough. She guessed that unmoving heap was Mrs. Cobb. Tara knew she needed to help her, and that their only hope was for her to help Spike beat Angelus.

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His brains rattling, Spike had the most unpleasant sense of *déjà vu*. Not since Buffy beat the tar out of him when he tried to stop her turning herself in to the police, had he ever received such a thorough whaling. He thought of all he'd risked and failed. He had failed Tara, and the poor old lady. If she
minded him, Tara would stay in the house and Angelus would drive her out with fire, with her suffering horribly at his hands. Or perhaps she’d summon inner reserves and set him on fire. That was a pleasant thought. He imagined that he’d enjoy watching Angelus go up like a torch. Put paid to him before he put paid to him. But Tara shouldn’t play with fire anymore. She was weakened and needed to gain strength so she could cast her mojo with the other witches and go home. Big job for her there. Pity he couldn’t protect her. Never got to make love to her, either. His thoughts grew more and more disjointed as consciousness slipped away.

What saved him was a slight sound. His eyes were crossed and his nose poured blood, but his ears still functioned well enough. Tara's soft footfalls whispered in the dry grass.

Spike bellowed loudly, "You nobshine, you bastard, you pig-buggering evil sod," and continued in that vein, while his brains continued to rattle from the blows, until he heard a...

click

and then a

POW!

Tara stood behind Angelus, who had turned to look at her just as she reached him, about to mock her for making the critical error of pulling a gun on a vampire. She pulled the trigger, and an explosion filled the air with acrid smoke. Angelus' upper face, nose, and eyes were blackened and he howled, "My eyes! MY EYES!"

The barrel of the pistol had ruptured. The explosion had been the sound of hang fire in Spike's father's old Adams pistol, and it sent a stinging, blinding blast of black powder and wadding into Angelus' eyes, where she meant to shoot him.

Angelus screamed curses and flailed, alternately clawing at his eyes and batting at Tara, who hastily backed away. Spike pulled himself together and got a last few licks in, then he tipped the roaring Angelus into the well.

Spike sat down heavily and collected himself. He needed to close up the well and pile heavy objects on the cover, but first needed to rest and gain strength. He also most sincerely needed to eat soon.

With Angelus disposed of, Tara hurried to Mrs. Cobb. It was quite dark, but a finger to her neck told Tara to her sorrow that Mrs. Cobb was dead.
Silent tears running down her cheeks, Tara sat down hard by Mrs. Cobb's body. Why should this death hurt more than Willow's? The immediacy of it, all that had happened and all that was at risk, slammed into her like a blow. She wept silently, trying to arrange Mrs. Cobb's limbs into a more dignified position.

Spike stood and walked painfully over to her. "Lemme see your hand."

"What?" Tara sounded distracted.

He took her right hand, turned it over, examining it, and then kissed it. "That hang fire could just as easily have taken off your hand. Lucky for us it blinded Angelus. For now, at least. He'll heal. Here, leave her now. There's no help for her, poor lady." He put his hand on Tara's shoulder, trying to turn her away.

"I can't just leave her like this!" she cried. "I don't know if we should bury her or lay her out in the house. But I'm not just going to leave her here, like a pile of trash."

Spike sighed sympathetically. "I see what you mean. Burying her looks like there was foul play--well, there was! --and bringing her inside is more respectful-like. Don't want her relatives to find her like this."

"I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do." Tara wept and rocked.

Spike sat down beside her and put his arm around Tara for a few minutes, silently offering comfort. He gave her a gentle squeeze. "Here, help me carry her. You take her feet, I'll take her arms."

Together, they carried her into the house and laid her on her bed in the big bedroom.

"How much water do we have?" Spike asked.

"Huh?"

"Well, we should conserve what we have. Don't fancy the thought of sending the wellsweep down, give those two a leg up. Know what I mean?"

They decided there was enough to bathe Mrs. Cobb and make a last meal before they departed. Tara said she would wash her, and Spike left her to it.

He went outside to make sure Angelus and Darla were still contained in the well. He lifted the cover and called down, "How're you making out down there -- chillin' in the well?"

Darla did not speak, but Spike fancied he could hear her gnash her teeth. Angelus roared up at him, "I curse the day Drusilla set eyes on you! When I get out of here, you'll pay, she'll pay, and as for your witch--!"
"Yeah, an' if shit were ice cream, everyone would have cold, sweet arseholes!" Spike bellowed back, slamming down the lid. He needed to find something to weigh it down.

So hungry. Angelus' driver and brougham were no-where to be found. Pity. He'd rather liked the idea of bullying the driver, punishing him for abetting Angelus and allowing himself to be made a tool, perhaps taking a pint from him, or at the very least, eating one of the horses, and then sending him packing on foot. It was not to be. Spike sighed.

Hoping the barn held the promise of blood, Spike only found Mrs. Cobb's chickens in the adjoining coop. He didn't fancy killing a dozen or so of her birds to get enough blood to make a meal. She didn't have a horse or pig. His own horses? There were only two, and if he ate one, the remaining one would not be able to pull the carriage alone. Kill one and ride? Tara couldn't ride sidesaddle, and he wouldn't ride and leave her on foot. Must focus.

He found building supplies from some uncompleted farm project, and wore himself out carrying timbers and bricks to the well. He piled them on top of the lid. He didn't fear changing the future; Angelus and Darla would get out eventually, anyone investigating the odd pile on top of the well's cover would guarantee that. He did pity whoever would be the one to let them out.

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Tara removed Mrs. Cobb's torn and dirtied clothes and washed her. She dried the body and worked it into a clean nightgown, pulling it up into a sitting position, putting it over the head, working the lifeless arms into the sleeves, pulling it down to the waist, and laying it down again and working it down past the hips and legs. Tara mind was eaten up with remorse. They had brought this on the poor lady. A glancing flash of resentment for Willow--you did this!--was quickly pushed aside. This was not the time to give into her anger at Willow. She brushed Mrs. Cobb's hair and covered the body with a clean sheet.

Tara wanted to wash herself, but wasn't sure if she and Spike would be digging a grave, or leave the poor woman in her bed, covered with a sheet. They would be going soon. Perhaps she should leave a note for the relatives.

Spike looked in on her. "I'm sorry, sweetness. I shouldn't have let you do this yourself."

"I don't think she would have wanted a strange man to see her like this. I'm sure she'd rather it was a woman who washed her," Tara spoke in a subdued voice. "What do you think we should do now? I'm not thinking clearly."

"Think we should leave soon."

"Right. The scene of the crime," Tara said tonelessly.

"This isn't your fault, you know," Spike said. "This is terrible, but you didn't bring this on her."

"Didn't we? Angelus followed us. If we hadn't come here, Mrs. Cobb would be asleep, dreaming of--" She shifted abruptly. "You want to know who I'm really mad at, it's Willow! I'm so damn mad I could kill her." Tara almost never swore.

Spike stared at her. "It's a hell of a thing, wanting to yell at someone who's already dead, isn't it?" He lowered his voice, and spoke in a calmer tone. "Look. I'm going to get you out of this. Going to get you to the witches, throw us on their mercy--"

"How well will that work, I wonder?" Tara was almost never sarcastic, either.
"Glinda. Gonna get you safe. I promise. Look, you like chicken?"

"What?" Tara snorted with humorless laughter and looked unbelievingly at his change of subject.

"Sorry. I need to eat. She's got a flock of poultry. Thinking of having a little chicken. Want some?"

She put a lid on her sarcasm and frustration, and spoke more calmly. "You won't get much blood from a chicken. Isn't there anything else?"

"Fraid not. Only two horses. Angelus' coachman hit the road, took their team."

Tara said, "That leaves me. Okay, let's do it." She made it sound eminently reasonable.

"Let's do it? Told you we weren't gonna play kinky games."

"Why? I saw you straining to carry her in. You nearly lost the fight with Angelus. You need to eat. Now, let's do this."

"Look, don't have to cut my balls off, here! Just hungry is all. Fuck this noise. Get ready. I'm putting you on a train. I'll eat one of the horses and ride the other to Westbury. Catch up with you later."

"No! I don't want to be separated. Let's just do this. You know you want to. I want you to. So what is the problem?"

"Look, I'm hungry, not crazy. Not gonna hurt you. Don't play with me."

"You say you want to protect me. You need to eat, so do it! I'm saying--"

Spike gave a growl of frustration, "You do this... you, you get depressed and then all, 'Do me, Big Bad, take me outta life.' You were like this the night we got here. Had a look on you, like you were about to throw yourself off a cliff." He looked at her narrowly. "You think I'd hurt you! Think I'd be the means of you hurting yourself. Well, think again!" He glared at her.

"I did think that," she said softly, "I thought I'd give you an opening and you'd... make the pain go away. I didn't know you that well yet." She put her arms around him. "I'm sorry, Spike. I know you won't hurt me or take too much. I just want you to be strong and keep us safe." She looked up at him contritely. "Please?"

Her arms around him, her clinging body, and her soft words undid him. All his resolve, all the highfalutin promises he'd made the first night not to hurt her or use her, came tumbling down. He did want her. The sex part was easy. She seemed to want him as much as he did her, but this! The blood. The hell of it was she had logic on her side. If he'd fed before taking on Angelus, the fight would have gone differently. What if she'd lost her hand? How could he protect her if he nobly refrained from feeding? She was a volunteer, after all. Aaugh! He hated the thought of doing this, and at the same time, it was all caught up with his wanting her. Her body. That creamy neck. Abruptly, he gave in to her.

"All right. Let's do this. But we're leaving right after. No shilly-shallying. Gonna teach you to drive tonight, drive night and day, get to the witches, get home. Not gonna make this a habit, believe you me." He spoke with resolve mingled with self-disgust.

She lifted her head from his shoulder and said, "Where do you want me?"

Shaking his head, he led her out of Mrs. Cobb's room and back to their own. "Better sit. Don't want you feeling faint and falling over." He sat on the edge of their bed, and patted his lap.
Tara sat down sideways, and Spike held her by her hips. She began unbuttoning the neck of her nightdress. "Will it hurt?"

He tried to remember when Drusilla bit him so very long ago. As he recalled, it hurt at first, only to be replaced with fierce desire and a swooning surrender to her, and at the last, he'd come in his pants. It was the first time a woman had ever touched him in an intimate way. No need to tell this to Tara. "I expect it will. You'll probably feel a lot of unaccustomed stuff. It isn't natural, that's for sure. I told you, these are extraordinary circumstances. We're not doing this again."

Tara finished unbuttoning the top of the nightdress and pulled it down below her shoulders like a peasant top. "Don't want to get blood on this pretty thing."

"Don't want to get blood on you, pretty thing," he muttered.

"Let's just do this, please." She turned her face away.

Spike turned her face back to his. "This isn't the way I wanted to tell you, but I figure now's as good a time--" His eyes held apology and tenderness. "I've wanted to tell you for a long time now. I love you. Hate doing this to you."

"Oh!" Tara hugged him tightly. She wanted to answer him but before she could form a reply, he spoke.

"Ready?" No time like the present. He didn't want her to see his face.

"Ready." She kept her face averted and waited breathlessly.

Living in Sunnydale, Tara had sometimes wondered what it would be like if evil finally caught up with her. (She had almost entirely blocked the memory of Glory.) She imagined that to be bitten by a vampire would be the filthiest kind of violation, to not only invade her body with sharp teeth, but to drain her life's blood and steal her soul. But Spike's treatment of her was the antithesis of violation. She'd seen him put his body on the line for her and the ones she loved. She'd seen his sacrifices—seen him stand up for her almost from the moment she met him. She wanted to give back to him. Her heart began to pound.

Hating himself, Spike cradled the back of her head. He fanged out and quickly sank his teeth into her neck. She gasped and stiffened.

Trying not to hyperventilate, Tara tried to distract herself by detaching from the pain and examining it as though from a distance like she did at the dentist's. Just let it happen and not let it control her. Spike was like a mother cat picking up its young, and she was its kitten going limp as he held her. No, that wasn't it. She was the mother cat and he was her kitten, suckling from her. That was better. She began to feel warm and sleepy, her breaths coming deeper and deeper, as though she were the one being fed. No, that was wrong, too. It was more like, it was like... a bird before a snake. She felt a mindless lassitude creep through her limbs, and a warm and weighty sense of herself sinking into the hardness of his lap and moving against him. He was pulling her by the hips, moving her as his mouth pulled at her neck, and it kept time with the throbbing of her blood. Her breathing grew faster and she began to murmur wordlessly.

Spike tried desperately to control his bite and the amount he took. She was delicious, hot and rich and full of indefinable Tara-ness, and it was not that he was famished and she was available. It was that it was she. Tara. His girl. He heard her beginning to babble, "oh it's so good oh it's so good," and felt her undulating against him. With disgust, he realized that he was grinding into her as he fed from her. His soul recoiled at taking unfair advantage of her.
In the past, he'd been nothing but grateful for the narcotic, aphrodisiac effect of the bite. It was the reason the Sunnydale night wasn't loud with the screams of its victims, so complacent were they to be drained and discarded like so many empty soda cans. He was just as glad to accommodate his victims as they were to be victimized.

Horrified, he withdrew his teeth and shook his features back to normal, licking blood off his lips. There was a long trickle running down her neck to her collarbone. He licked that, too, and licked the small wounds on her neck to close them.

She groaned happily and lolled backwards. He eased her onto the bed and looked at her with mild alarm. She clearly expected that they would immediately make love. "More coitus, less interruptus," she said with a suggestive sleepy smile, putting her hand on his crotch.

Hastily, Spike stood up and said, "Now, I'm no prude, but that's the bite talking, not you. I think you want me, and I'm not saying I don't want to get someplace safe and show you how much I want you, too, but right now, you're not your own mistress."

"Oh, come on, Spike." She pushed out her already-full lower lip. He wanted to bite it.

"Right. Remember when you'd had a few too many peach coolers at the engagement party? Supposing I'd talked you into sex back then?"

She didn't understand. "I was with Willow back then."

"Okay, what about when Glory sucked your brain, and you weren't yourself. Supposing I'd had slipped in when Willow wasn't paying attention, torn one off? You wouldn't have known any different. Or cared. What then?"

Tara sat up woozily, unsure if she shouldn't lie back down again. She wobbled, and decided that she didn't feel comfortable half-dressed around Spike just now. She began buttoning up the nightgown, then realized that they would be dressing and leaving shortly. All business, she got out of the opposite side of the bed and pulled the nightgown off, keeping her back to Spike. She took clean clothes out of her carpetbag, and said flatly, "You're saying I'm not in control. That when I say I want you I don't really mean it."

"That it's just because this felt good." She pulled a clean blouse on. "Button me up, please?"

Spike stood his ground. "Think you want me, too, but the timing's all wrong. As usual."

Tara didn't answer. She had her back to him and he couldn't see her face. In a low voice, he said, "I want this to be perfect. Don't want our first time to be with your blood runnin' down, and you all googly from it, and the dead lady in the next room. Want you to be able to give yourself to me freely, with no coercion or regrets."

She turned to him and hugged him hard.
"I'm selfish. I never asked you how you're doing," Tara said, laying a gentle hand on Spike's battered cheek.

"You're not selfish. You fed me, didn't you? I feel up to taking on medium-sized vampires now. Much better. Felt like a frog in a blender back there," Spike admitted. "Angelus got me almost as bad as the Slayer did couple of years back. Remember how my face looked at her birthday party?"

"She did that?" Tara was horrified. "I always thought you'd gotten into it with some demon."

"Got that right. Regular healthy relationship there, eh?" He winked at her. "You and I might have our ups and downs, but that one took the cake."

"That, or maybe mine and Willow's." She shook her head. "Let me tend to those bruises. You want to get breakfast while I mix up a potion?"

Spike agreed, and went out to the barn. He decided to spare the chickens, and fed them instead. He scattered the grain the horses had missed and made sure they had enough water to last them until Mrs. Cobb's relatives turned up. Which might be today! Spike calculated--today was Saturday--well, the wee hours of Sunday morning. No horse or carriage of her own. She probably got a ride to church from one of her children, which meant that he and Tara had a scant few hours in which to make their getaway. He hurried back to the farmhouse.

"Glinda, gotta go. Write a note for the relatives. I'll make sandwiches. Christ. We get out of this, I'll never look at a sandwich again. No, the note had better come from me. You make sandwiches."

Despite Spike's directive, Tara dabbed ointment on his face while he struggled over the note. What to say? Sorry we brought on your mother's death. Vampires were following us. She should never have invited us in. By the way, be careful opening up her well. There's a nasty surprise at the bottom, and I don't mean a dead sheep. He stopped trying to make sense of it, and simply said that Mrs. Cobb had been assaulted. He expressed deep regret over not being able to prevent their mother's death from heart failure during the assault, and said that the perpetrators were confined in the well. He hoped that they would take care in releasing them, as they were extremely dangerous.

He imagined that Angelus and Darla would fare well enough. This time line was already altered by Tara's and his presence; he hoped that fate or karma or the Powers That Be would take care of Angelus and Darla and their respective destinies. The best he could do was try to warn the humans who would necessarily come in contact with them. He finished the note but did not sign it.

Tara finished packing the picnic basket and threw the last of their few belongings in the carpetbags while Spike harnessed their horses. Mrs. Cobb had been right about one thing: he was useless at harnessing a team. He struggled with it, trying to make sense of the tangle of lines and buckles. He finally got it sorted out well enough, and pulled out.

Tara put their bags in the compartment, and taking Spike's proffered hand, climbed up to the driver's box.

"Right. I figure we've got about two hours before dawn. Want you to learn to drive tout de suite. Here, take the reins. Hold 'em like so. Pull this way to go right, that way to go left. Hand brake below. And drive on the left! This is England. Nearly came to grief back there in London until I got
the hang of it once more. Been driving in America too long. You should see my Viper." He sighed dreamily. "Sweet, sweet little thing. Necromanced windows so I can drive about during the day. I love her almost as much as--" He looked at her. "Hey, you never answered my declaration back there."

Tara dimpled. "I thought I did." She had a delicious chuckle. "I don't share my blood with just anyone," she teased him. "Oh, all right," she said, taking pity on him. "I love you, too, and no, that's not the bite talking!" She forbore to keep an edge out of her voice.

Spike smiled and said, "I like having you drive. Can touch you while you wrangle the team." He lounged back and put his arm around her hips and squeezed her. "When we're out of this, I'm going to take you someplace nice. With a hot tub--"

"Oh, a bath!" Tara moaned. "I would kill for a bath right now!"

"And a big bed and good food. Maybe one of those fancy little B & Bs on the California coast. Rent their bridal suite, have them send up a bottle of their best bubbly, and nosh for you?"

"You do know you're torturing me, don't you?"

"Sorry." Chuckling, he changed the subject. "Been thinking about this time travel. Remember, there was still food in the Hampstead house?"

"Stale food. Yes?"

"Well, you and I must have traveled back very soon after William was turned. Dru and I missed a couple of the servants. Got four, sorry to say, but missed the housekeeper on her half-day, and the kitchen-girl. Think the heirs--my nephew and his wife--hired them to clean up after us. After the bodies were removed. Blood an' all. Breakage." He looked grim. "Think the food was theirs--room and board, you know. I'm trying to pinpoint the time. Angelus knew me, remember, though it was a short acquaintance. Remember him asking me what I was doing off Dru's leash? She'd taken me to him right after I was turned, and then he and Darla went off on some lark. Gone a couple of weeks. When they got back, I remember Angelus beating me for something I hadn't done. Talking about a witch blinding him, and it was all my fault. No idea at the time what he was on about. Neither did Dru. He punished both of us by-- Well, no need to go into the charming details. But this is the first time I'm thinking about time and how it loops. You and me, here, meeting Angelus, remembering his anger, and realizing it's because he met me before. This me. Spike the Second, call it. Make sense?"

"You're saying that this trip already happened, like it was foreordained. Predestined?"

"Think so. Grasping at straws here, but looking for a way to believe that it's meant to be, and our winning is gonna happen, too." He looked questioningly at her.

"Oh, I hope so!"

"Good." He smiled briefly at her. "Well, it's getting light. I'd better get below. Wish you still had the pistol. Keep yourself covered up, and your hood up. Not too many female carriage drivers here."

"I'll be all right. Get under cover." They kissed for a long moment, and then he climbed down from the driver's box, got inside the passenger compartment and lowered the shades.

During the long morning Tara thought about what Spike said. She realized how much they both relied upon the coven as a deus ex machina. What if she was mistaken and there was no coven? No, what she had felt during that locator spell a few days ago was unmistakable, and not just one mind--a community of minds, humming with power. But what if they were not believed? Her mind shied
away from this, but on the face of it, she had to admit their story was pretty improbable-sounding. A vampire and a witch, time-traveling, on a desperate mission to get back to the future to save it? She smiled ruefully. If someone approached her with such a story, she doubted she'd believe it, and here she was, living it! If only she had some artifact—a pager or cell phone—something to offer as proof. Tara had never owned one, and though Spike was no Luddite, he did not have one, either. They'd have to settle for the truth.

Of course, when Spike had told her just that, that they had traveled in time, Tara had believed him. More than that, when he told her that Willow had died, he’d taken care to feed it to her in small pieces, careful of her grief. He was gentle and protective of her, and so considerate of her feelings. She trusted him. She thought of him in the carriage below, and felt a flash of anger that he'd refused her that morning. Yes, the bite felt good, dark and erotic, but there was far more to it than that. She wanted to give herself to him, make him hers, spend hours showing him how she felt, and no more maddening interruptions! Drive night and day, eh? Not fair to the horses, and not fair to her, either. With a stab of wicked glee, she thought about getting him alone and biting him.

A wagon approached and Tara remembered to keep to the left. She kept her head low and let the hood shadow her face. The other vehicle, carrying a farm family on their way to church, passed without incident. She arranged the furs under the cloak more warmly around her body, and hoped the enveloping cloak disguised her sex and identity. An upsetting thought occurred to her. Obviously, there was no media or police to give an APB with a description of them, but there was telegraph. By now, the Scotland Yard detectives would have broken out of William’s cellar and given a description of them. She imagined that the train stations were supplied with posters advising the reader to be on the lookout for a blonde American woman traveling with a brown-haired Englishman. She thought of the glamour for Spike's hair. Perhaps they could both be brunets? She thought Spike was probably fluent enough in French to pass as a Frenchman, but she only had high school French. And she was sure she could not fake a believable English accent. The best she could do was keep still and let Spike do the talking. As he was fond of saying lately, when frustration at their situation got the better of him, so her thoughts echoed: the sooner we get to the witches and throw ourselves on their mercy...

She remembered Spike's words, spoken in anger: I'm putting you on a train. I'll ride to Westbury. Catch up with you there. The thought of being separated from him reduced her to cold terror. It was the thought of being apart from him, not as much as being apprehended and put in Victorian jail that sent a stab of fear into her and made her realize how much she loved him already.

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They made a quick meal at noon, sandwiches and wine as usual, and exchanged kisses in the shelter of the carriage compartment.

As the day wore on, Tara practiced meditation, detaching from her fear, her hopes for rescue by the witches, her desire for bodily comfort: bed, bath, and central heating. Her sexual frustration. She let go of attachment to outcomes and just allowed events to unfold. The drive was without incident, the horses plodded along, neither hurrying nor dallying. The landscape gradually flattened out into a plain, dotted with farms, and hung with mist. The weather continued cold, with fitful sun, making it impossible for Spike to join her. She sighed. Some meditation. She couldn't keep her mind off him. They approached a small town, Heytesbury according to the sign, Tara pulled the horses to the side of the road, and set the hand brake. She climbed down.

Spike was sleeping on the floor of the carriage compartment, curled in a nest of saddles, horse blankets, and his mantle. His face looked angelic while he slept, Tara thought. She got carefully into the carriage, opened her bag, and combed and pinned up her hair.
"Spike?" she whispered. "Wake up," she said a little more loudly.

"Hmm?" he murmured, beginning to stir. He sat up and rumpled his hair. The act appeared to wake him up.

"I know you wanted to drive night and day, but the horses are tired. I don't think chicken feed was what they needed. We're just outside a town. I wonder if you'd mind if we stop, take care of them, and feed me, too?" Tara tried to keep a coaxing tone out of her voice, and figured if he wanted to go for the big push to Westbury, she'd go along. She hoped he'd say yes, though.

Spike appeared to consider her proposal, his tongue showing between his teeth. "Let's see what you've got under your skirt, Mrs. Southwood," he said suggestively, running his hands up her legs. "Mmm, so glad you don't shave. I like a downy little chick, like those hippie birds years back. Soft and natural, like the ladies here." Running his hands up her thighs, he added, "None so pretty as you, though." He whispered, "Make you come in colors tonight."

Tara leaned back, breathing unevenly, but thought she'd rather get a room before-- With a flash of disappointment, she realized he was only after the fat little purse sewn to the bottom of her corset. He caught her disappointment, and smiled wickedly at her, taking some money out of the purse. "Need dosh for a room, don't we?" he asked innocently, waving it at her.

She said breathily, "Not a moment too soon."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This chapter's NC-17, kiddies. Do not read if you're not of age, please.

Spike led Tara into the inn and negotiated a price for a room and two baths, and arranged for the innkeeper to send his kitchen-girl up with hot food before their baths. Spike wasn't sure he could sit through a meal with Tara after seeing her in her bath, and he certainly didn't plan on letting her bathe alone. Too many previous interruptions interfered with his plans for their perfect night.

He was given a key, and they climbed the stairs. Inside their room, he prowled around, checking that there was no door to a connecting bath as there had been in Kingston. Since the sun had set, he looked out the window for a long time, looking for balconies, ledges, and then checked under the bed and in the wardrobe. "Sorry," he said with an apologetic smile. I'm like those barmy blokes back from 'Nam, all hypervigilant. Just want you to be safe." He gave one last look out the window. "Everything but the bloodhounds snappin' at our rear ends," he said.

Tara looked at him blankly.

"All About Eve?"

She shrugged.

"When we get out of this, I'm taking you to a classic film festival. That is, if I ever let you out of bed."

They fell into each other's arms and kissed hungrily until the maid tapped on the door, carrying a covered tray of food. Spike took it from her, tipped her, and locked the door once more. Tara did not have much appetite, at least not for food, but made herself eat some hot soup. Spike contented himself with gloating over her like a miser over a treasure.

Dinner over, Spike held his arms open and Tara came and sat in his lap. She laid her head on his shoulder and sighed in contentment. They were both very conscious that the maid would be back soon to tell them the baths were ready, so they merely held each other and shared light kisses. Spike's hands roamed over her body, but feeling up a girl in a corset is an exercise in futility. He restrained himself from undressing her on the spot.

Their kisses were heating up when came another tap on the door. "What!" snapped Spike. The maid called timidly through the door that the bath was ready. Spike gave a growl of frustration.

"I don't want you out of my sight. Mind company while you bathe?"

Tara looked down shyly and shook her head.

They walked hand in hand down the hall to the bathroom. The maid had half-filled the tub with hot water, and another two filled jugs stood on the floor. Spike helped Tara undress, and helped her carefully into the tub, as she was so tired she was wobbly. With all the events of the previous day--
the fight with Angelus, and Mrs. Cobb's death and its aftermath--she had not slept since the night before last, and she was clearly feeling the strain. She stood in the tub, and he kissed the marks the corset had left on her ribs and belly. She shivered in anticipation, her nipples crinkling, but he did not rush to make love to her. The look in his eyes made her breathless.

Spike could not take his eyes off her beauty. He could not believe that such a treasure had given him her love.

"Someday," he said, kissing her forehead, "I'd like to share a bath with you, but not today. 'Sides, the bloody tub's too small! I'll bathe at the basin here. We'll pour most of this water in with you and you can have a good deep soak and relax properly."

"All right." She sat down and slid deep into the water with a contented sigh. "But you don't want me too relaxed."

"I want you any way you are. Lean forward and let me do your back."

Spike washed her back and rubbed her neck and shoulders while she purred with pleasure at how good it felt. Driving all day had left her sore and aching. He helped her wash her heavy honey-blonde hair, then poured one of the jugs of water and most of the second one in with her, rinsing her hair and back. Then he filled the stoppered sink for his bath.

He undressed, keeping his back to her. Tara stared, fascinated, at the long line of his marble-white back, muscular buttocks, and smooth legs. "Spike," she said, wanting him to turn around.

"Hmm?" he turned his head, continuing to wash at the sink. She could see his face in profile, smiling slightly. "What?" He did not turn.

Frustrated, she said, "Nothing." So odd to fall in love with someone's character and then be blindsided with unaccustomed lust for their body. Unaccustomed gender, in fact. God, he's beautiful, she thought. Are those dimples over his butt? She craned her neck, watching in fascination as Spike finished washing his upper body and bent to wash his hair. He poured the last of the water over his head, rinsing, and finished his bath by washing his feet. He lifted one leg chest-high, and put the foot in the basin. He washed and dried the foot, set it down, and then washed and dried the other. Catching tantalizing glimpses of what awaited her, Tara kept moving her head in an attempt to get a better look at him.

He dried off, put on the robe he'd hung by the sink, and turned around, smiling secretly. He could feel her eyes upon him as he bathed.

Tara unplugged the tub and stood up. Trying not to fall upon her like a starving man, Spike helped her out of the tub. He dried her hair and back, helped her into the nightgown, and covered her with the cloak since she had no robe. They walked slowly back to their room, Tara leaning on Spike's arm.

Once inside, Spike shoved the heavy wardrobe up against their door, as much because he needed to do something vigorous just then to ease the tension, than from fear of interruption. She gave him a Mona Lisa smile and nodded.

Spike realized with something like amazement that he had never made love before. Oh, he had loved, most deeply, but it had never been returned and he knew that this was like no experience he'd ever had. William, poor lovesick prat, had gone to his death a virgin, and in his relationships with daft Dru and the Slayer, he'd never had his feelings returned. The rest of his encounters were unimportant slaking of lust or fucking while feeding. Not to be thought of on the same plane as his
feelings for Tara. He realized, too, that she was only human and half-dead with fatigue. He heard himself say, "Are you sure you're not too tired?"

"I'm good. I'm good," she reassured him. "If you want the truth, I feel really relaxed and kind of loopy, like I'm stoned."

"What would my good girl know about that?" He walked slowly toward her.

Her heart started to pound. She backed toward the bed. "Well, college girl here, all about the experimentation... Willow wanted to and I went along. I didn't really like it. But I like this," she hastened to add. "I mean, I want this. I want you. Could we talk less--?" They tumbled to the bed, kissing, their bodies heating up, until Spike felt himself glowing with borrowed warmth. He looked at the small scabbed-over wounds on her neck and felt an absurd pride. He kissed her neck and ran his tongue over the marks.

Tara pushed his robe back and got the look that she'd missed in the bathroom. Her eyes grew round, and suddenly she blurted, "Smallwood? He used to call you Smallwood?" She started to giggle and tried to stop herself, not wanting to be rude but unable to help herself.

"She was wrong," Tara said seriously. "You're beautiful."

"Let's get you out of this nightie." She held her arms up and he pulled it over her head, then gazed in awe at her. "Good thing I don't need to breathe, 'cos you take my breath away." He pulled her into his arms.

They both stopping kissing and stroking each other to pull back and blurted out almost simultaneously. "I'm afraid I'm not experienced enough for you," said Tara, while Spike said at the same time, "I'm afraid I'm too much for you." They both laughed a little to realize that they had the same thought--fear of inadequacy--when it was all so plain to both of them that they were the luckiest people on the planet. They hugged suddenly, as though they'd won the lottery.

"You make me so happy. I haven't been happy since--" He stopped, unable to think of when he'd last been happy. He shook his head in wonder.

Her voice breaking, Tara said, "I love you so much. I didn't think I could love again so soon after-- But it's real and it's true. I trust you more than anyone--"

They wrestled on the bed, each trying to see who could get closer. Spike allowed Tara to pin him down, relishing the thought of submitting to her. She climbed atop him and said with a smile, "I win! You're mine."

"I am yours," he said, unconsciously echoing Tara's own words to Willow long ago.

She kissed him gently, and in her heart, said goodbye to Willow. "And I'm yours." Her kiss was an act of dedication.

Spike deepened the kiss and rolled her over. She was open to him and he caressed her everywhere, glorying in the feel of her warm, satiny skin.

Tara was so different from Buffy. With the Slayer, there had been the dogged pursuit of her orgasm, with one clear end in sight, the main course, and no time out for the side dishes of lovemaking. "Getting the job done," she called it. He had been so wounded by her poorly-concealed dislike for
him and her humiliation at finding herself in his bed, on his floor, or up against his crypt wall, her clear shining righteousness sullied by the vampire's touch—but despite that he had been unable to resist her for three painful, wasted years.

Tara, on the other hand, inexperienced though she was, had an innocent lasciviousness, a sensuous enjoyment of the moment, clearly relishing each step of the way to their bliss. She purred her enjoyment, made little whimpers of happiness, moaned and growled her pleasure. Such a difference! Shortly, he stopped thinking about the Slayer altogether.

"Promise to stop me if this hurts you." Spike was tender and gentle, moving slowly and gradually into her, watching her face for signs of pain or fear. He was shaking with emotion, finally being where he had been dying to be for what seemed like forever, and so overwhelmed with love for her that he was terrified he'd hurt her. This is all for you. I think only of you. He heard a sharp gasp and looked down at her in concern. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. Well, a little, but it feels good, too." She moved against him. "Don't stop."

"Show me what you like."

"I like you..."

He grinned down at her. "No, really."

She sucked his thumb into her mouth to wet it, and played with it for a moment, running her tongue around and around, watching him with a shy half-smile.

"Show me," he coaxed her.

She guided his hand to her most sensitive bit of flesh, her thumb over his, and describing ever-narrowing circles until she came with a wail, digging her heels in and pushing back on the headboard, and up onto him. After long moments, her legs shaking, body clenching like a fist, she stopped quaking and relaxed in a puddle around him. Her closed eyes leaked tears, which ran down into the hair at her temples, and she laughed softly with wonder. "I love you so much. I could definitely get used to this." She chuckled and hugged him. "You're amazing."

Abruptly, Spike smelled blood. "You're bleeding. I hurt you!" He was appalled, his own orgasm derailed and forgotten.

"You could, you know, kiss it better?" she suggested.
Chapter 17

Spike and Tara lay in a tangle of bedding, sweat cooling Tara's naked body. She murmured, "I love being naked with you."

"Well, I love that noise you make..."

"What noise?"

"You know, when I—"

"Unnh..."

He smirked. "Yeah, that noise."

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Later, Spike asked, "Do you like children?"

Tara smiled in the dark. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Looking for reasons you might not stay with me when all this is over, me not being able to give you children being a big one, love."

Spike felt her pull him closer. "Don't worry. That'll never happen. Me leaving you, I mean." She was silent for a moment. "I can't have children. I always wanted to adopt, though, one day."

"Why can't...? Did something..."

"My father."

Spike's arms tightened around her as his rage rose.

"You must promise me you'll never go after him," she pleaded, holding him tightly.

"Why should I not!"

"Because it's past. I've healed. And I don't believe in vengeance."

Spike did his best to get his fury under control. When he could speak without shouting, he said, "You turned out so perfect. So easy to please. How—"

"I had lots of help," Tara said. "My religion. And my mother. She reminded me that my mind and body were the only things that belonged to just me. She was right. I wasn't going to let what he did take any more away from me than it already had."

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They made love for most of the rest of the night, slept, and talked. They both felt an unspoken and awed awareness that this was unlike anything else they'd ever known. Neither of them wanted to
examine it too closely for fear of breaking the spell.

After Tara had fallen asleep again, Spike got up and pulled the bell-cord quietly. It was near dawn and he supposed the kitchen staff would be up by now. He quietly moved the armoire blocking their door, and after putting on a dressing gown, he slipped into the hall before the girl could knock.

"My wife is very tired and I don't want her disturbed. We'll need the room another night. Please send up a lunch around noon. Don't knock. I'll listen for you."

She agreed and left quietly.

~~~

Spike watched over Tara as she slept. He couldn't help but think about Angelus and Darla. What if something happened to him and he couldn't protect her? He did not underestimate their bloodlust one bit. There'd be hell to pay if they caught up with them. And they would catch up to them; it was only a matter of time. Wasn't it? Or maybe he and Tara would finally get a break? Maybe Angelus and Darla were the least of their concerns right now.

Spike heard Tara mutter in her sleep, as though she could sense his churning thoughts. As Spike willed himself to relax, he felt Tara subside. Careful not to wake her, he climbed back into bed and held her gently until she awoke just before noon.

She yawned widely. "Have you been awake all this time?"

"Still borrowin' trouble. Thinking about Angelus and his bitch. Worrying about getting us to Westbury."

Tara looked thoughtful. Suddenly, her eyes grew round. "The Slayer! Who is she in 1880? Where is she?"

Spike smiled reassuringly. "Arpi Salahshourian. Armenian. Never came west of the Balkans as far as I know, so no fear." Spike thought he saw a flicker of amazement flash through Tara's eyes. "Back when I was chained up in Rupert's bathtub, I read the Watcher's Diaries when I got bored, which was a pretty constant state with me back then."

Tara smiled. "When should we go?"

"The day's half-spent. Thought we could rest up and feed you up. You've lost weight on this little junket."

"I needed to."

"Rot. You were and are gorgeous. Just don't want you getting sick and weakened. Last night, amazing though it was, was hardly what I'd call a good night's rest. I got the room for another night."

He cocked his head towards the door. "And there's the girl with your lunch." He got up and pulled his robe on before opening the door and taking a covered tray from the serving-girl. He tipped her and closed the door.

"What have we here? Meat pie, veg, and bara brith—the cook must be Welsh. Where do you want this? At the table, or would you like to picnic in bed?"

"I'll get up. I don't like crumbs in the sheets." She stood and stretched, pink and naked, then reached for her dressing gown. "Whoosh! It's cold in here."
Spike was transfixed. "Food first, filth later," he muttered.

"Hmm?" she queried, smiling in amusement. "I must not have satisfied you last night."

"Are you kidding? I'm dying for you. I've never wanted anyone so much in my unlife."

Tara changed the subject. "What about you? Are you going to let me take care of you?"

"Now, if you're talkin' about that blood thing again, I think we should wait until it's necessary. If and when it's bloody necessary! Which I hope it won't be. Not going to make that a habit."

Tara moved into his arms and nuzzled his neck. She didn't stop there; she nipped the base of his throat and sucked gently. "I think I can make you see reason. You need to eat, too."

Spike gasped. He reached for her and pulled her to him.

She breathed into his ear, "I can change your mind."

"You probably can," he admitted. He gently took her hands in his. "Later. Eat now."

Tara smiled and sat down to eat.

~~~

While Tara ate, she thought about what Spike had said about Angelus and Darla. Remembering their two previous encounters, she wanted only to stay as far away from them as possible. She looked at Spike, who was watching her intently, a small smile playing on his lips.

"What?" she asked. "You're embarrassing me."

"God, you're beautiful."

She rolled her eyes and started to make a moue of disbelief, but the look in his eyes warmed her to the core. Not wanting to get distracted, she lay down her napkin and said, "I've been thinking... I think we should leave tonight. Not stay for another day."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I love being here with you. But we're pretty well rested and with Angelus and Darla—we don't know where they are, or the coven. I just think it would be better if we left tonight."

"Westbury, then?"

"Yes. It won't take long to pack. We don't have much." She stood up.

"If that's what you want, love, that's what we'll do. Still have some time before we can leave, then. How about that making me see reason you hinted to earlier?" He gave her his best suggestive leer.

Tara felt her whole body blush. "There's always time for that."

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It didn't take them long to pack up and head out that afternoon. It was heavily overcast and light snow fell. Spike sat up top with Tara and drove. He couldn't get over how well she was holding up. Every time he glanced over at her, her smile grew dimples. He felt his unbeating heart swell with pride.
As the day wore on, he noticed uneasiness settle over her. "What is it, love?" Spike asked.

"How far is it to Stonehenge?"

"Miles back—we passed Amesbury this time yesterday. Think you were asleep. We've nearly crossed the Salisbury Plain. In Wiltshire, now."

"Right. Now I remember, dreaming... " She stopped abruptly, and then said, "Can't you feel it?" Her voice was hushed.

"What?"

"Ahead of us. Just out of sight, but it's like a magnet. I can feel its pull." She shivered. "Not in a bad way, just... powerful. Very powerful."

He smiled. "I've got a good feeling about this."

She was silent, her head sinking into her fur collar like a turtle pulling into its shell.

"What?" he prodded.

She said reluctantly, "I don't. I've got a bad feeling."

"What?" he said on a lowering note.

"I'm afraid of what's coming—afraid something's going to separate us."

"No!" Spike was firm. "I'll never let that happen, so don't worry. We'll get to the ladies, throw ourselves on their mercy, make 'em see reason." He spoke reassuringly. "Between you and me, love... well, you could charm the birdies out of the trees, and me, with my not-inconsiderable powers of persuasion, we'll hitch us a ride home."

He pulled her closer. "Back to the good ol' everyday evil of Sunny D. Got us a job to do. Nothing's gonna get in our way. We'll have each other." His voice faltered a bit. "Won't we? I'm not just...?"

He couldn't finish the sentence. Convenient. He felt like a ponce for asking, but he had to know.

"I need you," she whispered. To Spike's ears, it sounded like a confession.

"Nothing wrong with that. I'm not the kind that cuts and runs. I'll be with you as long as you'll have me."

Tara didn't answer, but slid even closer, and locked her arm around his waist. She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder.

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That afternoon the temperature rose slightly and the snow stopped as the day wore on into evening. A west wind blew away the clouds and a gibbous moon hung in the smoky sky. It was still cold enough to see Tara's breath and Spike felt her shiver. She hadn't eaten since noon, and though she was sitting practically on top of him, he gave off no warmth.

Spike felt her trembling, and for the hundredth time he cursed his lack of body warmth. "Here! You're freezing. Let's stop and build you a fire." Tara hugged herself as Spike reined to the left, pulling the team off the road near a small copse in a hollow. There was nowhere dry for her to sit, so he made a pile of saddles, padded it with saddle blankets, and sat her down. The wood he gathered was wet, and he couldn't get it to burn.
"Ignis incende," she muttered with chattering teeth. The wood crackled into a small blaze and she dragged her seat closer, savoring the warmth.

Spike circled their little camp, peering into the distance and smelling the wind. "Can't be too careful," he told her. Satisfied that they were alone, he joined her by the fire, hunkering down on one knee.

Spike rummaged in their food basket. "I saved the leftover meat pie, and there's still bread and cheese. Think you should eat, love."

She nodded and took the meat pie he offered. It was cold and unappetizing, and Spike knew that she made herself eat. Back in London, Tara had told him jokingly that Victorian food sounded better in novels than it actually tasted.

"You're a good sport, my girl. Get you home, take you to... what kind of restaurants do you like?"

She smiled slightly. "Vegetarian."

Spike guffawed. "Well, you really are trouper, then. Mutton, meat pie—Christ, I knew you didn't care for the cooking—who could?—but I didn't know you didn't eat meat."

"It's okay. Food is food, at this point." Her smile grew teasing. "I don't wear fur, either."

"Appearances to the contrary." He knelt in front of her and tucked her wrap more securely around her. "Got to keep you warm, since I can't." He grew a little distracted, smoothing the soft fur around her neck, stroking her throat. The small wounds he'd made were scabbed-over. He wanted to lick them.

She bent forward to kiss him. "You keep me plenty warm."

They kissed, gently but thoroughly. He groaned and pushed her away reluctantly. "Better not get me started, pet."

She pretended to pout. "Get me started, too."

Spike heated water in a little teakettle, brewed tea, and laced a cup with a hefty dollop of brandy. He handed Tara the cup. "Cheers."

Tara raised her cup. "Cheers."

~~~

They drove half the night, lulled by the rhythm of clop-clopping hooves and the creaking of the carriage. Spike felt Tara drowsing, leaning against him. He wasn't expecting the heavy bump and the loud crack that followed. The outside horse stumbled and screamed, and the carriage lurched. Tara was nearly pitched off her seat, but Spike jerked her back by her shoulder.

"Whoa!" he shouted, reining one-handed.

Spike first made sure Tara wouldn't fall. "Hang onto the handbrake, love." He climbed down. The left horse was down, whinnying in pain. It scrabbled in an attempt to get to its feet, and then fell back heavily. Spike ran his hands down the jerking leg, and shook his head in pity.

"Left leg's broken. Must've stepped in a pothole and fallen upon itself. Poor sod. Axle's broken, too." He sighed deeply. "Wish we still had the gun."

"Ohh," Tara made a wordless sound of sympathy for the horse. She climbed down to join them. "We
have the bread knife. It could be painless. I can help."

"Don't suppose you can do anything." It was a statement, not a question.

"I could, but healing takes time. It'll be light in a couple of hours. I suppose you could wait it out in the carriage, but—"

"Right. Here we are on the main road, passers-by might ask awkward questions. Well, 't'were best done quickly." He went for the basket with their kitchen paraphernalia, and withdrew the knife. "Do your bit, love."

"Can you unhitch the other? I'll lead him away in a bit, so he won't be upset."

Spike did as she asked, watching as Tara knelt by the suffering horse, stroking its neck and murmuring soft words in an unfamiliar language. The mare whinnied softly and stopped struggling. Spike cut the traces and the horse relaxed. Tara spoke the last words of the spell in a sorrowful voice. She looked up at him, tears glinting in her eyes. "You can do it now. She shouldn't feel it."

He looked grim. "I think you should take a short walk—gonna take you up on your old suggestion, take a bit of sustenance for myself. Might not have another chance soon. I feel kind of—I don't know. Private? Ashamed?"

She whisked away tears and said briskly, "Don't be. I would have reminded you if you hadn't brought it up. Do what you need to. I'll see what baggage we'll need." She led the gelding away.

Spike nodded and knelt by the injured mare. He cursed the necessity of this, but wanted to spare the animal pain, and Tara was so eager to offer him her blood. He wanted to spare her that again. There had to be a way to keep himself better fed without taking from her. There was a way, right in front of him.

The horse's breathing evened out and it seemed to sleep. Spike hoped it wouldn't struggle. He raised the mare's muzzle, laying the blade against the jugular, and sliced. "Thanks, old girl." The blade bit deeply. She didn't move, but her blood spurted out in a fountain, crimson even in the faint moonlight.
Spike drank until the flow ebbed with her slowing heartbeat.

She sighed and stopped breathing.

~~~

Tara walked the gelding around and to the rear of the carriage, out of sight of Spike and the mare. She wrapped the traces around the opposite back wheel. Scrubbing her eyes with the back of her fist, she opened the carriage door and started going through their things. Since they were nearing Westbury, they wouldn't need much in the way of gear, and they were down to one horse. That meant either riding double, or one of them would be walking.

A few minutes later, Spike appeared around the open carriage door. Tara was rummaging through their bags, and said, "Okay with you if I leave most of this? We don't need much—we're nearly there. What do you think, ride double?"

"Both of us and our stuff seem a bit much to ask of the poor beast. I think you should ride—"

"Remember, I can't ride sidesaddle."

"You can—I'll be leading you. You and the stuff up top. This is wearing you out—sleeping odd hours and bad food, and not enough of either. You need to keep up your strength. How far would you say it is?"

Tara closed her eyes and sent out feelers of perception. "A few miles? Not ten. Maybe five? Or less. Sorry, I can't be sure."

"So even on foot, we'll be there by dawn." Slipping into a fairly credible John Wayne voice, he said with fake heartiness, "Well, all right, baby sister, saddle up."

~~~

In spite of having ridden, Tara had only a sketchy idea of how to saddle a horse, so she went back to packing while Spike did the honors. As he lowered the sidesaddle onto the horse's back, the big gelding turned to look at him as if to say, "You have got to be kidding."

"I know, I know," Spike argued. "It's a big departure from what you're used to. Think of it as a mid-life crisis, like sports car menopause."

The horse snorted its disgust.

"You two having a nice conversation?" Tara's eyes were red but she was in her usual calm spirits. She had gotten them down to two bags tied by their handles, and she had distributed their weight to make a better-balanced load.

"Just telling it how much lighter you are than the carriage. Don't think the beast trusts me, though." He gave the girth a final cinch, muttering, "Don't blame him—I just killed his mate."

"Shh. He trusts you, I'm sure. You've got a point. I thought we'd leave the kitchen stuff and the other saddle, and maybe both ride? Us, one saddle, and the two bags I kept weigh about one tenth what he's used to pulling."

He scratched his earlobe dubiously. "Even less, but—"

She urged, "He's a big horse and I'm not at all sure of myself on that sidesaddle. I like being close to
you, anyway. Please?"

"He's not used to being ridden. He may not even be broken to saddle—"

"All the more reason for you to hang onto me. We'll make better time, too, than with you walking him."

Spike gave in. "All right. I sort of like hanging onto you, too." It didn't take long to swap the sidesaddle for the astride saddle. He slung the bags in front and walked the horse up and down a bit to get a feel for his willingness to carry a load rather than pull it. The gelding seemed to have gotten over its outraged sensibilities at wearing a saddle.

"Do we have everything?"

Tara nodded.

Spike grasped her waist and set her upon the big gelding, watching it narrowly for any signs of imminent bolting. The beast stood patiently while Tara held on with one hand and stroked its neck with the other. Spike caught her eye. "Listen, he makes any funny moves, slip off, but try to land soft. Bend your knees, roll when you land. Don't land stiff-legged, hear?"

"Spike, I'm fine. He's fine. Let's go."

He swung up behind her. "You comfortable?"

"Tolerably."

He patted her bottom. "Good thing it's not an American saddle. You'd get your Christmas goose early."

Tara snorted with laughter.

He settled her against his chest, arms about her, and she took the reins. "Giddy-up."

~~~

The next few hours passed without incident. The sky clouded up, hiding the moon, and the air was heavy with moisture. They changed positions, Tara riding pillion, as she couldn't see the moonless road as well as Spike could.

She could sense the coven's nearness, and told Spike when to turn. He spoke softly to her, but she wasn't really listening, so strong was the presence she felt up ahead.

"Westbury, huh?" Spike was saying. "Clever of them to avoid the obvious witchy West Country stereotype."

"Mmm?"

"Oh, you know... Misty, mythic, Devon an' Cornwall, gnomes an' faeries... The Hound of the Baskervilles. My dotty Dru loved the atmosphere. I know for a fact we weren't there in the honeymoon phase of our relationship, or I'd be twice as on edge as I have been. Right about now's when she introduced me to Angelus back in London, and wasn't he in a rare mood? Least, now I know why." He snorted sarcastically. "Always knew Angelus was all wet." He chuckled at his own wit.
Tara huddled into Spike's back and said, "I hope Mrs. Cobb's sons didn't come to harm letting him and Darla out of the well."

Feeling a nameless pull from up ahead, Tara had a hard time focusing on Spike's words. She felt certain a ceremony of some kind was being performed. The full moon, though nearly obscured by heavy clouds, seemed to throb with the vibrations resonating in her head. She shivered.

"My girl, you're cold."

"I'm all right. The air feels almost warm. You feel warmer, too." She hugged his waist.

"Just ate, remember. What is it?"

"We're very near."

As if on cue, a clap of thunder sounded, and it began to rain. Tara moaned.

Spike cursed dully, then muttered, "Here, let's get you to shelter." He leaned forward, clucking to the horse. It lumbered into a ragged trot. "We get there, I'll take some people apart if they don't pop you in a hot bath, an' wrap you up by the fire."

~~~

Spike struggled to keep the horse on track. Above the noise of the storm he heard Tara say, "That way."

Dashing the rain from his eyes, Spike reined the horse toward the left fork in the road that Tara indicated. The road was rough and slick with mud. They were going too fast. He could feel the horse scrambling for a foothold on the downward slope even before they went down. He shouted, "Jump!"

He managed to slide Tara off as the beast plowed forward, front feet skidding out from under him, and hindquarters crashing heavily to the ground. Spike pitched himself off to the right, rolling, spreading the impact, but effectively covering himself in mud by doing so. He bounced up and hurried back to Tara. She lay shivering in a heap of muddy velvet and sodden fur, unable to stand with the weight of her wet skirts. He helped her up and steadied her, as she shivered and tried to stand on her own.

There was no shelter but an oak copse. He led her there and leaned her up against the biggest tree. It was mostly leafless, but the huge old branches and the angle of the wind-driven rain made a patch of shelter on the lee side. He fetched the horse, uninjured despite its spill, and led him back to Tara. The panting horse gave off some heat.

There was nothing to say to make her feel better, so he merely asked, "How're you holding up?"

She was silent for a long moment, and by the way in which she spoke, Spike could tell she was freezing.

"I h-h-hate to say th-th-this—you shouldn't hate anyone—but I h-h-hate Willow right now. I h-h-hate her for bringing all this on us. Mrs. Cobb, and the poor dead h-horse, and oh, I h-h-hate to cry, I'm sorry I'm such a baby, but I h-h-hate all this." She clamped her jerking jaw shut and squeezed shut her eyes, but hot tears poured out. Spike held her and they huddled between the tree and the horse's flank.

When he spoke, it was calmly and without false sympathy. "How far is it?"
She couldn’t speak, her teeth were chattering so, so she only pointed with her chin. Wordlessly, Spike picked her up and carried her in the direction she indicated.

Over the rock-capped hill, a great swath of land rolled down to a sprawling stone farmhouse and outbuildings. "That it, you think?"

Still unable to speak, Tara nodded.

"Don't see any light in the big house. What say we hole up in the barn, rest a bit, warm up, find you something dry to wear, and make our entrance once the household is out of bed?"

Tara nodded again and laid her head against his chest.

The nearest outbuilding was a stone sheep shed containing several dozen sheep. Their warm bodies made the temperature inside about ten degrees warmer than outside, and there was a hayloft. Spike led the horse in and pulled down the baggage slung over its back. He'd unsaddle it after attending to his girl. He stripped Tara of her wet clothing and rubbed her with a dry cloth he found on a peg, rubbing hard to create heat with friction. He pulled her flannel nightgown out of the pigskin bag, whose contents were relatively dry, unlike the carpetbag's. Shivering and naked, she hurried into it. Spike hung up her wet clothing as best he could, on available pegs and nails on the supporting posts. He told her to stand back, and snapped the water from her furs. Damp or not, they'd have to do.

"Come on." He gestured at the ladder to the hayloft. Tara climbed before him, his hand on her bottom lest she fall.

"We're in luck," Spike said, gesturing toward a stack of empty grain sacks. He fluffed the hay and made her a bed, padded with sacks so the stalks wouldn't poke her. "Lie down." Shivering, she lay down and he covered her with sacks and more hay, and topped it all with the furs, damp side out. "If that doesn't do the trick, I'll find you the cleanest, warmest sheep I can." His mouth crooked ruefully. "That came our wrong."

He cocked his ear. "Or better yet..." He dropped lightly to the floor of the shed. "What have we here? Little one, tell me you don't have fleas."

Tara called down to him, "What is it?"

"Glinda, you like cats?"

"I'm a witch; I love cats." Her teeth had nearly stopped chattering.

"Well, here you go." He climbed up one-handed, carrying a small furry bundle with claws dug into his shirtfront. He deposited it in the opening Tara made in her nest, cooing a welcome to the cat. It was in clover. Clearly, it had found the warmest spot in the shed.

With Tara and the cat settled, Spike hopped down again, unsaddled the horse, moved some sheep and gave the horse part of their dinner. "You don't mind sharing, do you?"

Whistling *Talk To The Animals*, Spike looked down at his filthy hands and clothing. Not wanting to get into bed with Tara in his muddy state, he decided to take a "shower." He stripped and eased the door open. It was chilly outside and still raining. He dunked his head in a watering trough and sluiced water down his arms and chest. No lights in the main house. He judged dawn to be about an hour away.

Eager to get back to Tara, he slipped back into the shed, grateful for its warmth. The smell wasn't even too bad, and less so up in the loft. Tara called down to him, "I saved part of a bottle of brandy."
"That's my clever girl." Spike checked the carpetbag and sure enough, an unbroken bottle of brandy was on the bottom. Nothing dry to put on, though. Well, he'd try not to put his cold feet on his girl. "Here I come."

Chapter End Notes

Graphic by the fabulous KazzyCee!
Chapter 18

Spike climbed the hayloft ladder one handed, bottle and rag in the other hand. Tara was completely hidden under the pile of hay. He could hear her softly murmuring to the loudly buzzing little cat.

He uncorked the bottle and took a swig, then vigorously towed his hair with the rag and dried his damp skin as best he could. "I ought'n touch you, cold as you are. Had me a bathe outside -- I'll only make you colder."

"That's all the more reason for you to get into bed."

He cautiously parted the hay, grain sacks, and damp furs. "I'll try not to get next to you. Don't want to make you colder."

"No, get right next to me," she insisted.

She lay in a crescent, the cat pressed up against her in the half circle of her breasts, belly and thighs. They made a little patch of warmth in the chilly barn. Spike crawled in facing her, and settled the makeshift bedding around them. The cat curled in the little no-man's land between them. It pressed closer to Tara's belly.

"He's no fool," Spike sighed.

"You know what would warm me up?" Tara reached for the back of Spike's head, pulling him into a kiss. They kissed gently, but the temperature rose palpably.

Reluctantly, Spike pulled back. "You want a little nip? Warm you up."

"I'll have a sip, but you know it doesn't really warm you up," she said practically. "You're not supposed to give it to people with hypothermia. It makes it worse." She took a small sip from the bottle of brandy and handed it back to him.

"Christ, Tara," Spike said, setting the bottle behind him. "I was 'bout halfway out of my mind with worry. You better now?"

"Yes. You can touch me and everything."

He ran his hand down her arm to her hand and picked it up. "How do my hands feel? Chilly?"

"A little, but don't stop."

"You sore?"

"Truth? I can barely sit down."

"Wasn't talkin' about ridin'."

"Neither was I."

He laughed low in his throat. "Then it's a good thing you're lyin' down. I should kiss it and make it better. Pretty little flower. You know, vampire saliva works a treat on wounds. Remember your burn?" He pulled her hand up to his lips and kissed it. "All better now, right?" He sucked her
fingers into his cool mouth.

"Mmmmm..."

~~~

Tara had been feeling a cold coming on for more than a day. She was getting sick but ignored it, concentrating on seducing Spike. Tired and sore, she knew he would let her sleep unmolested, but couldn't she molest him? All that talk about making her cold -- those frustrating touches through her flannel nightgown. One kiss, not counting the kiss on her hand. Didn't he know she made enough heat for both of them?

She felt him work his way down her body, caressing her through the soft worn flannel, moving cautiously so as not to uncover her. Much. "Poor pussy," he said, pushing the little cat out of the way. And then, and then, oh, there!

"Ohmygodthat'sso--"

He raised his mouth abruptly. "So cold?" He sounded stricken.

"--so... exquisite." She pressed the back of his head with her hands, lowering his cool mouth back to its delicious task.

~~~

Later, Spike chuckled.

"What?"

"Just thought of something -- not too flattering, but--"

"Tell me."

"It's not nice."

"Tell me," she said in a mock-threatening tone.

"Well, when Lenny Bruce met the girl he was goin' to marry, he said she was the perfect composite of the Virgin Mary and a $500-a-night... lady of the evening. Sorry. I said it wasn't flattering."

Tara smiled smugly. "Not flattering? To be called a combination of the carnal and the divine? I think that's pretty flattering."

"So you don't mind if I say you're the absolute love of my life and the most glorious fu--"

She pounced on his mouth.

~~~

Afterwards, he spoke with compunction. "Are you sure I'm not too much for you?"

"I always think you'll go a little too far, but you never do. I sort of want you to."

"I always hold back. I don't want to hurt you."

"I know, but the possibility that you might is kind of exciting. I keep hoping you will."
Spike stared at her, appalled. "Well, keep on hoping."

She chuckled. "It sounds sort of incompatible, but it's really not."

She raised up on her knees, glowing with warmth, swaying and brushing his belly with her rose-tipped nipples. "Tell me what you like."

Spike shivered in anticipation. "I like you. You don't have to -- I don't think you'll like it, and I want you to like everything."

"Oh, but I do. Tell me," she coaxed.

"I didn't think you'd be like this."

"Like what?"

His only answer was a gasp and a groan.

~~~

Tara pillowed her cheek against Spike's thigh and murmured sleepily, "You know I don't really hate Willow. Not anymore. She brought us together."

Spike forbore to touch Tara any more, and let her drift into sated slumber. Dawn had broken, but the pale winter sun was hidden behind heavy clouds. The hayloft was dimly lit by what little light seeped in through cracks in the eaves. The only sounds were Tara's breathing and soft sounds of the animals below. He furrowed his brow, hearing congestion in Tara's lungs. He must take better care of her.

That's when he heard footsteps in the yard just outside the shed. The door opened and an arm holding an oil lamp was thrust inside.

Soundlessly, Spike moved to the opening at the top of the ladder and watched while a smallish dark-haired man entered the barn, followed by several young girls.

"What have we here?" the man said, looking at the big bay horse calmly eating hay out of the sheep's manger. "You were right, my darling," he said to a young dark-haired girl behind him. "There was a visitor... or perhaps...?" He looked up at the opening at the top of the ladder, and Spike made a little salute of acknowledgment.

"Oh." The man sounded surprised, disappointment on his handsome features. "I thought that a new girl might be here... That is, usually our new arrivals announce themselves by... 'calling cards,' or rather... they make themselves known... We know them by their..." he trailed off, looking discomfited. "We've never had a gentleman arrive like this. Unless...?" He brightened. "You would not happen to be traveling with a young lady...?"

"Right you are. William Southwood, at your service. I'm traveling with my wife."

"We've never had a couple come--"

Tara made a strangled noise that sounded suspiciously like a stifled giggle.

Spike grinned and whispered in an aside, "Are we twelve?"

She whispered back, "Sorry -- I'm punchy." She sat up and started to dress.
"Allow me to introduce myself," the man continued. "I am Charles Maxwell. This is the Westcott Select Academy for Young Ladies. If your wife is not to be a student here -- and there are no married girls -- then I must ask you your business."

Spike gave the man a sharp look. "'Calling cards,' eh? How do you know your new girls have arrived? Let's not beat around the bush, Mr. Maxwell. Is this the coven or isn't it?"

Maxwell smiled faintly. "A plain-spoken man. That's a fair question. Although it is not I who discerned a new girl was here." He pulled the dark-haired girl into the circle of his arm. "My daughter Penelope here, told me that she sensed a new arrival. Someone with certain gifts, like hers, who felt us and was compelled to seek us out. It is ever thus."

Tara finished buttoning up her nightdress before joining Spike at the top of the ladder to the hayloft. "Hello. I'm Tara Maclay--" Spike poked her in the ribs "--Southwood."

"You're American." He seemed more surprised at that than at the previous circuitous talk of the paranormal.

"Yes. I sensed you. That's how we found you, but we're not here because I want to join. We're in trouble and need your help." Her voice broke up and she sneezed several times in quick succession.

Spike spoke with impatience, "All this is very nice, but I've got my wife here bedded down on the hay like baby Jesus. Didn't exactly expect the welcome mat, but it'd be nice if you asked us in and let her warm up."

Tara whispered, "Is that your 'not-inconsiderable charm'?"

He muttered, "Sorry."

"I'm forgetting my manners," Maxwell said. "Yes, do come into the house. But I must ask you to cover your deshabille, Mr. Southwood. There are impressionable young girls here."

"Hand the cloak on up, then. My clothes are soaked and my wife doesn't have a dry stitch to put on, either. Had an accident in the storm last night." Spike reached down for the cloak, revealing an expanse of marble-white chest and causing the girls to titter and drop their eyes.

"Girls, go get blankets and tell Aunt Eliza to heat water for a bath," Maxwell ordered. He cast an irritated glance after them as they fled, giggling madly.

"Your hand is like ice, man," Maxwell observed.

"Cold doesn't bother me much, although I prefer to be warm. I'm afraid my wife is going to take ill, though."

Spike wrapped up in the cloak and climbed down, and put on his muddy trousers and shoes. Tara climbed down, with Maxwell averting his eyes from Tara's legs. Spike plucked her off the ladder before she touched the ground. "Your shoes and stockings are soaked. Let me carry you." He could hear bubbling in her breathing and feel her fever.

The daughter of the house returned with several blankets. Spike tucked one around Tara's shoulders while the girl, Penelope, wrapped one around Tara's legs and feet.

Tara pulled the hood of Spike's cloak over his head, and arranged folds of her blanket over his hands. He smiled his thanks.
Halfway across the yard between outbuildings and the house, a spaniel bounded toward them and growled at Spike.

"Down, Maida!" Maxwell looked alarmed. "I'm sorry -- she usually fawns over strangers."

Spike locked eyes with the furiously barking dog and, unseen by the Maxwells, let flash a gleam of feral gold. The dog dropped to its belly and whined cravenly. Spike crooned, "Nice doggie."

Mr. Maxwell held the door for his guests, and Spike was glad that the invitation had been issued in the shed. He carried Tara into the kitchen feet-first. The woman of the house said, "Give her to me," and took Tara out of his arms. No mean feat; Tara was a big girl, but so was their hostess. She was an imposing woman, stern and scrubbed, with her hair hidden beneath a linen cap. She gave Spike one penetrating look, and carried Tara off to the bathroom.

"Your wife?" asked Spike.

Maxwell said, "I'm sorry; I didn't introduce you. My wife's sister, Miss Harkness. Come. Let us go into the parlor and I'll pour a drop of something to warm you up."

~~~

Tara felt deep relief being carried off and not having to set her jaw and keep on.

The woman sat her upon a bench and turned to test the bath water. Satisfied, she threw in several handfuls of herbs from a nearby bowl, and turned to Tara. "I'm Eliza Harkness. You feel well enough to talk?"

Tara nodded, but her words sounded breathy and ragged. "A bit. I'm Tara. Hello."

"That's some pet wolf you've got there. Vampire, isn't it?"

Tara's eyes grew round. She began, "He's got a soul--"

The woman cut in, "Oh, yes, I can see he's tamed, but he'd kill for you. We'd best do as you say, eh?" Her voice had a teasing tone that belied the underlying grimness.

"We don't... We need help. There's no-one else; I can't explain. We aren't going to ask for anything that's so--" She began to cough helplessly.

With a flicker of sympathy, the woman said, "It's all right, dearie. Don't try to talk now."

~~~

Miss Harkness unbuttoned the top of Tara's nightgown and pulled it over her head, noting in passing the half-healed puncture wounds on the white column of her throat. She shook her head and helped Tara into the bath. The pungent smell of herbs filled the steamy air. Tara moaned and slid down until only her nose and eyes were out of the water.

Miss Harkness shook her head. "There's a fox in the henhouse."

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The heat penetrated Tara's aching bones. If only time would stop, and she could remain suspended in blissful warmth, like an unborn child. Miss Harkness let Tara soak and disappeared into the kitchen.

~~~
Later, bathed, dressed in a clean nightgown, padded robe, and several shawls, Tara was ensconced near the kitchen stove, her feet in a bucket of steaming water. While tea was brewing, Miss Harkness placed a bowl of steeped herbs on the table and directed Tara to come sit down. Tara bent over the bowl, breathing the medicinal vapors. Miss Harkness draped a towel over the back of Tara's head, trapping the steam.

Spike appeared at the kitchen door. He had washed and was wearing dry clothing borrowed from Mr. Maxwell. "Miss Harkness, I haven't had the pleasure of your acquaintance. I am William Southwood."

Miss Harkness merely sniffed.

Spike continued steadily, "How is your patient?"

She stood between Tara and Spike and seemed reluctant to budge. Finally, she moved to one side, muttering inaudibly.

Instead of approaching, he backed away and sat in the seat by the stove that Tara had vacated. His face bore a look of resignation. "You're an intelligent woman. I could give you a lot of flowery talk but I think you're not the sort who cares for it."

She gripped her hands. "That I am not."

"Where Mrs. Southwood and I come from, a certain witch of our acquaintance could enter our minds. It was done mostly for communication at a distance, but I believe that she could read our thoughts as well. Like you, she was very powerful. I must say I didn't care much for it -- too invasive, but perhaps taking a look 'round what I keep in my head might convince you of what my words cannot."

She said obliquely, "You should not have been invited here. Maxwell is a trusting fool."

"Perhaps, but I swear that you are in no danger, nor is she." He nodded toward Tara, who lifted her head from her steam bath and looked on with bleary eyes and hectic spots of color in her cheeks.

Spike said simply, "I invite you to."

Miss Harkness curled her lip. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Are you afraid of what you might find in here?" He tapped his temple.

She approached cautiously. "I can burn you up where you sit."

"I'm sure," Spike said silkily.

She locked eyes with him and stiffened. A kaleidoscope of images whirled through her mind, and she forced her breathing to slow, and began to pick and choose -- not only what Spike would have her see, but what she would see. It was as if he had proffered an art portfolio, the best drawings on the first pages, but the faulty, badly drawn, earlier images not hidden either. Their obscenity was not a current representation of the man he had become. She riffled back through the images, leafing back to the man, then forward to the vampire, and then further to the souled vampire. She stopped at the spring of 2003.

She gasped. "You died to save the world?"

A whistling exhalation and a thump from behind her caused both Spike and Miss Harkness to start.
"If this is some fancy trick..." Miss Harkness began acidly. She and Spike were manhandling Tara up to bed. Mr. Maxwell had wanted to put them in an east-facing room with a view of the moorland, but his sister-in-law moved their meager belongings to a room facing north. Spike took this as a good sign. At least, she was past wanting to set him on fire.

Spike sputtered, "I don't control what's in there! My thoughts are ungovernable. Always have been. If that little stroll down Memory Lane didn't convince you--" He broke off. "You've talked with my wife. Do you honestly believe she'd be with me if she had any doubts?" he asked, indicating the recumbent Tara.

"It's plain she's in your power. I've seen the bite on her."

"I know it looks bad, but it's not what you--"

Tara wheezed, "Stop it, both of you. Spike, don't leave. Don't let her get you alone."

"'Spike'?" Miss Harkness sneered.

"It's a pet name--" He was defensive; she ignored him.

She went on, "Girl, you're not in possession of your senses. Good-looking gentleman with the sweet talk -- you're not the first to be seduced by--"

"I'm sick, not stupid. Or bad! You don't know me. You don't know him. He's protected me and others, I can't begin to tell you--" and she was overcome with heavy phlegmy-sounding coughs.

Miss Harkness backed down. "All right, dearie. I'll give it a rest. Actions speak louder than words. Rest now." She fixed Spike with a withering stare. "And you behave!"

---

Mid-morning, two carriages pulled up to the front door and disgorged more than a dozen sleepy girls and the mistress of the house. Maxwell held the door, greeted the girls, kissing one of them -- a taller version of Penelope, and embraced his wife. She was a full head taller than he.

He helped her off with her wraps. "How was the ceremony?"

She sighed. "Productive. Tiring." She smiled faintly. "I think we have a new girl, do we not? I sensed a new arrival."

"Oh, yes, indeed. And her husband."

"Really!"

"I found them in the stable, like Mary and Joseph. She's taken ill with cold and damp, poor girl. He's quite the interesting character. A Londoner, but something is odd. I don't think he and Eliza quite like each other. I've seen them circling one another like a pair of sparring cocks."

"Hm. I'll be interested to hear her views. I'd like to meet them before I retire. I took a chill of my own."

He steered her toward the drawing room. "I built up the fire. Go warm up. Eliza will bring your
tea. Let me see to the bags."

~~~

At Mrs. Maxwell's soft tap, Spike opened the door. Tara was awake but her breathing was labored. Mrs. Maxwell leaned over the bed and said, "I am Ann Maxwell. How are you, my dear? No, don't talk. How silly of me to ask. We will take good care of you."

She turned to Spike. His eyes were half-wild with worry, but he spoke with courtesy. "We're in your debt. We've come a long way to see you, longer than I can tell you. I hope you can help us."

"Help you? It is she who I'm concerned with right now. Mr. Southwood, I don't know if you're a believer or not--"

"I'm afraid I am not a Christian."

"--neither am I, strictly speaking, but I was about to say, my girls and I will do all that is in our power to help her." She nodded briskly and left them.

~~~

Ann sighed imperceptibly. She had so wanted a rest but now it appeared they must convene again. At the foot of the stairs, she called, "Girls! Eliza! Meet in the grove in one hour."

~~~

It had been a busy and fruitful weekend, culminating in the healing rite in the oak grove near the big house. Ann had every expectation that Tara would be better shortly.

She and Charles retired early that evening, sharing supper on a tray in their room.

Charles asked, "What do you make of their story? Their horse bears a brand from Scotland Yard."

She brushed her long fair hair. "I've heard very little of it. Tomorrow is soon enough. There's something very right about them. Something is off, though. About him in particular. Not only that - I don't believe that they're married. She wears that big gaud, but no wedding band."

"Does it bother you?" He liked to watch her brush her hair.

"Their anticipating the wedding night? No. How could it?" Their eyes met in the glass and held with a brief intensity, like a kiss. "We didn't wait."

He laid his hand on his breast in an affectation of outraged modesty. "'Miss Harkness'!"

"Oh, stop it and come to bed."

~~~

Spike and Tara also made an early evening of it, and Tara felt well enough to sit up and eat soup.

Spike asked, "What do you think of them?"

"They're nice. He's handsome."

"For a little fellow." Spike shrugged. "But I don't like a big fellow looking down at me. Hated the poof lookin' down his nose at me all of the time."
Tara lifted an eyebrow, observing Spike sitting there in Maxwell's clothes, which were a pretty good fit. He and Maxwell were nearly the same size. Her eyes crinkled with amused affection.

"They're an odd couple," he continued.

"Not very well matched in size," she agreed.

"Not just that. Class, temperament, religion. Wonder what they get out of it."

"It's a love match."
Before they went to sleep, Tara tried to worm out of Spike what Miss Harkness's provocative words meant.

"What was that Miss Harkness said to you before I fainted?"

"Not getting started, petal—you're sick still. Don't need to worry you with what-may-be's. Hellmouth, remember? You're no stranger to the weird. It's them," he indicated with a jerk of his chin, "downstairs, that need convincin'. Wish that little look-'round in my head convinced the main battle-axe."

"She's not a battle-axe. Mrs. Maxwell is. Not a battle-axe; the main one. Please don't mix me up."

"I think she and her husband hold the purse strings, but Harkness is the brains of the outfit."

"You think?" Tara was briefly distracted from her original question, but only briefly. "Back to that 'died to save the world' thing?"

"Don't worry, sweetness. It's not me. It's 'me-who-was'. You see me putting on fancy jewelry, recitin', 'Hail, Slayer, we who are about to die salute you,' then you can worry."

"Huh?"

"Sleep now, yeah? Not getting' into it right now."

Tara decided to table it. "Come lay by me? I'm still all hot and fever-y. Keep me cool."

"Yeah, well, you'd better sleep. Not takin' any more strenuous exercise." He spooned up to her back and held her close.

She snuggled back and sighed happily. "You're nice and cool."

"Go to sleep, baby."

~~~

As soon as the house was a-stir, Spike rose and dressed in his borrowed clothes. The household was assembling in the dining room and he was introduced to a dizzying array of young witches. His head swam with trying to remember names. Young Penelope Maxwell, the only one he could recall, introduced the elder girls, who had been away at the witchy ceremony when he and Tara had arrived. He was put in mind of the houseful of potential slayers at the Summers' house, but in ruffles and crinolines. The thought amused him.

"Mr. Southwood, I don't believe you've met my sister, Miss Deborah Maxwell."

"I've not yet had the pleasure, but I'm very glad to make her acquaintance." The elder Maxwell sister inclined her head coolly.

Must have been talking to Harkness, he thought.

Penelope frowned at her sister, and went on to say, "And of course you remember Miss Jane Brumwell, who was with us when we found you in the barn."
"How could I forget?" he said, smiling archly. The young girl blushed speechlessly, apparently lacking Penelope's self-possession, overcome with embarrassment at the remembrance of the view of his naked chest the previous morning.

Penelope led Spike to the next young lady. "This is Mademoiselle Mireille LaPensee." The plain young girl curtsied.

Spike bowed over her hand. "Enchanté, Mademoiselle."

Penelope continued, "And this is Miss Costanza Mital. She has traveled the farthest to come here. All the way from Bohemia!"

Spike noted masses of light brown hair and exothalmic eyes. "How do you do, Miss?"

"As long as I'm introducing the foreign ladies, there is Signorina Maria Conte, from Florence," indicating a dark young lady. They bowed to one another.

"And there is another Maria, our baroness, Maria von Einem!" He was presented to a languishing brunette.

Spike clicked his heels and bowed to her. "Guten Tag, Baronesse." She inclined her head.

"And these are Charlotte Colquitt, Florence Kirkham, Georgette Kirkham, and Maud Spottiswode, all of whom are all local girls."

"Ladies. Charmed, I'm sure."

"The rest of the ladies are English too, but not from here. Alice Cohen, Mary Ellen Brumwell, and Victoria Heaton."

"How do you do?" they said to one another.

With the exception of the elder Miss Maxwell, the girls were charmed by him. In the largely manless confines of the "Select Academy," he was a prize. They fluttered around him like hummingbirds to nectar.

Enjoying the role of hostess, Penelope said, "Do you know how I knew you were here?" She had slippery dark hair and a fey manner. Spike was uncomfortably reminded of Drusilla, or rather, what Drusilla might have been had Angelus not gotten a hold of her.

"I'm afraid to ask," he admitted. He feared it might be the powerful--heat--he and Tara had generated in the barn.

"Well, I am not so very good at this. Divining, or sometimes scrying I mean."

"Why don't you say what it is you do mean?" Her sister Deborah spoke witheringly.

Penelope frowned at her sister and raised her eyebrows very high. She turned to Spike and spoke with charming intensity. "You listen with your heart." Undaunted by her sister, she went on artlessly, "It's as though you were speaking! Quite loudly, you and Mrs. Southwood. But I understood very little of it." Her brow wrinkled in puzzlement.

Spike smiled in relief.

Penelope continued, "How is she today? Is she better? But of course she is," she answered for him. "We saw to that." She smiled sweetly.
Spike smiled gently at her. "Yes. She was better yesterday after you and the others did...what it is you do. Her breathing sounds much better and I do not think she will even be confined to bed much longer." He looked around the table. "Thank you. Thank you all."

Miss Harkness gave a nearly inaudible sniff.

Tara appeared at the doorway. Spike leaped to his feet. He closed the distance between them with the vampiric speed he usually took care not to display. He wanted to take her in his arms, and had to remind himself about unseemly displays of affection, even between married couples.

He satisfied himself by taking her hands. "Should you be out of bed?"

"Listen." Her hands in his, she gestured with her chin toward her chest.

"Your hands feel cooler." He inclined his head to her chest and did not hear the bubbling in her breathing that so alarmed him yesterday.

She smiled. "Clear. No water-pipe sound."

"What would my good girl know about that?"

"Oh, you know, college girl, experimentation." She smiled impishly, and then smiled greetings to the group at large.

Spike led her to the table, pulled out his chair, and helped her to sit. He realized that they would have to avoid anachronistic conversation while here. On second thought, he realized that they could have whole conversations that would be virtually in code as far as the Victorians were concerned. He filed that tidbit away for future reference.

The elder Maxwells appeared, greeted the gathering at large, and Charles held Ann's chair for her. "Mr. Southwood, please sit to my right," Ann directed. Spike moved with alacrity to the place of honor.

Charles Maxwell said, "Mrs. Southwood, would you please do me the honor of sitting by me?" He pulled out the chair to the right of his at the head of the table, and helped her to sit.

There were no servants. Spike commented on this, and Miss Harkness interjected, "We all work here."

Spike said diplomatically, "Very democratic."

Apparently, it was Charlotte and Florence's turn to serve, and they got up to do so. But first Ann said, "Penelope, will you give the blessing?"

Penelope straightened and recited,

"For the seeds that grew them,
For the cows that gave the milk,
For the chickens that laid the eggs,
For the lives of the animals whose bodies will nourish ours,
For those who planted and tended,
For the wind, the sun, the rain, and the earth that nourished them,
For those who harvested, milked, gathered, and slaughtered,
For those who carried, prepared and delivered,"
They all spoke in unison, "I thank you, Lord and Lady."

"Thank you, dear," said Ann. "Did you introduce our guests to the young ladies?"

"Only Mr. Southwood. Mrs. Southwood arrived only a moment ago."

Ann repeated the introductions of the girls for Tara's benefit, and then her eyes met Charles' across the table, and she began, "Mr. and Mrs. Southwood, I realize you must have many questions about us, just as we have about you. Charles, why don't you give them the 'official' explanation?"

"Certainly. As I began to say yesterday morning, this is a school for young ladies. Girls feel a 'pull,' and metaphysical contact is made. The girls aren't precisely recruited, but they are extended an opportunity to attend. In most cases, they are grateful to learn that what they only suspected might be real is in fact real. They come and learn, and usually stay and teach. The older ladies have, in some cases, married and live nearby. That is the official story. But as you said in your--forgive me--disarmingly blunt way, it is a coven."

Ann smiled faintly. "Thank you, Charles. Mr. Southwood, to the community at large, we are a simple ladies academy, but we are in the business of healing and balancing. We are removed from the world at large, but work to create order and balance in that world. Our tools are love, beauty, and creative power. I am honest with you because you mentioned needing our help. It is possible that we can help you but first we need to know a little more about you. After breakfast, I think it would be well if my husband takes you into the library to speak with you alone, while my sister and I talk to Mrs. Southwood. It is not that we wish to compare your stories, but it may go more quickly if we interview you separately."

Spike knew that it was precisely that they wanted to compare stories that she wanted them interviewed separately. "I agree completely," he lied easily.

~~~

Spike watched Charles set up the chessmen.

"What do you do if a young girl isn't cut out for this? If she doesn't make the grade?"

Charles pursed his lips drollly. "Well, it is a 'select' academy. If they don't pass muster, we don't 'select' 'em!" He chuckled, and sobering after a moment said, "It is not I who makes the final decision. That is for my wife and Miss Harkness to do. The organization is matriarchal."

"I notice that there are no young gentlemen here. I realize that co-educational schools are a rarity here, but you are not a member here, or are you?"

"I? I just supply the funds. Many of the girls cannot pay--not that that makes the slightest bit of difference...I'm very happy to serve. My wife, the girls...it's a good thing when a person discovers the role he is best fitted to play in life, and plays it. I am a financier, if you were wondering, and part-time gentleman farmer."

"I am very happy for you--you seem very happily placed."

Charles smiled his thanks, then returned to Spike's question. "I am told that there are males who are practitioners of the craft--even adepts--but the power tends to have a corrupting effect on our sex, and they are not the sort that you want to meet."

"Oh, yes," Spike said fervently, remembering Rack.
"But let's talk about you." Charles eyes were expectant.

Spike took a deep, unneeded breath. Where to begin? "Do you believe a man can be reformed?"

"That I do. I did not like at all the path I was on before I met my Ann. All I am today I owe to her."

"I'm glad you and your wife were honest about the unusual nature of your organization, because you and she will not be so unwilling to believe several unbelievable things I have to tell you."

Charles said gently, "I'm like the Red Queen--I practice believing six impossible things before breakfast each day. Why don't you just begin at the beginning?"

Spike smiled grimly and began, "'Six impossible things'--okay, here goes. One hundred and twenty five years ago I died and was reborn as a vampire..."

~~~

In the dining room, Tara was having no easier a time of it. The girls had been dismissed and she, Mrs. Maxwell, and Miss Harkness lingered over their breakfast tea, while Tara tried to give them a coherent account of her and Spike's presence in 1880.

She was shy about explaining her relationship with Willow, but the story made no sense without telling it. "She wanted me back. I died and she played God. Again. This was her pattern. I died in 2002 and was supposed to be gone, but she talked Spike--William--Mr. Southwood--you may as well know his name is Spike--she talked him into going back in time--"

Mrs. Maxwell and Miss Harkness were unsurprised by the nature of her relationship with Willow, but the mention of time travel made them both sputter.

"Really!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes. She was that powerful. She had tremendous power that she used for good purposes, mostly, but she could also be incredibly selfish. She'd used me and hurt me more than once." She closed her eyes briefly at the still-painful memory. "We lived in a part of America that contained a Hellmouth. Are you familiar with the term?"

Ann said, "The one in the Middle West or the one on the Pacific coast?"

Tara smiled slightly. "The one on the Pacific coast, Sunnydale. I'm glad I don't need to explain that. Every spring, things would 'heat up', and our latest enemy was a trio of evil young men, humans, I'm sorry to say, and when the latest scheme of theirs went awry, they came after the Slayer with a gun. I was shot by accident. Now, here's where it gets iffy, because it's at this point, I have no memory of what happened. My personal timeline stopped there. Spike tells me that I died and Willow went insane with grief. I have no knowledge of that, but he's never lied to me."

"That you know of," put in Miss Harkness.

Tara flared, "I don't know why you dislike him so. You had a look inside his mind--surely you must see the progress he's made. He's a very good man--"

"And you're very much in love with him, are you not?" Ann asked gently.

"That doesn't mean that he hasn't changed. What Miss Harkness saw was the future. No wonder it's
believable--just the changes in my own short lifetime are mind-boggling. No wonder she doesn't believe it, but really...you must. We don't have anyone else to turn to." Her voice trailed off to a whisper. Tara hated to cry but she started tearing up. She was still weak from her illness and not making the best presentation of their case. She hung her head in defeat, expecting the final blow--the word No. No, we can't help you.

Ann and Eliza's eyes met, and they appeared to communicate wordlessly.

Ann said, "Dear, don't trouble yourself. No decision about what is to be done about you will be made hastily, or I daresay, not in your best interest. Please trust us."
Still crying, Tara left to find a handkerchief. Mrs. Maxwell and Miss Harkness waited until she had left the room, before Miss Harkness said, "I'll be very interested to hear your husband's take on the case. Better him than you. That vampire is too charming by half. I only hope he didn't charm Charles as well."

"Eliza, will you share with me what you saw?"

"I've tried to show you how to do it yourself."

"You know I'm not as powerful as you are. You really should be the one--"

Miss Harkness interrupted, "That would never do. I could not afford to keep this place up."

"We are very grateful to you, Eliza," Ann said gently. "While I don't have your gifts, I freely acknowledge that this place would not be what it is without you. Please show me what you saw."

Grudgingly, Miss Harkness turned her chair towards her sister's, and took her hands. Ann was treated to a generous sampling of her sister's look into Spike's lurid past, skimming over the more recent, reformed person he had become. After one particularly bloodthirsty vignette, Ann flinched.

"Eliza. Please."

"Oh, very well," Miss Harkness grumped.

The "stereopticon show" became more balanced, and Ann noted with interest that some kind of device surgically inserted into William's, or rather, Spike's head, forced him into a sort of...conditioning. Like training a dog or schooling a horse. His alliance with the band of do-gooders had begun. What began as unwilling cooperation grew to be willing participation.

True, his bloodthirsty side enjoyed the venting that their need for occasional mayhem required of him, but she could see that Spike was a man very like her own Charles, an uxorious sort who wanted to serve a greater good purpose. She could see Spike had it in him to be a slave to a woman. The right woman.

His growth as a person, his love of the Slayer--poor soul!--and his devotion to the Slayer's sister during her absence, his continuing to fight for the cause of right, all contributed to his evolution as a man.

She flinched again at the final, ugly break with the Slayer, and the trials required of him in the getting of his soul. As far as she knew, he was unique in all the world. She wept for him, re-experiencing his madness, and watched his last year as the Slayer's right-hand man. With emotion too deep for tears, she watched him sacrifice himself in the closing of the Hellmouth. Why, he had done more single-handedly than she and her band of witches had done for several generations!

Ann watched his startling resurrection in the huge, modern city south of the Hellmouth, his alliance with another band of do-gooders (and another souled vampire--fancy that!) the last cataclysmic battle, the fallen comrades... Then a breathing space, a little peace, and the proposal by the redhead witch. Ann could immediately see what Spike was too inexperienced to see--that what the woman asked of him was contrary to the laws of nature; indeed, Ann could feel the wrongness radiating off
the young witch. She watched the man who had next to no experience saying 'no' to women, allow himself to be inveigled in the witch's ill-conceived plan to pluck her fallen lover out of the past.

Then the tragic misapprehension, the lack of time to explain, the spell gone awry, and that last terrible bolt of unimaginable power that shot the couple back in time, more than a hundred years.

Ann straightened her back. If that were Spike and Tara's request, to send them back to their own time, then she and her girls had their work cut out for them.

Feeling Eliza start to pull away, Ann held her hands fast, and said, "No, dear. Let me see all of it."

She could feel Eliza's deep dislike of the vampire, and filtered through that dislike, experienced secondhand Spike's growing regard for his charge, his protecting her in London and on their journey, their growing attraction to one another, her rapturous submission to him and his to her, and his rose-colored regard for her. Ann acknowledged that Mrs. Southwood was a lovely young woman, but in Spike's estimation, she was Helen of Troy.

In Miss Harkness', too.

Oh, dear. This, then, was the source of her sister's antipathy for the vampire.

~~~

The look on Eliza Harkness's face was not exactly that of a cornered rat. She was too good a woman to feel ashamed of anything she had done, for indeed she had done nothing wrong, and she was too proud to defend her feelings. With one abrupt gesture she severed the link with her sister, and forestalling any questions, she swept from the room.

~~~

After Spike finished his tale, Charles shook his head. "I'd be tempted to disbelieve some or all of this, but I could tell you stories of my own... Some of the foes my girls have gone up against...their influence of world events...and when I learned that Platonic forms were real...!"

Spike shrugged. "Well, there are a couple of things. We're not married, and the horse is stolen."

Charles said easily, "Oh, that. Ann noticed right off that Mrs. Southwood doesn't wear a wedding band. And I saw that your horse bears a brand from Scotland Yard. Don't trouble yourself."

Spike looked unhappy. "I am troubled. Just as 'there is no giving in marriage in heaven,' neither is there among the undead. Wish it weren't so." He sighed.

"Perhaps the coven can help. There's 'handfasting--'" Charles began.

Spike interrupted, "I want her to have all that a young woman should have. I want to give her the world, and all I've got is...me. Pity." Bitterness twisted his features, and then he went on in his usual tone. "That's about it. I'll tell you more as it occurs to me."

"Mr. Southwood, don't discount yourself. I've seen the way she looks at you. You're very well suited."

Spike smiled faintly. "Please. Call me Spike. Or William, if you prefer."

"Very well. 'Spike,'" he said experimentally. "And I thank you for an extremely interesting tale. Is there anything I can do for you?"
Spike stroked his chin and looked thoughtful. "Well, I could use some blood."

There was a long pause while Charles looked completely nonplussed, then slightly panicked.

Spike guffawed. "I didn't mean yours, man!"

"Oh. Oh, I see. I didn't understand." Charles closed his mouth and remembered to breathe.

"Animal blood, Charles. Pig, sheep, cow. I ate the other horse. Wasn't talkin' about your heart's blood."

Charles actually blushed. "I've never known a vampire socially."

"Charles, you're a brick."

~~~

Ann thought wistfully of the early chapters of her own love affair with Charles. She was reminded of their tenderness and passion, except without her foolish little jokes about wanting to put him in her pocket and carry him off, or his about having found a woman he could look up to.

Or perhaps Spike had.

She felt, too, a perfectly genuine heartache for her sister. She knew Eliza preferred the company of women, but this infatuation could only bring her misery. She would give much to spare her sister the pain this would inevitably bring her, but she saw no solution. And without her sister's wholehearted cooperation, she being the most powerful member of the coven, there could be no magickal solution to Spike and Tara's dilemma.
Chapter 21

Charles and Spike left the library, still deep in conversation. "Charles--d'you mind if I call you Charles?"

"No, please do."

"You mind a little advice?"

"Not at all."

"You don't want to get to know too many vampires 'socially.' To borrow a phrase, they're 'mad, bad, and dangerous to know.' Why, my maker would inveigle herself in here--and you'd let her, if you didn't know better, so charming was she. A lovely dark-eyed slip of a thing." Spike lowered his voice intimately and fixed the round-eyed Charles with a black look. "She'd go on about nixies and pixies, all googly-eyed and mystical, and you'd think, 'She's just our kind!' and before you knew it, she'd have ripped out the throats of all your beloved girls, and as for you--well, maybe she'd decide to keep you for herself, comely fellow that you are..."

Charles swallowed.

"So!" Spike spoke briskly, breaking the spell, "Rule one, don't invite strangers into your house. Okay if they arrive in daylight, but--"

Charles shook himself like a spaniel emerging from water. "What does 'Okay' mean? I've heard you use it several times before."

"Sorry. American slang, now a part of the vernacular. Means 'all right' or the affirmative."

"Ah. All right. 'Okay,' that is." He chuckled. "Okay, Spike! Go on."

"Another thing. We can pay for this. Not asking you to go out on a limb for us without compensation."

"Please! You insult me." Charles looked wounded.

"Well, all right, but there's one universal language, and it's not music." Spike pulled his earlobe and looked thoughtful. "Can you fight? Want me to show you some dirty tricks in case some beastie gets in here and threatens your seraglio?"

Charles chuckled at that. "No, I cannot fight, except for a bit of fencing back in school. And my 'seraglio' are quite capable of some 'dirty tricks' of their own. They've held their own in many a confrontation. But I wouldn't mind being shown a thing or two." He looked slightly wistful.

"There you go then," Spike said approvingly. "That's one thing I can do for you."

~~~

They parted in the downstairs hall. Charles was eager to compare notes with Ann. He found her in
an empty classroom, poring over a grimoire.

"My dear, I have just had the most fascinating conversation with Mr. Southwood!"

Ann was lost in thought, but she courteously dragged her mind up from her reverie to pay Charles proper attention. "Do tell!"

He gave her a summary of Spike's history, and it did not differ materially from what she learned from Eliza's glimpse into Spike's memories, allowing for the natural prejudice Eliza felt for Spike. If anything, Spike had toned it down a bit for Charles' sensibilities, particularly regarding his final immolation on the Hellmouth. It spoke well for Spike's modesty.

Charles babbled on, "Not only that, he's going to teach me to box! Not Marquess of Queensberry, either--'dirty tricks,' he calls them."

"Oh, Charles. Your nose. I love your nose the way it is."

Heedless, he went on, "And he offered to pay us. Of course I said no. We don't really need it, but fancy! All your heroics, you and the girls, and not once have you received a farthing. I've always felt that you should be compensated. Why, if what you've done were generally known--"

"You know we don't take money for-- Perhaps we should pay him," Ann said thoughtfully, and then took pity upon Charles' blank look. "I'm jesting." She filled in the missing bits of Spike's story while Charles gaped, then finished, "I think we should help them in any way we can. Send them back if we can. There's a real obstacle, though, in that Eliza is dead set against this. She's...oh, I hate to break a confidence in this way, but you'll know eventually. She's sweet on Mrs. Southwood, and I fear will oppose any attempt to help them. Anything that will help him," she amended.

Charles found his tongue. "Then this is a real crisis."

"Yes. Because, in their time, their not getting back--and winning--will mean annihilation. While it doesn't affect us directly, Deborah and Penny's grandchildren will die, along with the whole world."

"I will do anything I can!"

"Fetch the girls. They're in Greek right now. When you go into town, you might send off telegrams to our compatriots in London and Edinburgh. We won't be able to do much until the next full moon, but ask them to get ready."

"Anything else?"

"Kiss me."

Charles knelt by her side and did so, thoroughly, and held her for a long moment while she leaned against him. She finally kissed his neck and whispered, "Whatever would I do without you?"

He shook his head and held her closer, and finally said, "Anything else?"

"Pray."

~~~

Spike found Tara huddled by the fire in their room. She'd taken off the hated corset and wrapped herself in all the quilts at hand. Her eyes were dry but he could smell that she had been crying.

"I don't think they're going to send us back." Her voice was still thick with tears.
He didn't answer right away, but built up the fire and brought a couple of pillows from the denuded bed. He stretched out on the hearthrug, and said, "Come here and put your head on my shoulder."

She launched herself at him, and attached herself like a barnacle to his side. "What if we have to stay here? I'm cold all of the time." He figured that that was the least of her upset, but didn't press her for details.

He said lightly, "What, not like Hogwarts here? Thought you did."

"I mean, in this century."

"Oh, it's not so bad." He looked up at the discarded corset flung over a chair back. "You can help pioneer women's dress reform and I can bail you out of jail." He pulled her over him, closer to the fire, feeling her soft springy nakedness under her shift. "That better?"

She nodded and nestled on top of him.

"Speakin' of which--ladies' dress, I mean, not jail--the way you're dressed is getting' me all hot 'n' bothered. Or should I say 'the way you're undressed'? You look very fetching in only your chemise, Mrs. Southwood."

"You're not looking--you're feeling. Is the door locked?"

"The hell with it," he said, helping her pull the chemise over her head.
Ann and the girls convened in the schoolroom. She briefly explained the current crisis at hand and set them to studying. Anything pertaining to time travel, and the sending of people through time, living people and dead people. Vampires.

She was met with expressions of excited willingness, flat-out disbelief, and all shades of opinion in between. Ann did not rule with a rod of iron. She felt that if she could not command their belief, respect, and willingness to work toward their common goal based upon her leadership skills, then she didn't deserve to lead. Rarely, a crisis of confidence had led to one or more girls leaving the coven, and if it did happen, Ann looked at it as a personal failure.

One pair of rolling eyes belonged to Deborah. Ann spared her a sharp glance and resolved to talk to Eliza. It simply would not do to have Eliza undermining the group's cohesion. The worst case would be for Eliza herself to leave, voluntarily or otherwise. Ann shuddered. Eliza was the strongest member of the coven, and would make a formidable enemy.

In her little stone hut beyond the beech grove, Eliza sat quietly, trying to calm her mind with meditation and a burning serenity charm. The stillness of her figure belied the turmoil of her mind. *He doesn't deserve her* ran like a refrain through her churning thoughts. Her window into the vampire's sordid past, his second-hand knowledge of Tara's painful history, and their current liaison tormented Eliza. Did he really think he was a fit mate for Tara? She needed gentleness and understanding. Healing. His violent nature would only corrupt and destroy her. The erotic bite kept flitting across her mind. He thought she enjoyed it, when it was clearly wishful thinking on his part. No woman could want that. The coven's texts--the ones not generally made available to the young girls--were filled with examples of vampires' use of thrall. Sometimes they toyed with their victims before killing them or turning them. It must not be allowed!

The thought of Tara in his power, when she would be so good to her, tortured Eliza.

In grudging fairness, she reminded herself he had a soul, of his sacrifice on the Hellmouth, and his latest alliance with the right, but did he think a few years made up for decades, nay, more than a century of mayhem? Yes, he had changed, but how much, and how far could he now be trusted?

It was tempting to think of putting an end to him, but it was contrary to all Eliza held sacred. She could make use of him. He could help protect the group when she herself was not in attendance. Like a fierce watchdog. She had not missed their dog's reaction to him as Charles brought them in from the barn. Yes, he could be useful.

Their future dilemma? Well, what of it? It was only speculation on his part. The future could take care of itself. His presence here, in her time, altered the future. Who knew what additional havoc might be wreaked if he were sent back? Better keep them both here, take care of the lovely Tara and heal her mind, and keep a close eye on Tara's pet vampire. Some accident might befall him, and then she, Eliza, would step in and offer comfort.
The smoke of the burning herbs stirred in the drafty room. Eliza's whirling thoughts were no less disturbed.

~~~

Warm, sweaty, and very relaxed, Tara sighed, "I feel better. You were trying to cheer me up?"

She was draped over Spike like a soft quilt, her cheek pillowed on his chest. He pulled their scattered bedding up around her. "Among other things."

She kissed the underside of his jaw and said, "What if they don't send us back? Or can't?"

He shivered at the feel of her mouth on his throat and said, "Red could, and she was just one. I imagine the combined wattage of this little group can do it. We'd best be careful they don't send us into outer space." He rolled her over and gave her his best sexy grin. "Which you have just done to me. Think I should return the favor."

~~~

Ann scoured the place looking for her sister. Not infrequently, Eliza would disappear and later emerge, having worked through some disturbance or another. Ann knew it no longer rankled much that she, Eliza, was not the one leading the group. Lately, Ann knew that it was Eliza's frustrated feelings for one girl or another.

She would have given much if she could give her sister the contentment she herself knew. She had satisfying work and the perfect companion. The coven was not just her life's work, it was the work of many generations, and there was no reason why it should not continue for generations, a force for good. Like the sun. Charles understood and shared her vision. He supported her and indeed the whole group, like a paterfamilias, but in fact, she led. Not for the first time, Ann gave silent thanks to Charles for being the man he was.

~~~

When she could finally catch her breath, Tara panted, "Won't they worry if we don't turn up sometime? We've been up here for hours."

"We missed lunch. Well, you did." Spike smirked. "I expect they know how it is for a young couple on their honeymoon. Can't keep their hands off each other. 'Sides, you're not exactly a quiet little thing."

Tara gave him a mock-punch on the upper arm, and hid her face against his neck, muffling her laughter.

Spike pulled her closer and said, "Been thinkin' 'bout what you said, about them not being able to send us back--"

"Hey!"

"No, not during--but it's never been off my mind, really. Multi-tasking, as they say. Not all fists an' fangs an' a great big--" He broke off with a gasp as Tara gently gripped that part of him.

"As you said, I missed lunch."

~~~
After a morning of research and a lunch made notable by the Southwoods' and Miss Harkness' absences (little Jane Brumwell had gone to tap on the Southwood's door but hurried away scarlet-faced), the girls met in the big dormitory over the meeting hall in the east wing. During the first years of Ann and Charles' marriage--the years of the coven's greatest growth--Charles built two wings onto the already large farmhouse and nearly tripled its size. The newest girls, and girls about whom it was unclear whether they would stay and make a career of it, were housed in the dormitory. It was their unofficial meeting place, and the elder women did not usually intrude.

Deborah was holding forth on the improbability of what her mother proposed. As Ann previously suspected, Eliza had selectively filled Deborah in on some key facts of Spike's nature. What Deborah did not know was Spike's role in the ongoing battle of good versus evil.

"If it is even possible, I don't see why we should do this. It could be quite dangerous, and I don't see why we should risk our health and sanity for outsiders. Especially his kind. That's even worse than being an outsider."

Mlle LaPensee added her two cents. "You know that our efforts are almost exclusively for outsiders. That is what we do. Besides, Monsieur Southwood is vairy 'andsome." She turned pink, the mere mention of him making her plain little face almost pretty.

With heavy scorn, Deborah said, "Oh, Mireille, you know that that has nothing to with this! Don't be so frivolous."

Mireille tossed her head.

Penelope said, "I think, too, that you do not like sharing your clothing with Mrs. Southwood."

Deborah sputtered, "Of all the irrelevant--! Really, you are absurd." Penelope's observation had its basis in truth. Deborah shared Mrs. Southwood's statuesque figure, and since she and Tara were nearly the same size (Tara having arrived undersupplied with clothing, and what little she had soaked with rain) Deborah was required to share what she had.

The girls were pretty evenly divided in opinion. The local girls Charlotte Colquitt, Maudie Spottiswode, and the Kirkhams shared Mrs. Maxwell's West Country tradition of duty, hard work, and reverence for life. The old religion had always been a part of their lives, and they trusted her implicitly and were squarely on her side. The foreign girls Costanza Mital and the two Marias waffled between disbelief and loyalty to Mrs. Maxwell. Of the other English girls, Alice Cohen and Victoria Heaton were somewhat better educated than the rest, having gone to Queens' College and inclined to take a "wait and see" approach until more information could be obtained, and Mary Ellen Brumwell was Deborah's bosom companion and on her side, while little Jane, though rather overwhelmed by the Southwoods' stimulating presence, was fervently on their side, and so consequently on Mrs. Maxwell's.

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Deborah continued to argue. Things were going against the Southwoods. Penelope slipped away to find help.

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Spike roamed the halls. Charles had promised him a bit of blood, said that one of their local girl's father was slaughtering a sheep for their dinner, and said he'd pop 'round with it, but it was no go. He thought of finding Tara a snack and bringing it to her, make up for her missed lunch, then saw a clock and decided to go back and wake her for dinner.
Rapid pattering footsteps signaled the presence of the coltish youngest Maxwell. She blundered around a corner and bounced off Spike's hard chest. He held her by the upper arms and steadied her.

"Oh, I am sorry! Where is Mrs. Southwood? We must find her and--"

"She's having a bit of a lie-down. What's the emergency?"

"My sister. She's been talking to Aunt Eliza, and half my family is now against you!"

"Say no more." Spike led young Penny back to their room and tapped at the door. "Sweetheart? You decent?"

"Come in," Tara called from behind the door.

He opened the door a crack. "We have a visitor."

"It's all right." She was up and dressed, though her hair was down. "Pin me up?"

"I will," Penelope said, seizing a brush and beginning to brush Tara's hair vigorously. "My sister is trying to talk the girls out of helping to send you back. Foolish girls! We've gone up against foes we can see--and bested them--but when it's an unseen foe in the future, why, that's just too unbelievable and of course you must be full of...rot." She turned a muddy red but continued, "I'm sorry to speak so plainly, but you must come with me, now, and tell them! I can help."

~~~

Deborah spoke strongly, "So who wants to undertake this foolishness, and who wants to stand with me while I tell my mother that we will not do this?"

The girls on Deborah's side spoke for her, while the few opposed--fewer than had been--looked uncomfortable and struggled to put into words their resistance to going against Ann's leadership, and their feeling that Deborah's was an unwise plan.

"I believe them."

"I don't."

"It is rather hard to believe."

"It's impossible to say either way, but perhaps we should do as Mrs. Maxwell says."

"I have to agree."

"Of all the nonsense!"

Spike's preternatural hearing garnered him an earful. "You sure you want to go into the hornet's nest, Glinda?"

Tara looked intimidated, and Penny answered for her: "I have a plan!"

~~~

Penelope flung the door open. "I believe them!" She walked in, head held high, while Tara hung back in the doorway. Spike put his arm around her.

"You don't believe them? Well, perhaps you'll believe this." She opened her reticule and withdrew
a couple of pieces of cream-colored fabric.

"Her undies?" Spike looked amused. He said in an undertone, "Why haven't you modeled them for me?"

Tara whispered back, "You said to throw the modern stuff away but I had a sentimental attachment to them. Willow bought them for me. Besides, they were very expensive."

She asked Penelope, "Where did you get them?"

"In the laundry room, at the bottom of your carpetbag. It was my turn to do laundry." Penny walked around the circle showing the girls the transparent shimmering bra and beige lace boy shorts. "Look at this. Have you ever seen knitting finer? The tiniest stitches, and the material 'gives.' Machine-made, isn't it?" She looked at Tara for confirmation.

Tara shrugged. "I guess."

"Not only the workmanship--listen to this." Penny cleared her throat and read from the tag, "'All man-made materials.' Not silk! 'Machine wash, delicate cycle. Do not machine dry.'" She looked expectantly around the room.

"Man-made!" several of the girls exclaimed.

"Machine wash?"

"'Dry? In a machine?'"

"It's very...daring, isn't it?"

"Oh, how is it worn?"

"I think it goes like this--Mr. Southwood, would you turn around?"

Rolling his eyes, Spike turned his back while the girls took turns holding the bra up to themselves.

Penny looked around the room, gauging the effect of her show-and-tell. "Not only that, there's this." From the bottom of the bag, she removed a small silver ring. She read aloud, "Petaluma High School, Class of 1999."

The girls gasped.

Penny smiled smugly and threw a triumphant look at Spike and Tara. "I'll pass it around, too."

Spike gave Tara an approving squeeze. "I'm glad now you didn't get rid of all that stuff when I told you to."

Tara spoke in an undertone to Spike. "I bought it myself--my father wouldn't. I was so proud to have finally graduated. I missed a whole year. I just couldn't bring myself to throw it away."

Peering at the ring, Alice asked, "What kind of stone is that?" Her father was a diamond importer.

Tara said, "It's a spinel. A synthetic sapphire."

Spike spoke up suddenly. "Just had an idea. You think her undies and her ring are interesting, you ought to get a load of her twenty-first century dental work."
Chapter 23

The atmosphere at dinner was somewhat eased, but Eliza was still missing.

Ann was worried. This excessive introspection of Eliza's could not bode well. But there was nothing to be done at the moment, so Ann focused on her guests. She smiled across the table at Tara. "Mrs. Southwood, you're looking much better. Rosy and well rested."

"Please. Call me Tara." Tara blushed. "Yes, I've been getting a lot of...rest."

"Splendid. Rest is just the thing." She gave Tara a knowing look.

Spike coughed.

"Mr. Southwood, are you well? Perhaps you should...rest more, too." Ann smiled blandly at him.

Spike looked slightly nonplussed, and then managed, "Why don't you call me Spike? Or William, if you prefer."

Ann looked pleased. "Very well, William. Charles, where are we? Telegrams off?" She caught Charles' slight smirk and smiled in spite of herself.

"Yes, indeed," he said. "I mailed your letters to our associates on the Continent as well. With luck, they'll arrive so that we may be ready to receive our foreign contingent by the next full moon."

"All is well. I sense less...'dissention in the ranks,' to borrow a military term. Not inappropriately, since we're about to go up against another challenge. Not directly, but we are going to try to send you two soldiers back to your battleground." She looked around the table expectantly. "Girls, are we one on this?"

There were murmurs of assent, and Deborah said clearly, "Yes, Mama."

Penelope piped up, "And there is the dance at the Grange Friday night. You did say...?"

"Of course, darling. Just because we're preparing for a ritual doesn't mean we don't participate in the world. I promised you your first long dress and you may put your hair up like a grown-up young lady." Her look of maternal indulgence gave way to grim determination. "In the meantime, I must find my sister," she said half to herself.

~~~

Ann deduced that Eliza was in her little retreat on the far side of the beech grove. After dinner, she changed into stout boots and hiked the mile and a half toward the little hut.

Before she reached the hut, she stopped in the starlit grove and said a prayer for her sister,

"Deep peace of the running wave to you, Deep peace of the flowing air to you, Deep peace of the quiet earth to you, Deep peace of the shining stars to you, Deep peace of the gentle night to you. May the moon and stars pour their healing light on you. Deepest peace of the light of the world to
She approached the door, took a deep breath, and knocked.

After a long moment, Eliza opened the door. She was dry-eyed and composed.

Ann said, "I've been worried about you."

"Sit down." Without asking, Eliza poured Ann a cup of tea. She sat at the table across from her sister, and poured a cup for herself.

Ann appeared not to know where to begin. "You've missed lunch and dinner."

"You have a gift for stating the obvious." Eliza lightened her words with a small smile. "Thank you for your concern." It was clearly an effort to say it.

"Please, Eliza, won't you let me help?"

"I've been thinking. All day. Thinking and...spying...and going 'round and 'round, and coming to terms with this." She sipped her tea, and appeared unsure of how much to say. "As you probably know, I could care for Mrs. Southwood. Tara. What a lovely and unusual name."

"I know," Ann said softly.

Eliza went on more strongly. "I don't think they're suited. She had deep feelings for another woman--the woman who sent them here. Her and that vampire. She might come to care for me, but to attempt to influence her decision would be wrong." The words jerked out of her with an obvious effort. "I don't like him any better than I did, but he is her choice. That woman, 'Willow,' another lovely, unusual name!--was an undisciplined and foolish girl. She lost Tara through her heedless, selfish behavior. I shall not try to claim her in the same way." Eliza smiled humorlessly. "It's a great pity to be able to see so clearly. To see what's right and suitable and yet know that others don't see as you do."

"You have always had the Gift."

"I was going to oppose this. Perhaps leave. I cannot win. It's not only that I don't think it's wise. I don't think it's possible." The words thudded like clods dropping on a coffin.

"What?"

A chill wind rattled the windowpane. Eliza beckoned her sister to the chairs by the fireplace. "What were your plans? What spell or combination of spells do you think can accomplish this?"

"I've got the girls delving into this as we speak. Classes are suspended until we reach an answer. I thought perhaps--"

"Nothing can accomplish this."

"But that other--Willow?--did this!"

"Oh, yes, indeed, and at other times that is not all she did, or tried to do. Or was very nearly stopped from doing. The vampire's memories don't directly involve what she tried to do--he was...otherwise engaged at the time. But he heard plenty when he came back. This witch is notorious. A reformed...what is their expression? A reformed 'Big Bad,' and a murderer. I hope you do not mean to emulate her."
"But they are here!"

"Remember? Or perhaps you don't--his memories are unclear--he was pacing and waiting while she performed a ritual in the next room. Incurious fellow. He was suspended in the aether while she sent him back several years, pinpointing the location in space and time. He arrived. The exigency he was sent to prevent began almost immediately. This isn't scientific--this is art, and in her case, dark art. The previous incarnation of this Willow didn't understand the vampire's purpose in throwing Tara to the floor, and reacted as was her wont. Well, to give her her due, she reacted with the idea of protecting her lover." Eliza's voice caressed the last words. She continued, "At any rate, the spell was augmented a hundredfold by her punishing stroke. It was not meant to be, and I haven't the slightest idea how this can be duplicated, and in reverse."

Ann looked appalled. Finally she spoke. "Eliza, that is not the only exigency. Mrs. Southwood's death would have been a tragedy, and if a choice were to be made--a hard choice!--I would choose her over the other. As a general sometimes must. But she's just one soldier--the real enemy lies beneath the Hellmouth. What Mr. Southwood is so anxious they return to and defeat."

Eliza looked thoughtful. She had been rolling a croquet ball for the cat as she spoke. Abruptly, she dropped her shawl on the floor.

"Pick up my shawl," she directed Ann. "No, don't use your hand; use the poker."

Ann looked baffled, but did as Eliza asked. She picked up the shawl with the hooked end of the poker, and handed it to her sister.

Without comment, Eliza put the shawl around her shoulders. "Now, pick up the ball. With the poker."

Ann gave her a look of incomprehension.

Eliza spoke as though to a child. "I can see sending a person through time--think of any teleportation spell you care to, and add the element of time, as well as distance. Difficult, but not impossible. But what is there to 'grab hold of' with a vampire? You know as well as I do that the life-force of the spellcaster, and the focus of the spell--the traveler--would aid in the spell. But there is nothing there with a vampire! You cannot send reanimated flesh through time. There is nothing to grab a hold of."

"But, but, the other witch could do it!"

Eliza gave her a pitying look. "You haven't been listening. 'Dark arts,' Ann."
Chapter 24

Ann shook her head. "I cannot believe that dark arts are the only recourse. The witch that sent them here--Willow?--was only one! There is power in numbers--I've sent telegrams to our sisters all across England and letters to the continent, and I cannot believe--"

Her sister just looked at her with pity.

"Eliza, please! It's nearly a fortnight until the full moon. We'll be forty strong or better--as many or more than the last crisis. Tara herself can lend a hand. Our good must outweigh the bad of one witch using the black arts."

Eliza kissed her sister. "I will help in any way I can. But it will do no good."

~~~

Ann decided to keep the near-hopelessness of their prospects from the girls. The sisters continued to direct the students' research. Ann hoped that there would be a way this could be done that would benefit everyone involved.

The girls studied every day, and were allowed away from their research only for meals and bathroom breaks. But their evenings were free, and they were taken up with fluttering over their dance dresses. They were unlike most of their other Victorian counterparts in that they were not only interested in snagging husbands, but since there was very little opportunity to socialize with the opposite sex, most felt deep anticipation over the upcoming dance at the Grange.

~~~

To escape the feminine ferment to get ready for the dance, Spike took the opportunity to give Charles the promised lessons in fighting. "You need a dojo, Charles."

"A what?"

"A place to train. A gymnasium." It was deemed too muddy and cold to train outside. After the girls decamped to the sewing room, he and Charles went into the big meeting room and pushed tables and chairs to the side.

"I promise not to break any furniture or bones," Spike said with a wicked smile.

"Please. Ann is very fond of my bones," Charles said, stroking his nose.

"Okay. Now what do you do when some big bad has got you by the throat?" Spike suited action to words, and grabbed him from behind. Charles struggled to get away. "What you do is this." He slapped the side of Charles' right leg. "Lift your leg, man." Charles did so. "Now stomp down hard on my instep. No, harder, man. Takes a lot to hurt me. I've got you by the throat. Hurt me back." Charles did as he was told. "Now, when I turn you around to bite you, bring your knee--other leg, Charles--bring it up, here...but not too hard, if you please...family jewels and all." Charles did so, and Spike twisted as to take most of it on the inside of his thigh. "Good. That should get the attention of most opponents who've got you, leastways long enough for them to let you go so you can run."
He let go of Charles and smoothed his crumpled collar. "Need to wear something that can stand gettin' mussed."

"It's all right. Go on." Charles' eyes shone. Spike figured that he didn't have much opportunity for rough and tumble, let alone taking an active role in the family's protection.

"Face to face now. Someone's got you by the throat, break the hold like so--" Spike brought his arms up, between Charles' "--and then bring 'em down hard and break your opponent's collarbone."

"And here's what you do when someone, something, tries this..."

Tara was amused by how many times she was asked about the styles in her century. She supposed it was not a good idea to tell too much about the future, but this seemed harmless enough.

Deborah sniffed, "I cannot believe that ladies wear trousers out in public, skirts up to here, and as for bare midriffs--!" She was aghast. "And the piercing of parts other than one's earlobes--like Hottentots! I cannot imagine living in such a time."

"Well, it's not a look for everyone. I usually wear long skirts myself. Not so different from you. And as for the piercings, well, most people just pierce their ears like you do. Others pierce, umm, other parts. It's really no big deal in my time."

"People?"

"Yes," Tara said, smiling. "Both men and woman wear earrings."

"Like pirates!" Deborah breathed. "I believe it is good that I live here, in this time. There seems to be too many things that are strange in yours." She flushed a delicate shade of pink. "But the undergarments are lovely." She gave a bark of laughter, seeming embarrassed by the admission. "Shocking, but lovely."

Tara and Deborah were in the sewing room. Tara had come looking for a sharp pair of scissors to destroy the anachronistic little set of lingerie that was her proof of being a resident of the 21st century. She watched as Deborah altered a dress for Tara to wear to the dance. She knew that it was Deborah's attempt to make up for the near-mutiny she had pulled on her mother, which incidentally would have damaged Tara and Spike, too, marooning them in the 19th century. Tara didn't blame Deborah. Spike was a vampire and those that didn't know him as well as Tara did were bound to jump to conclusions. Especially when their Aunt Eliza had put a flea in their ear.

"It's last season's look," Deborah said apologetically. "But you did say...?" They talked in a desultory fashion, politely skirting the real issue between them. Tara reassured Deborah that the dress didn't need to be the height of fashion. As long as it fit and she didn't look silly in it, Tara would be satisfied with whatever Deborah came up with. Still, she sensed that Deborah was trying hard to make up with her and couldn't seem to find the words.

Tara decided to offer an olive branch, in the form of the coveted Victoria's Secret set.

She could see the delight in Deborah's eyes as she accepted it timidly. Shamefacedly, her eyes met Tara's. "I'm sorry." Tara knew that Deborah was not referring to the passé dress.

Charles gingerly touched his cheek below his eye. "How's the eye look?"
"You have what is popularly known as a shiner. Your wife won't be pleased." Spike rubbed his knuckles ruefully.

Nonchalantly, Charles said, "She'll get over it." He nodded to a long leather case he'd brought. "Care to have a go with the épée?"

"Charles, you're an animal."

Five minutes later, after a presentation by Charles, Spike found himself beaten across the room, and he hooted with glee, *"You're a dark horse!"* He met Charles' counter-disengage with a counter-parry. "I'm less worried about you than I was." He ducked a particularly lethal slash with a disengage and counter-riposte, and said, "Although men don't go armed in this day and age." He parried and dodged, adding, "You do know that this isn't really effective against vampires, unless you, you know, cut off their head?"

"I know that *now,*" Charles said, grinning, backing Spike into yet another corner.

"Charles, I am more than convinced that you will have no problems taking care of yourself and yours." Spike stopped for unneeded breath. "Show me that last move."

~~~

That night, after love, Spike watched as Tara massaged a painful muscle spasm in her bottom. "Didn't mean to make you seize up so hard."

"Sheeyah." It was half a laugh, half a groan. "Sure you didn't."

"Here, let me." He took over, turning her onto her stomach, and kneading the muscle of her buttock deeply with his thumbs until she yelped and then subsided with a sigh.

"Do you wish I had Slayer strength?" she asked wistfully. Spike stopped massaging and looked at her narrowly. "Don't know. D'you wish I had breasts?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're asking if you're enough for me. What I'm used to. What I want."

"Well, yeah." She twisted her head and looked up at him.

He kept stroking but his eyes grew faraway. Finally, he gave a little snort of laughter. "Slayer strength, huh? You think that's what I'm missing? There are lots of different kinds of strength. Strong enough to stand up and say, 'This is my man--we're together.' Strong enough to open up and let someone in." He lay down and looked Tara in the eye. "Remember, holed up back in London that first day? Too sunny to leave?"

She nodded.

He went on, "We killed time, talking. I told you about gettin' the soul, about Buffy, about moving on. You were in a tailspin over Red, but you listened to me. You talked, too, but mostly you let me talk." He held her chin and locked eyes with her. "When Buffy and I first got together--well, 'together' might be puttin' it a bit strong--anyways, we never had a conversation that didn't consist of how much she hated me, how I was evil, dirty... or how fast and how hard to--" he broke off,
grimacing, and went on, "Those last months, before the shakedown at the Hellmouth, things changed--we came to be more...like comrades in arms. She said she believed in me, and...well, there was some soft talk out of her toward the end--I think she felt guilty for how badly-- Well, I had a lot of guilt, too. Still do, truth be told. Buffy and me--we went through a lot, some of it pretty bloody amazing, some of it just pretty bloody. She was the breaking and the making of me."

He pulled her close. "But this, with you, I've never had this with anyone. Where I've had my feelings returned and been listened to and valued. Please don't wish to be anything other than what you are. Because I adore you." He gave her an intense look, appearing to weigh telling her something. "Ever hear the expression 'mixed marriage'?

She lifted one eyebrow. "What do you think my parent's marriage was?"

"Right." He smiled without humor, then said, "Don't know how to say this--never imagined I'd say it to anyone. Never thought an angel like you'd give herself to me, either, me bein' what I am. Not fit to black your boots, but will you...be with me? I don't think marriage is an option, given the circumstances, but this handfasting thing you ladies do...will you do this with me? Be mine?"

He heard her heart start to race, and she gasped, "Oh, yes!"

~~~

The sudden fierce upsurge of emotion blotted out the ever-present unease Tara felt over their upcoming trip. She didn’t share this with him. She knew he had an unswerving faith in the coven's abilities, but she picked up clues in Ann and Eliza's behavior and their shared looks, and felt her own growing sense of foreboding. One of the reasons she gave herself to him so violently was to bind him to her. She wanted to tattoo herself on his skin, entwine herself with him so completely that they could never be separated. At some level she knew that this dependence wasn't healthy, but when weighed against her fears for the future and the upcoming battle, she wanted to lose herself in him once more.

Giddy at his proposal, she added, "Handfasting's not a permanent joining, but if you want--"

He spoke grimly, "Want you always--never doubt it! But you might want to take me for a test drive before you make it permanent. With this upcoming jaunt, I want to tie you to me, if only for a little while."

"Oh, I feel the same way!" And kissing him frantically, she wrapped herself around him again.

~~~

Dance night finally arrived and the entire household was in a flutter.

Mostly to get them out of the way, the men were drafted to go to the train station. Guests were already starting to arrive for the ceremony to be held at the next full moon. Charles and Spike took the smallest carriage and picked up a pair of elderly Scottish sisters from the late afternoon train, took them home and delivered them into Eliza's hands. She gave them tea and showed them their room.

The men were late getting to the dance. An extra suit of Charles' evening things fitted Spike nearly as well as they had Charles, and they made an entrance. Spike craned his neck, looking for Tara but did not see her in the crush.

With relief, their young hostess Miss Lovejoy remarked to Charles, "So good to see you, Mr. Maxwell! And your friend...?" She smiled coquettishly at Spike.
Charles introduced them. "Miss Lovejoy, may I present Mr. Southwood? He and his wife are visiting us up at the school."

Spike bowed over her hand. "How do you do?"

"How do you do?" Crestfallen at his status as a "married man," she said with resignation, "There are never enough gentlemen to dance with. It's your school!" She pouted prettily at Charles. "Although there are a group at the side entrance, seeking admittance, but they do not look...well, some of them are gentlemen by their appearance, but some of them look...odd."

Spike was intrigued and Charles appeared to pick up on his wary interest. They made their excuses and entered the side vestibule, and from a window, had a covert look-see at the group seeking invitation. Spike spoke in an undertone to Charles, "Imagine that--'a gang on PCP.'"

"Eh?"

"I recognize some of Angelus' minions. Thought I was shut o' him. Bloody hell! What do you think?" He nodded toward the colorful throng in the ballroom. "Quite a crowd. I know your group doesn't readily admit vamps exist. The policy in SunnyD was 'save 'em but don't enlighten 'em.' Tell the girls and turn this into a public scene? Or take 'em on ourselves? You're hell on wheels with a blade, but Ann would be less forgiving of me getting' you killed than she was of your black eye. Don't fancy losing my best friend here, next to Tara--"

"Me?" Charles looked absurdly pleased.

Spike gave him an impatient "yes, you" expression. "--or having Ann fry me."

Charles gestured toward an ornamental display of antique arms on the wall, which included a pair of crossed rapiers. Spike nodded and they removed the swords. Spike reached under his jacket and pulled two stakes from his waistband. He handed one to Charles. "Here. 'Combat à la Florentine,' eh, Charles?"

"But of course," Charles said, taking the proffered stake with his left hand.

Spike spoke urgently, "Remember, take off the head, or stake 'em in the heart. Sunlight or fire's not an option. Those're the only ways to kill 'em."

"Right."
This was going to be tricky.

How to take on the whole gang, and there looked to be dozen or more, and keep Charles' blood in his veins. Spike felt a fierce fondness for the younger man. Game lad! He couldn't say no to him when he so wanted to help.

For the moment, the advantage was theirs. The vamp gang was still trying to pass themselves off as a group of gentlemen interested only in gaining admittance to the dance. The footmen had not been complete fools. They had made the excuse of seeking someone with authority to admit the vamps, but had in actuality fled. The couple of "odd-looking men" Miss Lovejoy had noticed, low-ranking vamps who had not learned to conceal their true nature, hung back with faces averted. The more gentlemanly, human-appearing ones put on a pretense of politesse, which Spike met with his own insincere courtesy, carefully stopping short of an actual invitation.

The most human-seeming vampire tried to scrape acquaintance with Spike (who knew as a matter of fact that they were acquainted, or rather, his earlier self was. Had been. Time travel sure played hob with verb tenses, Spike thought irrelevantly, then pushed aside the thought with irritation.) The important thing was that the vamps not be left loose to carry tales of his and Tara's whereabouts to Angelus, or allowed indoors to endanger the guests.

Temporarily safe, Spike and Charles hung back from the open doorway, the vampire's lack of invitation barring their way in. The right-handed Charles held his rapier behind the doorjamb, and his stake-holding left hand behind his back. Similarly, Spike held his sword out of sight in his dominant left hand, stake hidden in his coat pocket. He stroked his chin and appeared to consider the vamps' request.

"Well, I'm dashed sorry, Verrill," Spike said warmly. "I'm not really the person to ask. I'm a guest here myself. Perhaps Charles here..." He smiled fondly at his friend. "No, Charles would never be so foolish as to invite vampires in--" and Spike erupted into the crowd, an angry buzz saw of whirling sharp edges, the masquerade abruptly at an end. One vampire's head flew off, bursting into dust as its body dissolved, and Spike rolled away from the six or seven that attempted to pin him, staking one before springing up to his feet.

Charles eyes were like saucers. He quavered, "Are you really...vampires?"

Three vampires remained outside the door, facing Charles, the gentlemanly one appearing to think it was worthwhile to continue the masquerade, at least with this hapless fool. Verrill stood in Charles' line of sight to Spike and spoke smoothly, "My friend, you're seeing things. You've had a bit much to drink. Let me in and I'll help you."

"No, I think you are vampires. Just as they are." Charles nodded toward Spike, fighting the group who survived his initial onslaught. Charles stepped slowly through the doorway, eyes locked with them. "Show yourselves to me."
"With pleasure," the head vamp sneered, and with an ominous creaking and stretching sound, his face morphed into its feral form.

"I'm glad," Charles said, his voice breaking. "I could never kill a human," he finished firmly, and with a slash almost faster than the eye could follow, he decapitated Verrill with one stroke. The head dusted before hitting the ground and the body collapsed like a discarded garment. Charles' blade lodged in the head of the second vampire, a hideous wound but unfortunately not lethal, and the third vamp backed away hastily and joined the group ganging up on Spike. Charles jerked his jammed blade free and gave the wounded vamp le coup de grace.

"Charles! Little help here," Spike called. He was an excellent fighter, but not nearly as good with a sword as was Charles, and through their sheer numbers, the vamps ignored the non-lethal blows Spike inflicted, and simply pressed in. Spike killed several more, but was finally brought down.

Charles lunged and killed another, then the vamps made a critical error. They divided their force, and half of the ones pinning Spike rose and circled Charles. He revolved warily, blade in one hand and stake in the other, not letting them get close.

Meanwhile, Spike wrenched one vamp's head off, cracked two more heads together (not lethal, but effectively stopping them for the moment) and sprang to his feet. He waded into the group trying to take Charles down, killing two more, just as the last three remaining vamps closed in on Charles. One was killed instantly by Charles' whirling blade but the last two seized Charles, pinioning his stake hand and his sword arm.

Holding Charles' own stake to his throat, the vamp on Charles' left snarled to Spike, "Don't know why this human is so important, or why you fight your own kind for his, but Angelus gave us a job and we're carrying out his orders."

"Don't hurt him," Spike babbled, thinking to trick information out of them with a show of weakness on his part. Come on, he urged silently. Spill your plans for world domination, little big man.

Sure enough, the vampire couldn't resist the opportunity to puff himself up a bit, "Got the upper hand, don't we," he gloated. "Angelus promised us territories of our own, if we brought you in."

The other added, "Don't know why it's so important to get you back. It's your lady-friend he's really interested in. You're not all that, it's plain to see."

Spike bit back the first thing occurring to him to say, 'Well, he must be blind!'  He felt very calm and cool, as though chilled water flowed through his veins. "No, of course not," he agreed smoothly. "I imagine you'll want to hold my friend here hostage, and then be invited into the house to capture my fiancée, eat a few people, and then deliver us to Angelus. There's just one small problem. Well, several problems, now that I think of it. The dance is attended by several dozen powerful witches who could set you afire with a mere thought, but before that, you must have your mouth washed out with soap."

"Eh?"  The first vamp was thrown off balance by Spike's apparent non sequitur. The second added, "You daft, man?"

"Yes," Spike said softly. "For mentioning her, even though you didn't speak her name. For that, I'd have to kill you. But I'll settle for just--" and just then, Charles, bless him, stomped down hard on the vamp's instep, and twisted and kneed the other in the crotch. Spike smashed their heads together and then Charles decapitated them, while Spike finished off the two whose skulls he'd previously ruined.
Spike did a hasty sum in his head. "I think that's all. I made out fifteen to begin with. What do you say?"

Charles considered. "I think you're right. I didn't get but four, not counting these two." He wiped his blade and sat down abruptly, suddenly overcome with adrenaline exhaustion.

Spike dropped down beside him. "And I got eleven. Good. None got away. Didn't think Angelus was motivated enough to send a dragnet all the way to West Country, but I was wrong."

"You're all over mud, and now I am," Charles observed. "My bottom, at any rate. I think I wet myself-- No matter. The footmen will mop us up." He put his head down and breathed deeply.

"'You should never have your best trousers on when you go out to fight for freedom and truth'," Spike quoted, brushing vamp dust from his front and Charles' back.

Charles looked back at Spike, briefly distracted from his discomfort. "Who said that?"

"Ibsen, but not for a couple of years." With tact, Spike changed the subject. "You're a quick study. Never was so glad to see a student learn a lesson so quickly. Liked your fake-out of Verrill, by the way."

Charles looked back with a crooked smile. "I followed your lead. It was fun. Ann never lets me-- I know I'm not a fighter. Only good for making money and...one other thing."

"Heh. Me too. But not making money." He bumped his shoulder familiarly against Charles' shoulder. "Don't worry, Charles--not the size of the dog in the fight--it's the size of the fight in the dog. You did fine. You're alive, aren't you?" Spike leaned back and considered him. "You know, in this light, you look a little like Douglas Fairbanks."

"Who is Douglas Fairbanks?"

"An actor in the silents, famous for roles involving swordplay and derring-do. Perhaps he's a relative of yours."

"What is 'the silence'?"

"Sorry. 'Silents.' Silent films. Moving pictures. That, and music, are some of the innocent diversions I've enjoyed in my long life. One has to have interests. I especially miss the music. Nearly as enjoyable as fighting and fun--...enjoying the company of my lovely Tara, who incidentally--" he straightened up and said in a brighter tone, "--consented to be handfasted with me only last night. Forgot to tell you!"

Charles beamed. "Congratulations! Will you do this here, before you leave?"

"Dunno. It's up to her. Sooner the better, I say. Human life isn't very long." He sighed, helping his friend to his feet. "Let's get inside. I can hear your teeth startin' to chatter."

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Spike had hoped to avoid a public scene, and as it turned out, they were observed by only a few. The footmen, their canny West Country suspicions confirmed, appeared happy to buy Spike's: "Did you see that? Burglars! But we ran 'em off, didn't we, Charles?" Thank God dusted vamps left so little evidence behind. After receiving the promised mopping up and a couple of stiff drinks, Charles and Spike re-entered the ballroom. This time it was Tara craning her neck to find Spike. She was a vision. She spotted him and came fluttering up to him in a long blue dress. "You're so late! Did
you have an accident?” He didn't answer for a long moment, taking in her beauty. "Love, you look..."

She dimpled and curtseyed. "I feel like Meg at the ball. Do you like me?” She revolved so he could get a better look at her dress.

"I love you," was all he said, when he could finally speak.

Her hair rose in an artfully disarranged structure with a few loose curls waving about her cheeks and temples, one long heartbreaker curl trailing down the side of her neck. "It was Miss Harkness's idea. She noticed the...bite," Tara finished in an undertone.

He stroked the curl away and fingered her neck, then gently replaced it over his mark. "You look...there are no words. Sorry.” He shook his head to collect his thoughts. He added, "Sorry we worried you. Got unavoidably et cetera. Angelus’s boys, but Charles and I put paid to 'em.”

Tara gasped, "You're okay?"

"I'm fine. Just want to look at you. What do you call that--'baby blue,' baby?"

"It's more of a dusky--will you stop changing the subject? What happened?"
"He's looking for us, but he'll not hear from that bunch. We dusted 'em. End of story. Let's talk about you. Is your dance card full?"

She decided to drop it and gave him a lopsided grin. "Not hardly, the way we outnumber the men. Why the girls don't dance with each other! Anyway, all I know is a waltz, so if you want to dance with me ask me for that. I learned in gym class. Or a polka. I learned how at American Legion dances." She demonstrated a couple of steps. "But 'a married couple should not dance together more than once in an evening,' they tell me. I have to share you tonight."

Spike shook his head. "Good thing we're not a married couple then--I plan on dancing with you more than once." The music began, and he recognized Alexina. "May I have the pleasure?" He pulled her into the dance, enjoying the way the bodice of her dusky blue dress, trimmed with an ecru lace ruche, outlined her décolletage without concealing it. A faint fragrance of rose wafted from her skin, making his head swim. He looked down at the old gold and pearl set she was wearing, the lowest pear-shaped droplet just above the cleft of her breasts. "Those are my mother's pearls you're wearing! I'd forgotten."

"I wanted to wear them for you tonight." She was flushed from exertion and blushed even pinker at the look in Spike's eyes. To distract him, she said, "I begged Deborah to let out the dress. These Victorians are not slouches when it comes to corseting. She thinks I'm pregnant."

Spike leered at her. "Not for lack of trying. But the bein' dead hinders."

They danced away, passing Charles and Ann. They nodded and bowed to them but Charles and Ann were in their own world. Charles held her in a knowing grip, and their eyes were like stars. The next dance was a polka, and Tara pushed Spike to go ask Deborah. He danced the German next with Ann, and he couldn't forget little Penelope, shy in her first long dress and pinned-up hair. He asked her for the schottische. Then it was Tara's turn again. Convention be damned.

She gasped with laughter, "Oh, I love Die Fledermaus!" when the band started playing "Ha, what joy, what a night of delight."

As he whirled Tara, Spike said, "Hope you don't mind--I told Charles about our engagement."

Chapter End Notes

Another lovely graphic by the talented KazzyCee.
Chapter 26

After she had left the latest arrivals tucked up with a hot brick and a hot drink (it was the Brumwell girls' turn to cope), Eliza put on her warmest shawl and trudged to her little stone retreat beyond the beech grove. A person who felt her energy drained in crowds--and the crowd grew by the day--she longed for privacy as the hart for the water-brooks. If she couldn't be with the one she loved, the next best thing was solitude.

She built a fire and made tea, thinking about Tara with sharp longing, about dressing Tara's hair. How lovely she looked this evening! Eliza wondered what the group's reaction to Tara would be at the dance, and decided to look in on her charges.

Eliza thought of herself as the family watchdog, a grim Cerberus guarding their perimeter, except that Hades was without, not within. Wards and protection spells were all very well, but there was nothing like her own sharp eyes and ears. She settled down to meditate, willed herself into a deep trance, and sent out her awareness.

All was well in the farmhouse. The Brumwells looked in upon the McBreen sisters one last time, and seeing that they needed nothing, returned to the classroom with a pot of tea and biscuits. Very well. She cast about in her mind for a vehicle.

A ghostly white barn owl hovering over the farmhouse would serve, and Eliza projected her awareness into the bird. She flew strongly toward the Grange, covering the six country miles in scant seconds. Spying a group of men at the side entrance (creatures, really--not men at all) and immediately sensing wrongness and danger, she hovered and then alit on a bare branch, watching as the vampire and her brother-in-law took them on. That would never do. Charles was no fighter, but Eliza watched with a more than a touch of astonishment as Charles overcame his natural reluctance to fight, and acted with quickness and cunning. Her estimation for her brother-in-law, never more than toleration and unwilling gratitude for his support of the coven, grew by several degrees.

Things looked grim. He and the vampire were outnumbered by more than seven to one, and she might need to step in. It wasn't any soft feeling for them, although she liked Charles better than she had done, but they were standing between the vampire gang and the women within.

Eliza's spirit body left the owl and she stood by, ready to intervene if it should become necessary. They fought well, she observed. It was nearly over, but then the last two captured Charles and held him, threatening him with a stake at his throat. She saw that the vampire (or William, for she was forced to think of him as a person now) was put in the impossible position of complying with the vampires' insistence on being admitted to the assembly, or see his friend killed. His friend. She grudgingly had to admit that William had bonded with Charles. Apparently he was capable of fellow feeling that did not involve lust and exploitation. She put aside the necessity of re-examining her feelings for him, as it appeared that William was about to do what he did best, explode into action, when matters called for calmness and clear thought.

Her spirit body stood very close to the four, and invisible to them, she touched William's spirit, willing him coolness and cunning. She was pleased to see him draw matters out a bit, throwing dust in the vampires' eyes with the irrelevant drawn-out talk he excelled in, and gratified to hear him ally himself with the 'powerful witches who could set you afire with a mere thought.' It was as though he gave a nod to her power, although she knew he was unaware of her presence. His babbling allowed
Charles precious seconds to turn the tables on the group with his own action. William must have shown Charles a thing or two, she thought with grudging approval. She preferred to influence matters from afar, but face to face, or rather hand-to-hand, had its place.

The men dropped to the ground to rest, and to give them privacy, she turned her attention elsewhere.

Safe in the Grange, the women were waiting. Eliza saw Ann and Tara standing in the front vestibule, watching for the late carriage that would bring their men to them. They had entirely missed the narrowly-averted crisis at the side entrance. Ann looked up and around, perhaps sensing Eliza's presence?—but no, Ann only shivered as though she felt a chill. Tara fidgeted with her complicated dress and kept touching the long curl that trailed down and covered the erotic bite. Eliza wanted to touch her but was prevented by her own strong sense of propriety. This spying was sometimes necessary for the coven's protection, Eliza knew, but when it veered into voyeurism, Eliza felt ashamed. When soul-traveling, she had glimpsed Tara and William in their transports exactly once—and felt scorched by the experience. She needed to get past this, most desperately.

All the happy couples, she thought with a touch of bitterness.

The men emerged from the gentlemen's cloakroom, cleaned of mud and the aftereffects of battle, and looked spruce and handsome. Tara hurried to William's side and Ann to Charles'. They exchanged hurried expressions of worry and received reassurances, and the men swept Ann and Tara into the next waltz.

Eliza had never experienced the male-female mating dance. Aside from preferring the love of women, she was not pretty. In the normal run of things, and given her class, she would probably have been a sturdy farmer's wife by now, mother to a brood of children, and a grandmother several times over, though she was only forty-one. Ironically, it was Charles' marriage to Ann and his support of the coven that allowed Eliza the freedom and fulfillment she felt in her vocation. Again, she felt unwilling gratitude to him.

They floated by her, and for once, instead of shaking her head at how silly they looked together, Ann a head taller than poor Charles, she could see the love and gratitude each felt for the other. She knew that Charles had fallen in love at first sight with the lovely Ann, but Eliza always felt that Ann had married him for his money and position. She knew Ann wanted to give the coven a home and provide a central place that would attract other members and become a force for good in the world. Eliza always felt that Ann "married up," using Charles, and had disliked her for it, and herself as well, for enjoying the fruits of Charles' money. She knew now that she was wrong. Ann and Charles had found a home in each other, and a place to rest their spirits within.

She could scarcely bear to look at William and Tara, so wrapped up in one another and blissful did they look. She had to get past this.

Like a snapped rubber band, Eliza abruptly withdrew her spirit body from the Grange, and with a shock came to rest in her own body sitting in meditation by her own hearth fire. She realized she was cold; the fire had nearly burned out. Straightening her back and stretching her limbs, she fed the fire and made fresh tea.

A huge problem faced her. How to get past her terrible jealousy and reconcile herself to the fact that William was a person. He was a demon, yes, but also a person who had loved and sacrificed and was worthy of her...consideration. She knew that the upcoming ritual was almost certainly doomed to fail, and that it was very likely that Tara and William could not be sent back home together. Indeed, Eliza felt fairly sure that William could not be sent at all. How ironic that she could send far away the one she found so dear, and would be forced to keep the one she so disliked. Well, formerly disliked. In the space of an evening she had gone from wishing him dead, to wishing he and her
brother-in-law would disappear together, to perform--what was William's expression?--feats of
derring-do?--to thinking of him as a being worthy of consideration.

Sitting in front of the blazing fire, a calming cup of tea at her side, Eliza removed her shoes and
stockings, grounding herself. Her bare feet rested on the hearthstone. She drew her power from this
place. The earth fairly radiated it. How then could they fail?

She realized that the other witch, Willow, drew part of her immense power from and was influenced,
though unconsciously, by the Hellmouth. How could one live there and not come under its
poisonous influence? Eliza closed her eyes briefly and relived William's sacrifice of himself, closing
the damned place for good. How could she not offer him her strongest support?

As she understood it, the crisis facing them was to get William and Tara back to close the place
anew. Together. Eliza didn't claim to know all there was to know about time travel, but with the
other witch dead, Tara faced an enormous challenge, and William was vital to her chances of
success. Eliza knew that Tara was not as powerful as her dead lover was, and she would need all the
support she could muster. This new time line, created by Willow's sending William and Tara back,
created new problems if time were to be repaired and the Hellmouth closed anew. For good this time,
Eliza prayed.

She meditated upon the nature of time, using Indra's Web as a model, but thoughts of Tara and
William intruded. Resolutely, she returned to her meditation. She imagined infinity strung with
myriad parallel silver threads, crossed left and right with more silver threads, touching where they
crossed. Up and down, as far as she could see, still more silver threads, curtains of them, a universe
filled with silver webbing in multiple dimensions. At each of the infinite points they touched, a clear
crystal sphere connected each, glowing and reflecting every other sphere within them, dazzling in
their brilliance. Dimensions, time, and space. Tara and William again. Very well! Eliza growled,
shaking her head in frustration. If thoughts of them would intrude so annoyingly, she would look.

Tara and William, standing before a shaman, who performed their handfasting. They did not look
like themselves. Their dress was Celtic, their features did not resemble Tara and William as she knew
them, and William bore no taint of demon, but it was them.

A different time. Tara in childbed and William, exultant at the birth of his daughter, kissing them
both.

Eliza pushed the thoughts away, and then curious and against her better judgment, decided to explore
this thread. William lie mortally wounded on a battlefield, Tara frantically trying to stanch the blood
flow. Again, it did not look like them, but it was them, in an earlier incarnation.

And in a different time still-- "That is enough," Eliza spoke wearily. "I surrender."

She must let go! After long minutes of razor-sharp pain, and finally, submission and relief, she
returned to the problem at hand, this time with entire concentration.

~~~

Late that evening, back in their room after the dance, Spike washed again, not satisfied with the
footman's efforts in the cloakroom. He finished and lay back watching Tara undress.

She sat on the bench in front of the vanity, removing the pearl set. She looked for Spike in the vanity
mirror, but seeing no reflection, turned and smiled at him. "You looked cute dancing with Penny."

He shoved out his lower lip. "I'm not cute; I'm bad."
Tara's eyes crinkled with humor. "Yes, you're bad, but you're also very good. You looked sweet together." She unlaced her high-topped boots, removed them, and massaged her stocking feet.

"If Charles' family had their way again, they'd take her to London for a début, presentation at court, all that rot. Like they did with her stuck-up big sis. Ann says it's not their class's way--a generation ago, she'd have moved to her groom's farm, started a baby already."

Tara replied, "It doesn't matter--she's got a real vocation here. Both Ann and Miss Harkness think Penny will take over the place when they're gone." She came over to the bed and sat with her back to Spike. "Unbutton me?"

He complied, refraining from kissing her neck. He wanted her naked first.

"I hate to undress after a party," she said, holding the bodice with her hands on her ribs, turning from side to side in the mirror, enjoying one last look before removing it and starting on the skirt. "It's sort of sad. Like taking down a Christmas tree."

Momentarily distracted, Spike asked, "You Wiccans celebrate Christmas?"

She looked surprised. "We usually observe the tradition we were raised in, if only outwardly. I'm surprised you didn't notice. Here, it's part of 'passing' in the community. Most of the girls go to church. Mr. Maxwell and Alice go the synagogue in Bath on their holidays. By the way, the Marias asked me to a carol service in town tomorrow night. Unless...you want to come, too?" She started removing petticoats.

"Might do, if only to tag along to keep you safe. Probably sit it out in the carriage. Still not over Angelus sending his boys this far. Don't know if he knew what he was doing or just got lucky. He's one mighty pissed-off vampire I don't want to run into for a very long time."

Tara was untroubled. She went on, "They're not Wiccan, you know. Wicca's a new religion--I mean new in our time. It didn't really exist until the late 1940s-early '50s. They celebrate the old ways here--there are links back through time and the earth power. It's unusual to find somewhere with such a continuity, somewhere the old religion was never lost. There's real power here." Tara finally removed the hated corset with a whoop of relief, and was down to her snowy chemise. She started unpinning her hair.

Spike said, "C'mere. Let me. You got a curl that's puttin' me uptight. Want to play with it."
Chapter 27

The full moon was nearly upon them and the place had filled up. Tara and Spike did not have to give up their current accommodations, but the girls with their own rooms were relegated to the dormitory and slept double and triple in the beds. Witches from all over England, Scotland, and Wales had arrived, and several from the continent as well. Their teachers and local women, practitioners of majick, would be there, too. Tara was caught up in the preparations for the handfasting ceremony as well as the ritual that would return them to their own time.

Spike and Tara had announced their engagement over breakfast following the dance, and Penny piped innocently, "But I thought Mr. and Mrs. Southwood were already married." Ann and Charles exchanged helpless looks.

Ann said gently, "Dear, we may live in a Victorian house--"

The accurate Charles interjected, "--well not this one, but the one in London--"

Ann continued, "--and you know as well as I do that we don't necessarily subscribe to all of the conventions prescribed by the age we live in. The very nature of the group you find yourself in should teach you that things are not as they outwardly seem--"

Eliza interrupted flatly, "They are married, and have been. This is just a formality." Astounded looks met one another across the table, Spike and Tara's not the least of them.

There seemed to be no more to say upon the subject.

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Tara and Deborah found themselves in the sewing room again, this time cutting out a dress for the handfasting. "I want it to be something I'll wear again," Tara planned. "I think I'll wear it for the ceremony to send us home, too."

Deborah tried to talk her into an elaborate Victorian wedding dress, but not only was there not enough time, Tara wanted to look like herself. She had decided upon thin unbleached cotton batiste, trimmed with lace insets, and a straight, unfitted shape. Deborah found it to be too much like a chemise, but that's exactly why Tara wanted it. Spike would go wild.

Again, Deborah panted to know about the styles in Tara's time. Tara laughed. "I hate to tell you this, but the dress you wore last night is very like what modern brides wear. Long, sweeping, elaborate... You looked lovely." She looked abashed, then began tentatively, "Um, what did Miss Harkness mean when she said, that Mr. Southwood--well, you know we're not married yet--that we were already married?"

Deborah flushed but answered steadily, "No, I didn't know, but I do now. My parents are not as...careful as some might wish. My grandparents..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry. The atmosphere around here is somewhat bohemian. I don't mean to sit in judgment. My aunt must have meant that she discovered something about your past lives--yours and Mr. Southwood's. She has the Sight."
Tara took this in in silence. She thought about her feelings for Spike, and how she first felt about him. He was just another person on the periphery of the Slayer's charmed inner circle. Like she was. She liked him well enough, but had never felt any sense of predestination, let alone that they were soul mates. But she'd always considered him to be a person, not an evil dead thing like the others did. Earlier, when Buffy confessed that she'd been sleeping with Spike, Tara was startled and mildly interested. She was more disturbed about Buffy's anguish, which Tara frankly could not understand. Back then, they seemed admirably well suited to one another. Strong, intense, passionate. The only hold-up was Buffy's revulsion for Spike, and her revulsion at her own behavior, which Tara had to admit were big impediments.

She was not by nature introspective. She only knew that Spike was free of the past, and loved her, and she loved him. He'd moved on. The fires of the Hellmouth's closing seemed to have burned away the old Spike and left her Spike. She wondered if they would have fallen in love if they hadn't become castaways as they had. She had come to depend utterly on him, and couldn't imagine life without him. He fit her as perfectly as a stem fits a rose.

Her thoughts returned to her wedding dress. It was nearly done. She couldn't wait until Spike saw her in it.

~~~

Later, in their room, Tara fretted about which colors to choose for Freya's Knot, which would tie their hands, joining them. She'd brought a sheaf of parti-colored silk cords from the sewing room and spread them out on their bed.

Spike tried to be helpful. "This one's pretty." He fingered a brown one.

She lifted one eyebrow. "Brown's for healing animals."

He was unconcerned. "Sorry. Too bad we didn't have that on the road when the horse broke her leg." Suddenly he started. "Wait a minute! Think I cocked up. Is the dead horse and broken-down carriage still on the road leading here?"

Tara chuckled. "Don't worry--we were working on teleportation of large objects--getting ready for the big spell, you know. The dead horse we teleported to a spot out on the moors--probably eaten by wild animals now, the live one's back at Scotland Yard--"

"Bet they were surprised!" he interrupted. She added, "Bet he was!" They laughed together.

Tara finished, "--and the carriage was brought here and disassembled. It's down to parts now."

Spike's eyebrows rose in admiration. "A Victorian chop shop!" He laughed self-deprecatingly. "I'd make a terrible criminal--I'd forgotten all about it until you mentioned animals."

"That's not what I heard," she said archly, referring to his criminal past. He smirked. She continued, "Can we get back to the handfasting cord?"

"Sorry. How about this one?" He picked out a green cord and held it up to her cheek.

She gave him a lopsided smile. "Green's for fertility. Not germane in our case."

He lay back on the bed. "Love, gonna leave this up to you."

"No, help me decide. Okay, I'm torn between these: Dark blue's for a safe journey and longevity. Pink's for romance, honor, partnership and happiness. Red means courage, strength and passion. I
can't decide."

He was starting to get interested. "What do the rest mean?"

"Different things. Light blue is for understanding and patience. Yellow's wisdom and harmony, silver's creativity and protection, gold is for unity, prosperity, and longevity. White means peace, sincerity and devotion."

"Dark blue definitely. But I want 'em all. Why don't you pick what you want and braid 'em together? Want to tie you to me in all ways."

"Okay. You need to pick a Guardian."

He pretended to be offended. "I'll have you know I'm of age!"

She chuckled. "It's like a best man. I figured you'd pick Charles. Not a lot of choice here."

"I'd pick him anyway. Stout fellow. Good man to have at your back."

"Scared?" She gave him a sly sidelong glance.

He thumbed his chest. "Hey! Big Bad here."

She braided the cords, and said, "You want me to give you the big picture, or do you just want the high points?" She lay back and sighed happily.

Spike rolled toward her. "Been to enough weddings, haven't I? 'Course, I was usually breaking them up. Evenin' weddings. I wasn't a nice man."

"I think you're a nice man. You should let me brief you. This won't be like anything you're ever seen. No 'wilt thou' and 'I will.' There'll be a ritual and we have to make responses."

"Why don't you just give me the high points?" He smoothed the fabric of her shirtwaist, touching her high points.

She gasped, "If you think I can concentrate when you do that!"

He smirked and showed her the tip of his tongue. "I'll be good. Just give me my responses."

~~~

Later, Spike said, "It'll be good to get you home."

Tara said languidly, "Oh, I don't know."

He gave her an incredulous look. "Really. What will you miss?"

"Oh, some of the people, all the things I've been learning--"

"Too right. I never see you any more."

She gave him a little push. "I'm right here," she reminded him. She looked around. "This room. So pretty. I love antiques. Some of the clothes." She made a mouth. "Not the corsets. Or the food."

He said tentatively, "What if it doesn't work?" He hated to bring up the possibility of failure, but wanted to be honest with her.
"Miss Harkness has her doubts, I know, but Ann says, 'Never you fear.' If we had to stay, they'd let us stay here. As long as we're together...?"

"No! No, that won't do at all. Live long enough to lose you in the upcoming influenza pandemic, or adopt boys and lose 'em in the Boer war or on the Somme? Screw that. Gotta get you back."

"So we'd adopt girls."

"Glinda. Not stayin' here. Gotta get the hell outta Dodge."

"Well, it's going to be hard. Ann and Miss Harkness tried to explain it. It's not like throwing a baseball. It's more like tying a wire to a harpoon, and then to yourself, and throwing the harpoon. The first thing we transported was a mouse. It...didn't work." Spike felt her shiver. "I hate animal experimentation. But we worked the bugs out. When we sent the horse back to Scotland Yard, we sent it forward a week. Miss Harkness can see things from afar--she watched over it to make sure it arrived safely."

Spike watched Tara get up and put on her wrapper. "The ceremony's supposed to be held outside--for the power, you know. But we changed it because of--"

"My highly flammable nature?"

"Yes, sorry." She smiled. "The handfasting ceremony and the spell to send us back are going to be back-to-back." She flushed faintly. "Don't be surprised if Miss Harkness tells us to excuse ourselves to go make love. That's part of it, too."

Spike just raised one eyebrow.

She added, "It's all about power. Gathering enough energy to do this. It's going to take a lot."

He got up and joined her by the window, standing behind the curtain. "Don't know much about back to back, but I'm hell with front to front. Lotta power."

"Oh, look!" Something outside captured her interest.

"Can't look--flammable, remember? Tell me."

"Blackbirds. I just learned a divination spell--it's very old:

One crow for bad news, two crows for mirth;
Three for a wedding, four for a birth;
Five for treasure, six for a thief;
Seven a journey and eight is grief..."

"How many?"

"Three--a wedding. And then seven!"

"And a wedding night--let's practice some more."

She carefully closed the curtains as Spike pulled her into his arms and then took her back to bed. They did not see the eighth crow join the other seven.
Chapter 28

It dawned fair the day of Spike and Tara's handfasting. The moon would be full that night. The Lovejoys at the Grange had caught wind of the upcoming nuptials, and not completely unaware of the debt they owed Spike and Charles, sent over bottles of wine and boxes of hothouse flowers. Tara took a dozen roses to make a wreath for her hair.

The Maxwell's big meeting hall was warm and smelled of roses and beeswax. In the middle of the room, lit candles delineated a circle divided into four quarters with four little altars, and a large altar stood in the middle. Since no one stepped into the sacred circle, Spike avoided it, too.

Resplendent in Charles' best suit, Spike paced nervously. The room was full of many of the coven's members and witches ringed the building as well. He could see them through the northern windows, the rest of the windows curtained in consideration of his sensitivity to sunlight. Thin winter morning sunshine shone down.

Spike looked closer at the women outside the windows. He could see bare feet. "That can't be right," he said to Charles. "Won't they take cold?"

Charles explained, 'It's for the ceremony. They are usually held out of doors, and usually 'in the altogether,' although since we're here--you and I--they're keeping their clothing on. Their bare feet are to ground them--connect them to the power of the earth. At this advanced stage of their training, they don't feel the cold much."

Spike was amazed. "That could come in handy. I near-killed my girl bringing her here, having her out in the cold so much. You mean they have control over their bodies?"

"Yes, just so. I understand that normal aging is held off, too, although not indefinitely."

It was too much to take in. To a vampire, the thought of Tara living a long time was seductive, but he was too nervous to entertain the thought right now. He felt as though he were forgetting something.

"Got the rings?"

Charles patted his coat pocket and spoke reassuringly. "Right here. Are you pleased with what I picked for you to give her?"

Spike wanted to embrace him. "Charles, I couldn't have done better! She'll love it. Still need to pay you, though."

Charles squeezed Spike's shoulder. "We'll talk of it later. Oh, look sharp; it's about to begin."

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Spike spent the ceremony in a bemused dream. He could not believe that he, William the Bloody, was getting married. At the first sight of Tara, his heart leapt in his chest. Who could have guessed that all the clichés of joy had basis in fact? His elation was so high the happiness wanted to bubble up in laughter. He just looked at her, his eyes dancing.

She was led in by Penelope. What had Tara called her--the Maiden? He didn't remember all the roles
they had to play. Her attendants were the two Marias and the Maxwell girls, their brunette beauty setting off Tara's fairness like a lily in a bed of dark roses. They took their places at the four equidistant altars in the circle, and Tara moved to his side. He took her hand and with difficulty refrained from kissing her.

Miss Harkness officiated. To Spike, she looked even more grimly self-controlled than usual. The ceremony began with a, "Hail and welcome!" and a prayer: "Lord and Lady, You have made the bond of marriage a holy mystery, a symbol of Your love for us. Hear our prayers for William and Tara. With abiding faith in You, and continuing faith in each other, they will pledge their love today. May their lives always bear witness to the reality of that love. We make this prayer in the name of all that is. So mote it be."

Eliza knelt before the altar and lit the one of the pair of candles there--the Lady candle, Tara had called it. "Great Mother, whom I serve, please be here now as William and Tara intend to join one another in the sacrament of marriage." She lit the Lord candle. "Beloved Father, whom I adore, please be here now as Tara and William intend to join one another in the sacrament of marriage."

Spike couldn't stop smiling, and forgot each response until Tara gave him a subtle mental nudge. He took in the details of her diaphanous dress, with angel-wing sleeves and the wreath of roses in her hair. He felt a chill. What had a blackguard like him ever done to earn the love of an angel like her? He didn't deserve such happiness. With an effort, he pushed aside his apprehension and concentrated on Tara.

There were lighting of candles, incense raised in a censer, and bells rung. He couldn't take his eyes off Tara. She kept her eyes lowered, and beneath the crown of flowers, her hair was down, shadowing her cheeks. The long ceremony passed in a glorious blur, and at one point, Eliza asked him a question. He started, and refrained from saying, "Huh?"

Tara prodded him gently. She whispered, "She wants to know how long? A year and a day, or--"

"A year and a day, definitely."

Tara looked a little hurt, and Spike whispered hastily, "For you. Might be sick of me by then. Want to give you an 'out.'"

She whispered firmly, "Never, never..."

Eliza said in a loud, flat voice, "A year and a day it is."

There were prayers to their two gods and various elementals: the powers of the air, earth, fire, and water, and the four directions. At one point, he was sprinkled with water by one Maria and with earth by the other Maria. He couldn't wait for the complicated ritual to be done and for the time when he could be alone with Tara.

Finally, Charles came forward and laid the rings on a small silver plate upon the altar.

Eliza turned towards Penelope, and said, "Do you know the name of this woman?"

Penny responded, "She is Tara Maclay."

"Can you vouch for her being free to marry this man?"

"Yes, I can."

Eliza turned toward Charles. "What is the name of this man?"
"He is William Southwood."

"Can you vouch for his being free to marry this woman?"

Charles said, "Yes, I can."

Eliza turned toward Tara and said, "Tara, have you come here of your own free will and accord, without coercion or false pretense?"

She smiled at Spike and said, "I have."

Eliza said to him, "William, have you come here of your own free will and accord, without coercion or false pretense?"

He said, "I have."

Eliza said, "Then you may proceed."

Penny held up the plate with the rings so that Spike and Tara could reach them, and Eliza said to Spike, "William, only you have the power to marry this woman, your best friend and partner, who stands beside you. Do you now wish to have Tara as your wife, knowing her as you do?"

"I do."

"Then take your own ring, and place it on Tara's hand."

Tara removed Spike's mother's solitaire and Spike put the wedding band on her left ring finger, and she put the solitaire on with it. He seized her hand and kissed it.

Eliza frowned and said, "Tara, only you have the power to marry this man, your best friend and partner, who stands beside you. Do you now wish to have William as your husband, knowing him as you do?"

She smiled at Spike mistily and said, "Oh, yes!"

"Then take your own ring, and place it on William's hand."

Tara took her class ring and whispered, "I'm sorry there's no other. I'll get it sized, though." It didn't fit, so she slipped it on the first joint of his little finger.

He whispered back, "I'll wear it 'round my neck."

Eliza said to him, "William, repeat after me: 'I, William Southwood, commit myself to be with Tara in joy and adversity, in wholeness and brokenness, in peace and turmoil, living with her faithfully. May the Gods give me the strength to keep these vows. So be it.'"

He did so.

Then she turned to Tara. "Tara, repeat after me: 'I, Tara Maclay, commit myself to be with William in joy and adversity, in wholeness and brokenness, in peace and turmoil, living with him faithfully. May the Gods give me the strength to keep these vows. So be it.'"

Tara repeated the words, never taking her eyes off Spike as she spoke.

Eliza then spoke to the gathering, "And now we will consider the symbolism of handfasting: the tying of the knot that will join the bride and groom together in marriage."
Charles brought forward the braided cord and handed it to Eliza, who continued, "The handfasting knot, which binds two lovers' hands together, represents their sincere and hopeful intention to make an indissoluble union. Tara and William, join your left hands."

Spike and Tara, who had been holding hands throughout the ceremony, now took each other's left hand. Eliza tied their hands together with the braided cord.

Eliza said, "Now raise your hands together, so that all may see."

They did so.

She intoned, "Made to measure, wrought to bind, blessed be, these lives entwined! By the powers vested in me by the Lord and Lady, I now pronounce you husband and wife." As though she hated to say it, she added, "You may kiss now."

They kissed, and tears spilled down Tara's cheeks. Spike brushed them away with his free hand. She whispered, "Rain is good luck for a wedding."

Eliza continued, "What you have here done together with one another, let no one break apart. May the Lord and Lady take notice of, and be favorably inclined toward your union, and may you be blessed with health, prosperity and fruitfulness, from this day forth and forevermore. So mote it be!" She turned abruptly and took a wine decanter from the altar behind her. "And now, as in all marriages, you have certain duties towards each other." She poured wine into a cup, and put it in the couple's bound together left hands. Tara took Spike's right hand in hers. Eliza then took the ceremonial knife from the altar and put it into the couple's right hands, above the cup. Their joined hands and arms made a figure eight, the sign of infinity.

Tara gave Spike a look that said, Remember? and he smiled back. They spoke in unison: "As the knife is to the lover, so is the cup to the beloved." They lowered the knife into the cup, saying together: "And conjoint, they bring blessedness." They drank from the cup.

Eliza said reluctantly, "Now you must go and--well, I won't say consummate your union, but you must...couple."

Spike said, "Must we? Well, if we must..."

"Yes, Miss Harkness. Thank you." Trying hard not to laugh, Tara pulled him away, and they hurried from the hall.

Hugging and pulling away, taking turns leading one another, they ran to their room. Tara said, "You are so bad--you shouldn't tease her."

He squeezed her, saying, "Last thing on my mind--she'll get me back--try for jus primae noctis." He ran his free hand down her back, distracted. "What you got on under this?"

"What about her?"

"You didn't notice? Maybe I shouldn't say. Poor dear--it sticks out in lumps all over her. You're right; I shouldn't tease. Sod knows I know enough about unrequited love."

She kissed him softly. "Not any more."

He grinned. "That's right--I'm a happily married man. Here, stop huggin' me, I'm trying to get unbuttoned--" They were at their bedroom door. "Untie me. Wanna carry you over the threshold properly."
She untied the knot and threw the cord over his neck, pulling him into a kiss. He seized her up in his arms and carried her into their room.

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Tara flung off her crown of flowers, which landed in the middle of their bed. Her fingers flew over his buttons, trying to undress him. She frowned humorously over his many and complicated fastenings. In frustration, she'd stop briefly and hug him, laughing softly into his shirtfront. "Help me!" she begged, laughing. "Rip it!"

He could see her reflection in the mirror on the wardrobe door, and it disturbed him to see her hugging a phantom. In the past, he had sometimes enjoyed playing erotic games with a human lover, his lack of reflection, and a mirror. It amused him to see the Slayer, spread out and stretched open by an invisible lover. He shook off the disquieting thought and looked down at his beautiful bride. "Here, enough of this!" He pulled her long loose dress over her head and tossed it over the wardrobe door, shielding the mirror from his view. "That's better. Let me help you." Together they unbuttoned his elaborate dress suit and he stood before her. Slowly, he pulled her thin slip off. "I knew it. No corset, Mrs. Southwood? I am shocked. Shocked."

"Oh, shut up." She pushed him backwards onto the bed and climbed on top of him.

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After their third or fourth time, Spike lay back, his brains leaking pleasantly out of his ears. "You're an insatiable little chit. You're going to wear your old man out."

"Bull."

"Well, yes, I am very much like a bull, now that you mention it."

"Mmmm. Anyway, I'm not hard to satiate. I just like to be satiated...a lot." She punctuated her words with kisses.

"A lot's my favorite number."

"You take such good care of me. Will you always take care of me?"

"Always. I promise."

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Later, Spike asked, "D'you wish any of your family could have been here?"

Tara smiled. "My mother."

"I'm sorry," he began to say.

She shook her head happily. "She was here." She pillowed her head on his chest and smiled up at him. "She likes you."

Spike just stared at her.

~~~

They spent the whole day in bed. At one point, Spike heard a soft noise at the door. Someone had left a tray holding a lavish cold lunch, a pot of tea, a beaker of blood, and a bottle of wine, all neatly
covered with a white cloth. He fed Tara wedding cake in bed.

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Some time after sunset, Tara sat up. "It's time."

"Huh?"

"It's time to get back. Can't you feel it?"

Even Spike, who did not possess Tara's psychic gifts, could sense the building energy in the house. The air itself felt electric, as though a storm were coming.

They got dressed. Spike told her to take his mother's jewelry (still in the fat purse sewn to the bottom of the corset), but to leave the money for the Maxwells. He felt that it was little enough for all they'd done for them. About to send him and his girl back to the land of central heating. Spike could have kissed them.

They walked slowly back to the meeting hall. "Are you scared?" Spike asked.

"A little. I don't remember much about coming here. I was in such a panic."

He stroked her back. "You've got your corset back on." He sounded disappointed, but continued, "The first trip--the trip to fetch you, I remember not being able to breathe. Not that I need to, but it's an odd sensation. Don't let it throw you--I'll be right with you."

Tara's eyes grew round. "Willow! She'll be there."

"'Spect so. Didn't you say Ann 'n' Eliza said they're sending us back to the moment of departure?"

"Yes, they say it's like a beacon. Kind of like...we blazed a path coming here, and it left a visible trail. They're aiming for the moment we came through." She looked upset. "That means either Willow will be there--"

"Pissed off," Spike inserted helpfully.

"--or she'll be--"

"Dead," he finished quietly. She dropped her eyes. He took her in his arms and held her closely. "Sorry to be blunt, love, but 'moment of departure' means we may pop up on her deathbed. Wish it weren't so. God knows I've been round and round this in my mind--'did us coming back here change the future, and maybe she's there and all right?' I don't know. But I expect we'll know soon enough. Got to be strong."

Tara said in a hushed voice, "She'll be so angry."

"You don't...?" Spike began hesitantly.

She threw her head back. "Regret this? Not for an instant! I love you so much." She buried her face in his shirt front again.

Satisfied, Spike said, "We'll sort her out. I think we can handle anything. I've had nothing but good luck since I hooked up with you. You broke my duck."

Startled, Tara stifled a giggle. "Is that something sexual?"
"It means... what are you doing?"

"Feeling to see how badly broken your...duck is. Feels okay. Kind of swollen, though."

"Why you little...!" He seized her up and set her on a windowsill, and started undoing his trousers.

Giggling, she wriggled loose and said, "We have to get back. The ritual--"

"Can't go on without us. Now get back here!"

"Well, all right." She melted against him again.

He groaned and said, "Oh, Christ, can't we just--no, you're right. Gotta get back." He grumbled good-humoredly, "Keep taking my mind off--"

They were nearly there. Changing the subject, Tara asked, "Where will we live?"

"Not in my crypt--that's for damn sure. Not posh enough by half--"

"I had a room off-campus, before Willow and I got back together. I think I still have it. Will have it, I mean. But it's about the size of a broom closet, and only has a single bed."

"Never mind. Got some money stashed--want to take you on a honeymoon. What do you say to a little B & B up the coast, with a fireplace and a hot tub?"

"Heaven!" She clung to him.

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In the great hall, the ceremony had segued into what Spike thought of as 'the big blow-off.' Ann instructed them to take their place in the sacred circle, patting Tara as she did so. She whispered, "Good work." Spike had a slightly embarrassed sense that it was approval for his yeoman's efforts in the bedroom, and Tara's, too, helping generate energy for the ritual.

It was a pleasure to help.

Ann embraced and kissed Tara and squeezed Spike's hand. Charles and Spike hugged and clapped one another on the back. Eliza gave Tara a chaste kiss on the brow, and nodded formally to Spike. He felt as though it were a huge concession on her part, and gave her his first genuine smile. She looked uncomfortable and quickly glanced away. Tara gave farewell hugs to the Marias, Penny, and Deborah. She whispered in Deborah's ear, "Wear the pretty undies for you-know-who." Deborah looked startled.

The rest of the girls called out their good-byes. Mlle LaPensee cried, "Bon chance, M'sieu Southwood!"

He answered, "Merci, ma cherie!"

The rising tide of energy had faltered only slightly with the farewells, and the women returned to the business of raising and channeling enough power to send Spike and Tara back to their own time.

Spike remembered the first time he time-traveled. Not a throbbing dynamo this time; Willow's power had been almost...artificial, monstrously augmented by the Hellmouth as it was--this was more like a force of nature, a rising windstorm, and all the coven's power combined, he feared, was still not as powerful as Willow alone.
Perhaps that was why Eliza couldn't meet his eyes.

With rising apprehension, he looked around the room. He could see the coveners circled about him and Tara, and through the windows, he could see the rest of the group, witches from the neighborhood and their visitors from afar, ringing the farmhouse in a great circle in the moonlight.

Spike and Tara sat face to face in the little circle, their hands joined. He could hear her heart start to hammer, over the coven's chanting.

He felt her start to slip away from him. Her eyes grew wide with fear and she gripped him, hanging on like death. The chanting became louder, and again he felt her grow insubstantial. Without letting go of his hands, she climbed into his lap, and then locked her arms and legs around him, shuddering with fear. In a panic, he gripped her, too. The chanting grew louder still, and a rising wind blew around them.

Imbued with empathy he did not ordinarily feel, Spike could sense their efforts. The women tried and tried, but it was no good. One of the schoolgirls, Costanza Mital, began to bleed from the eyes. Jane Brumwell and Maudie Spottiswode fainted, and Victoria Heaton developed a sudden nosebleed. He could see more than one of the older barefooted women outside, collapse from the effort. Theirs was a heroic effort, a mighty force of nature, but ineffective. On him, at least. What was he but a vampire, outside of nature?

Finally, unable to take it any longer, Spike pushed Tara off his lap and stepped out of the circle.

She cried shrilly, "What are you doing? Come back here!"

He grabbed her hand, jerked her up, and dragged her from the room. As it is in any time or place, the coven was treated to the supremely uncomfortable experience of listening to a married couple quarrel.

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In the corridor outside the meeting hall, Spike said roughly, "Look. Sending you alone. I'll catch up."

"No!" Tara shouted.

"Yes! Not gonna give the old ladies an aneurysm over this!" he shouted back, and then deliberately lowered his voice. "Look. What's that science thing?"

"What!" She sounded incredulous, looking at him as though he had gone insane.

"That bloody 'butterfly wings that start a typhoon' thing. That's you. You've got to be that. Go back and close the Hellmouth."

"I can't!"

"Don't worry, I'll catch up."

"Don't worry? Are you crazy? I can't do this alone!"

"I'll catch up. They'll rest a bit and send me later."

"No!"

Eliza said, "Now."
She stood in the doorway, staring at them. "If you're going to do this, the time is now."

The look on Tara's face was that of utter desolation. Spike pushed her. "Go on. You know what's at stake. I'll catch up."

Eliza led her away and pushed her into the circle. Tara's eyes never left his, but he did not go to her or even step into the room. The tsunami of power needed a vent, and Tara was swept up almost immediately. The last thing Spike saw before Tara shimmered out of sight was her grief-stricken face. He couldn't hear her over the rushing air, but he saw her mouth shape the words, "Come back to me."

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The wind died down and the chanting stopped. The energy dissipated. She was really gone.

Spike roared, "God DAMN it!" He glared at Charles. "'Change the course of world events', huh?" He shifted his fierce regard to Ann, like a fencer taking on his next opponent. "'Never you fear,' huh?" He rounded on the group. "All of you, working together, and you can't send one bloody, buggering, Christless--" His voice broke, nearly weeping.

"And you!" he bellowed at Eliza. "Teach you about time travel--I'll knock you into next week!" He had gone vamp-face, but she didn't flinch away from him. She lifted eyes just as nakedly hurt as his own. At her look of commiseration, he felt a first flicker of comfort, but turned abruptly away before he started crying in front of her. His fierce face dissolved.

Ann approached tentatively. She reached her hand toward his hair, which had gone entirely white. "I thought it was just a legend," she said wonderingly.

"What?" he snapped impatiently, as though she were the crassest of fools. "Oh," he said, suddenly realizing. "The hair." He raked his fingers through his hair, suddenly too tired to speak, but finished in a whisper, "It was only a glamour. She said to stay close. Stay close, or I'd change."

Ann reached out to stroke his hair, but he flinched away from her even as Eliza pulled Ann back. He snarled, "Madam, do not attempt to condole with me." His last words were nearly inaudible. "Please, Ann."

Eliza just jerked her chin toward Charles. Ann took the hint and dropped her hand. She said evenly, "Of course not, dear. It's too soon for that. I leave you in the hands of my good husband."

Ann turned to the girls, all business. She clapped. "Girls! Leave at once."

Eliza had already gathered up the other wounded and left.

Gutted by grief, Spike allowed himself to be led away by Charles.

End Book One
Chapter 29

Book Two

Charles could see the terrible shape Spike was in as he led him down the hall, piloting him slowly to the library. It broke his heart to see how Spike's head hung down, and that he permitted himself to be guided, like a blind man.

As they approached the door to the library, Spike finally uttered a wordless sound of protest, tossing his head like a half-wild horse about to bolt, trying to shake Charles' hand off in the process. Charles locked his arm around Spike's shoulders. "Come along, old son. Got something for the pain--ten year old single malt."

"Nnn-- Don't want to hurt you. Want to hurt something... badly." Spike sounded as if he were going to erupt.

"Need to strike something? Strike me." Charles was completely sincere. He would have given much to ease his friend's pain.

Spike just looked at him. "Daft..." he muttered, hooking his arm around Charles' neck and holding his head to Charles', his eyes squeezed shut. His face clenched and it looked as though he might weep.

Charles gave Spike a brief hug. "Here now. Let's get you that medicine I promised." A hand on Spike's elbow, Charles opened the study door and steered him in.

Spike took off his coat and tore off the collar, throwing them in the process. Charles watched as Spike glanced around the room, apparently looking for something else to throw. Charles handed him a drink instead, and Spike downed it, throwing the glass, too.

Charles handed Spike his own glass and said, "Break this, too. Break several if you need to."

Spike looked at him helplessly. Charles could see that his friend was about to weep. To give him privacy, Charles made a business of removing his own coat and loosening his collar, folding and laying his own coat over the back of the horsehair sofa. He turned and poured himself a drink. When he turned back to his friend, Spike had gotten himself under a semblance of control.

Charles asked, "Would you like me to build a fire?"

Spike threw himself into the chair opposite Charles. "Better not, just yet. Feel a little too much like setting myself on fire right now."

"Ah, yes. The suttee. In your shoes I know I'd feel the same." He shook his head in bafflement, and exclaimed, "What the devil happened back there? I was sure-- The last time we hosted such a crowd was to repel some villainous pan-dimensional force that Eliza sniffed out, and were successful! Never even made it in the door. But this! I don't understand."
Spike answered dolorously, "Why not? When Willow could do it alone? Easy. She was angry and jealous when she saw me grab her girl. Thought, 'evil, dead thing--kill!' and zapped me. The pedal got goosed."

Charles looked at him with deep concern. Perhaps Spike needed...help for his melancholia, because clearly, he'd become unhinged.

"Sorry, Charles. It's an automotive allusion. An engineer needs a way to control an engine's power, else how when you're pulling into Paddington do you stop and not continue on to Greenwich? You control the power. 'Goosing it' is the opposite--sending a hellaciously strong bolt of energy, meant to punish me, but incidentally sending us a wee bit further than Greenwich. 'Sides, at the last instant, her soul was probably leaving her body. Got shot, herself. The thing she sent me back to prevent happened to her instead. Who knows what effect it had on the spell?"

He ruffled his newly white hair. "Not only that--but she was freakishly powerful. I saw her go from a pencil-floating little chit of a girl to a full-fledged force to be reckoned with. She had learned to control it and use it for good, but that corrupting effect power sometimes has--you mentioned it before--I think it seduced her again. 'Sides, she wanted Tara back. Who wouldn't?' He sighed deeply. "Bring her back from the dead? Tamper with nature? Why not? Seems like a good idea to me."

Grieving for his friend, Charles didn't answer. He just poured them both another drink.

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It comforted Spike to talk about her.

Several bottles later, he and Charles were horizontal, extolling the beauties of their respective beloveds, in no more maudlin a fashion than could be expected. Spike was stretched out on the sofa, one arm around Charles' chest, who was sprawled out on the hearthrug, head and shoulders leaned up against the sofa seat.

"She's got the most beautiful tits," Spike was saying, "and the look she gets when I--"

"Oh, I love that look!" Charles agreed enthusiastically.

"Yeah, and she loves me." Wonder crept into his voice. "Never thought I'd be loved, bein' what I am. Happiest day of my life, today, then whambo! The Powers That Be kick me in the arse. If I don't get her back--" His voice broke. After a long moment, he regained control of himself enough to speak normally. '"Course, wouldn't be all blood and puppies, if I do get back. There's that last Big Bad to sort out and we'd have a hell of a time explaining ourselves to the bloody Scoobies."

Charles looked up at Spike. "What are Scoobies?"

"Slayer's pals. Her backup. Sort of like Eliza an' the rest are to Ann. Bleedin' Scoobies never did like me. Slayer treated me like something to be ashamed of, during most of our acquaintance, so afraid was she of what they'd think of us."

"I know. My family sat shiva for a week when I told them of my engagement to Ann. Never did warm to her, either, though they love the girls." He returned to, "You're not worried your Tara won't stand up for you." Charles gripped Spike's shoulder reassuringly. "You're worried about her going up against--what did Ann call it?--the First Evil?--without backup." Spike closed his eyes briefly. Charles continued, "Of course you're dying to get back to her, but you know, there're two ways of traveling in time--the fast way you and she did, leapfrogging 120 years, and the way she was sent
back, but there's also the way the rest of us 'travel in time.' By living."

Spike shook his head vehemently. "Not good enough. When m'not so drunk, gonna pay your sister-in-law a little call, see if that's all that can be done. Not gonna take this lying down."

With her arms full of quilts, Ann looked in on the men around three. They were fast asleep, Spike abed on the sofa, curled toward Charles, and Charles asleep in an uncomfortable-looking half-sitting position on the floor, head pillowed on Spike's arm. Good boys. She knew Charles would take care of the poor lad. Her heart ached for him. She covered them both and withdrew silently.

Around ten, Spike awoke with a scorching hangover. "Ready for that fire now--wanna throw myself on it."

"Me first," Charles groaned from the floor. He gasped with pain, "Oh, my neck. I think it's permanently damaged." He struggled to a sitting position, trying to straighten his neck.

"Here. Lemme." He sat on the sofa, with Charles on the floor in front of him in position for Spike to manipulate Charles' head, neck, and shoulders. When he had Charles loosened up, he gave Charles' head a quick turn. With an audible crack, Charles found himself able to straighten his neck once more.

"Amazing! Thank you. That is a help. Now if you could just do something about this headache..."

He smiled ruefully.

Spike said modestly, "Bein' a vampire gives one an unusually good feel for the anatomy of the neck. Glad to put it to good use for once."

Charles smiled back at Spike, and then looked beyond him to the windows. "Here, this won't do!" Bright winter sunshine shone in. Charles hurried to the window, drawing the curtains. "That could have been lethal, man."

"Honestly, Charles? Don't much care." Spike was feeling hopeless once more. Hopeless and hung over. "Before I forget, sorry I yelled at you."

"Eh?"

"Last night. In the meetin' hall."

"Oh, that. My friend, you were in extremis. Please don't think of it."


"Dear boy." Charles looked at him helplessly, wishing for the ability to say something, anything that would help.

"It's okay, Charles. Nothing to be done about it. Better go get your breakfast."

At those words, Charles turned a delicate shade of green and hurried from the room, though not in search of breakfast.
Three-quarters of an hour later, Charles returned, his complexion less bilious than before. He brought a beaker of blood. "Ann sent this. Thought you might need it."

Now it was Spike's turn to go queasy, but he thanked Charles, and told him to thank Ann for him.

"She knows. Mind if I spend the day here with you? The ladies are sorting out last night's aftermath, and several of their husbands are doing driving to the train station, so I'm at loose ends."

"I'm glad to have you, but I'm the guest here. This is your study. But I don't really want to go back to--" He couldn't bear to think of the room he shared with Tara, with its empty bed. He shoved aside the thought and said, "Thanks for letting me bed down here. If you don't mind...?"

"Not at all! Not at all! Stay as long as you want. I mostly just use it to get away from 'my seraglio,' as you call them. They don't like my cigars, anyway." At the mention of cigars, Charles got a little ill once more, and to distract himself, said, "I'm going away soon anyway. Business trip to Russia—to look at some forests the company is considering buying. I'm told the snow is nearly gone, and the roads are passable now."

Spike had a sudden thought—and the thought of damaging the future by revealing too much to Charles' group be damned. "No, you want to stay out of Russia right now. Tsar Alexander's going to be assassinated shortly and it's not safe. Regular bloodbath it was--Dru loved it. You may be English but a lot of your co-religionists will die in the rioting that follows."

"Eh?"

"Bloody Russians killed two of their tsars in as many generations. Bad as the Americans for killin' their leaders, but at least the Yanks leave the families alone. Promise me you'll wait. Or send someone else."

Charles marveled. "Of course you would know what is to happen, having lived through it once already! I never thought to ask—"

Spike spoke suddenly, "Here's a thought. Was plannin' on keeping mum--well, as mum as possible for a man who likes to talk as much as I do--not wanting to damage the time line any more than already has been damaged...by us coming here. But I was looking for a way to pay you. Tell you things that might be useful to an investor such as yourself, or just keep you safe."

Charles' eyes grew round, and spoke slowly. "This is perfect. I mean, this comes at the perfect time. I was planning on leaving my partners, going into business for myself. Ann's thought--her dream, really--is that the coven will outlive us, and I wanted to set up a company that would see that it is taken care of, once we're gone." He seized Spike's arm. "Don't you see? You're immortal, and now the coven will be, too! Didn't you say that it was extant in your time?"

"Knew there was a coven in Westbury. They lent a hand when Willow went all 'Wicked Witch of The West.' (Sorry--another cultural reference.) That's why Tara an' me headed here. She sensed you, too. Don't know if it's one and the same."

"Perhaps it is, because of you." Charles hastened to add, "This will be for you, too. You won't stand to lose by this."

"Don't worry about me--I always get by," Spike said indifferently.

Charles spoke encouragingly. "I think you'll find it's different now. You've got a soul. It won't be the same--living opportunistically. You'll find meaning in your suffering, and turn it into gold."
Spike snorted.

Charles continued confidently, "I have faith in you. You've got a mission--or you'll find one; you'll need funds." He gave a short delighted laugh. "It's just as Ann said: 'Perhaps we should pay him!'"

The rest of the day, Spike and Charles made plans for financing the coven, Spike providing information that Charles' new group would find useful. Charles mentioned a young business partner he would be taking on. "Not sure if you were introduced at the dance. I'll have to make you known to him. He'll be taking over eventually, since he is to be--" Charles voice dropped an octave and thrilled with antipathy "--my son-in-law."

Spike looked blank.

Charles sighed. 'I'm not surprised you don't remember. Fitzhugh's a forgettable young man, but unfortunately, he's Deborah's choice. She met him last season in London. He'll do well enough in business, though, and it's he who Deborah wants-- After what her mama and I went through to get married, we swore if he wasn't an utter bounder, she could have him.'

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A century of mayhem didn't exactly leave Spike in the know about every world event and stock to invest in, but he could tell of general trends, and hell, what art to buy! Who knew to buy Renoir, Picasso, Monet, other investments? He remembered and dictated, and Charles made notes, broken down by decade. The further in the future, the more Spike's statements were lost on Charles. What in the world did he mean by "buy stock in that appalling Scottish hamburger chain," or "watch for two lads named Steve in northern California, who'll turn the computer industry on its ear"? Charles shook his head. He would have to take Fitzhugh fully into his confidence and impress upon him the importance of this. Besides, as time passed, Fitzhugh would have his proof, and his children would have more.

Charles already believed in Spike.

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At sunset, Spike sought out Eliza's stone hut. He'd been given vague directions: 'beyond the beech grove,' but it didn't matter. He could smell her.

He carried an axe. The hangover had abated somewhat but he still had a ferocious amount of rage and frustration to discharge.

He found what he wanted. There was a pile of timbers that needed chopping, and remnants of the carriage that carried him and Tara from London to the West Country. He removed his coat and shirt. He didn't sweat, but there was no point in ruining any more of Charles' clothing. He chopped and split wood until he was tired and had a pile nearly as tall as he.

He looked up and Eliza was standing beside him. He hadn't noticed her approach. She didn't thank him, but looked at the pile of firewood and kindling with approval. She spoke briskly, "Feeling better?"

"Not much."

"Come here." She turned and went into her little house, not waiting to see if he followed. He put his shirt back on and buttoned it, then picked up an armful of firewood and followed her.

She had set the table with tea things, and was pouring. "You take whisky in your tea?"
He shrugged.

She answered for him, "I daresay the hair of the dog's not amiss today. I can make a potion if you think it's necessary."

He spoke roughly. "Look--didn't come here for a potion. Straight to the point--is there any help for this? You don't know what she's up against. She's not Willow. She'll...be so sad." And appalled at himself, he started to cry. He bolted from the cottage.

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Hitting his head repeatedly against a tree, Spike could not, could *not*, believe he broke down like he had. And in front of her! This was too much. He cast about in his mind for some kind of violence he could do. To her? No. He was ferociously angry at her last evening, but ironically, she offered him the first comfort. Violence to himself? Greet daylight? That sounded better. A gang of vampires or demons needing killing sounded best of all. What had Charles said about Eliza "sniffing out evil"? Perhaps she could put him onto someone or something that needed killing.

Knowing that Eliza was coming up behind him, Spike turned and looked at her, still mortified that she'd seen him break down.

"Come back. I have a proposal for you," she said.
"Come back in." Eliza strode away.

Reluctantly, Spike did as she asked. He accepted the tea, noting it was nearly half whisky. He sat down and took a sip, looking at her, waiting for her to say something, any\thing that could possibly help.

Eliza began abruptly, "I agree with you. Mrs. Southwood will need a hand. What I propose is this: I'll continue to look for a way to send you to her, although I'm not optimistic about my chances, and meanwhile I'll lay plans to help her myself."

Miserable with envy, he said, "Plannin' on taking a little trip yourself, then?"

"No, not a trip. I'm needed here. Unfortunately, I'm needed there as well. My plan is to do both."

"Um, hate to break it to you, but you do know it's 121 years in the future. I wouldn't presume to guess a lady's age, but I expect that'd put you right up there in years, you plannin' on stickin' around that long."

"That's precisely what I do plan to do," she said simply.

"What – you're just going to live until you say 'when'? Nice trick." He pursed his lips and looked profoundly disbelieving. "I'm not biting you."

Eliza ignored his comment and continued, "It's a simple matter of mental discipline and maintaining the body's defenses against illness and inevitable decrepitude. I have a great deal of control over avoiding injuries as well."

Spike smiled faintly. "'Mind over matter,' eh? Show any of that to Tara when she was here?"

"She wasn't here long enough, and there were matters more pressing. We taught her what we could. If there had been more time... But I can go into that with her when I see her again," she finished briskly. She held herself very erect. "What about you? If I cannot send you back, what will you do?"

Spike was silent for a long moment. "Well, I'm not gonna go evil, if that's what you're worried about. I know if I make it – stick around until 2002 rolls around a second time, I'll see her again, but it'll be...different." He shut his mouth with a snap.

"Are you afraid of the man you will become in the intervening years?" She didn't look really interested in his answer, and Spike wondered where she was steering the conversation.

Impatiently, he burst out, "Don't you see? I'll have changed. I'm not a careful person. If I don't get staked or, hell, pass out drunk and wake up on fire some morning, it'll be completely different! She'll have changed, too. Everything'll be different." He wanted to hit something once more, got a shaky hold of himself, and finished sulkily, "It's cruel. I've done a lot – well, done a lot that's wrong, too – probably why the Powers are punishing me. But I don't think it's right to be separated from her that long. Sometimes I think it'd be better just to kill me now."
Eliza looked as close to sympathetic as was possible for her and said quietly, "We don't shoot our wounded."

Spike didn't answer, his jaw jumping.

She began tentatively, "There is one thing I want of you. I am going to need help. I've got a lot to do, keeping this place safe, and laying in stores of power to keep myself going, if I'm going to help your wife. What I ask is this: if I sense miscreants that I cannot handle myself, will you be available to help me occasionally? If I should call upon you?"

He looked stubborn. "Exactly what kind of help are you referring to? I've done my fair share of world-saving, but I work alone," he said flatly.

She spoke reasonably, "All I'm asking is for you to do what you do best. You worked with the slayer the first time, and with the other souled vampire last year. Last year, to you," she amended.

"Yeah, well, t'was what I wanted to do, wasn't it? Not under marchin' orders for any lady boss. Leastways, no lady boss I'm not in love with. What you're proposing is too much like that Watcher-Slayer thing. Not taking orders from anyone, least of all you."

She drew herself up sharply. "Do not presume to compare me to that group of...men, with their questionable morality. Oh, yes, I know about the Council of Watchers. They have approached us on more than one occasion, 'can't find our Slayer that's been called',' she spoke mockingly, "and been sent packing with a very large flea in their ear. I am nothing like them!"

Spike held up his hands. "Easy, now. Knew one, wasn't too bad. 'Course he did try to have me killed, but that was all he knew. Was trying to do the right thing, by his lights."

Eliza continued haughtily, "Not only that – you were spoiling for a fight when you got here this evening – simply simmering with it! What I am offering you is an outlet for your...passions."

Spike snorted, then hastily composed himself. "Okay, witch, I'll consider it." He looked thoughtful. "How will you get a hold of me? Since I won't be stickin' around much longer."

Somewhat mollified, she said, "I am familiar with your brain pattern now. It will be simple enough to send you a thought like this," and she shot him a telepathic thought: Any questions?

He was impressed despite himself. "Yeah. Got one's been bothering me. Can't stop thinking about Red's spell. How could the Hellmouth have influenced her if it was all sealed up like it was? I should know – I did it myself."

Eliza looked haunted. "The Hellmouth is still there, beneath the Sunnydale crater. Buried, but evil never really sleeps. It's buried well enough not to touch most souls, but Willow opened herself up to it once. She channeled powers far beyond her ken, and it made her susceptible to its influence. I doubt that she was aware of it herself." She met Spike's eyes. "Perhaps it'll be different this time."

Touched, but unwilling to admit it, Spike merely said, "You won't forget...to keep looking for a way to send me to her?"

"I will do what I can. However, I will not resort to the dark arts. I'm not sure if it has occurred to you, but it will – there are witches who will say they can help you, but you would find the price far higher than you can afford."

His face crumpled. He said in a low voice, "I know. Believe me, I know. Besides, Tara wouldn't like it. Want her to be proud of me."
Eliza didn't answer, only poured more strong laced tea.

Spike continued in a stronger voice, "Okay, witch--"

"You may call me 'Eliza'," she said primly.

He sighed. "Okay, Eliza, you sniff 'em out, I'll sniff 'em out." He looked bereft. "It's not like I have anything better to do."

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On the way back to the school, Charles met Spike on the opposite side of the grove. "How'd it go? Any hope for it?"

Spike just shook his head.

Charles looked slightly guilty. "I'm so sorry, but in a way...I'm glad. Don't hate me, but I really can't spare you right now."

Surprised, Spike said, "Can't stay too long. Eliza'll have a job for me to do. Regular symbiosis we'll have, she and I." He looked a little dismayed at the prospect.

Charles pleaded, "Please. Stay until autumn – until Ann's child is born."

Spike began to smile, fake-punching Charles on the upper arm. "Why, you old--"

Charles smiled briefly. "Yes, she's enceinte again. After all these years! Spike, I'm worried. Ann is thirty-eight." He looked as though he might cry.

Spike tried to buck him up. "Why man, that's nothing! Where I come from, women have babies in their thirties all of the time."

"Yes, where you come from," Charles said glumly.

Spike draped an arm across Charles' shoulders as they walked back. "Well, I wouldn't worry too much. Your sister-in-law just told me she plans on livin' to 160, and if that's the case, I think she's got medical matters pretty well licked."

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That June, Deborah's wedding was the event of the season.

Even though he'd received an invitation, Spike didn't want to go because it would bring back too many painful memories of his and Tara's wedding. He managed to be away on one of Eliza's little missions – a nest of Voirajkeg demons that needed exterminating. Trouble was, when you killed them, they seeded the ground with their blood. They reproduced in a horrifyingly prolific fashion. Burning the ground after killing them was the only effective way of making sure they were good and gone. With foresight, Eliza provided a salamander spell.

He returned in late summer. In early September, Ann's baby was born. They named him William. Spike was absurdly pleased at the honor done him. He wasn't fond of children, though, and demurred when pressed to hold the warm bundle. Funny how such a tiny being could turn a household upside down. He'd kept his promise to Charles. Ann was out of danger, and Spike decided that it was time to go.

During their last conversation before he left, it was Spike's turn to worry about Tara. "I'm goin'
barking here, worrying about her in that houseful of potential slayers. Don't know if you knew, but before she and I were together, Tara..." He trailed off, looking upset.

Charles' eyes gleamed. "'Ah yes, tipping the velvet's not entirely unknown amongst our girls here, either.' He comforted Spike, 'Don't worry, man. She only has eyes for you.'

Spike tugged his hair. "It's so long. I don't think I can take it, bein' away from like this. In the grand scheme of things, it hasn't been any time at all. Whoever thought this up...it's the most exquisite torture imaginable.' His voice broke.

"I'm so sorry, but it's just the way it worked out. It really isn't personal," Charles pointed out practically. "You'll make it back and it will only be a moment to her. But for you...yes, I imagine it must be torture. I am sorry." Charles looked helpless to say anything of real comfort.

"In wholeness and brokenness,'" muttered Spike.

There was no help for it. Charles asked, "What are you going to do now?"

Spike welcomed the change of subject. "'And now for something completely different,'" he quoted. "Never been one to sit through the same movie twice, so I think I'll try some new stuff. Except for music. Punk never gets old. But I might see what's left of the Old West, maybe catch the Alaskan Gold Rush, though it's a bit early--"

"I only understand about half of what you said, but did you say 'gold rush'?"

---

The first time Spike was unfaithful to Tara, he'd been drunk for a week. Prior to that, he'd taken out a demon gang with designs of world domination, starting with London's East End. (What was it with demons and world domination?) After taking out the scurf and mopping up the rest of the gang members, he'd felt a ferocious lust that the killing did not slake. Indeed, it made it worse. He tried to drink it away, and found his inhibitions only loosened. Vibrating like a tuning fork, he paid a visit to the madam of a demon brothel who owed him a favor. It was a year and two days after his handfasting to Tara.

Filled with self-loathing, he stayed drunk for the rest of the month, then crawled back to Westbury. He was welcomed back as always. Although he felt unworthy of rolling around on the hearthrug with baby William dangling over him, he soaked up all the warmth and normalcy he could. As ever, the girls made much of him, and it was amusing to see middle-aged Charles playing father to a new baby. Penelope was like a second mother to her baby brother, and Ann and Eliza were busy with a crop of new students.

He privately confessed to Charles, who said with a little laugh, "I'm the farthest thing from a father confessor! If it's any comfort, I forgive you. I cannot but feel that your wife will, too. It's a very long time. Men are different. Before I met Ann--" He broke off abruptly and looked down guiltily. Perhaps he felt tactless mentioning his own wealth in the face of Spike's poverty.

Sometimes, Spike felt that he'd gone soft. Falling in love did that to a man. He tried to tell himself that it didn't matter. Tara was as lost to him as though she were dead. In the end, he approached Eliza for another job. Surprisingly, it was not too onerous to work for her. She rarely pressed him for his help, and her offers came at times when he was at his wits' end for something to occupy his churning thoughts.

He tried drunkenness, a bit of lechery, turning his feelings off, rage at the Powers, and nothing
It was so long. It wasn't fair!

It would be many years before it occurred to him that he was not fully adult. He tended to think in terms of how things ought to be rather than how they were. Slowly, painfully, he came to understand that what helped most was helping. It was tempting to think of Tara as his promised redemption, in purgatory as he felt himself to be, but in the end, it was easiest to think of her as little as possible. What frightened him most was falling in love again. He knew himself to be an absolute pushover where women were concerned, and while he could stand – barely – being occasionally unfaithful, but the thought of cheapening his love for her by falling for another was unbearable.

There were pleasures he allowed himself: drink, a brawl, time spent with friends, and the feeling that he was part of the solution. Who was it that said, "If you're booking passage on the Titanic, there's no point in going steerage"? Eliza provided jobs, Charles provided funds, he drank (but only to excess) and treated himself to infrequent visits back to his good friends in Westbury. He and Charles delighted in each other's company, and Ann loved him for the pleasure he gave Charles. Even Eliza seemed to take an astringent enjoyment in Spike's visits. And young William thought his Uncle Spike was a living god.

Unfortunately, 1884 was the year Penelope fell in love with him. She'd grown into a beautiful young woman and was broken-hearted that Spike could not love her in return. Her parents applied the standard palliatives, but in the end, Spike stayed away until she was over him. She had finally married one of the Lovejoy lads and her second baby was on the way before Spike visited Westbury again.

Things were heating up in Africa: Khartoum...east Africa...South Africa. Spike was sardonically amused that demonic activity always seemed to mirror human historical hot spots. Eliza had no shortage of jobs for him.

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Being immortal was no mean trick. The main thing was avoiding boredom. He trained himself to not think of Tara too often. His infrequent partners were picked with the criteria of mutual pleasuring of one another. Not surprisingly, he found himself starting to get sweet on partners who physically resembled her, so he made an effort to stay away from her type. Infrequently, he was with her in dreams. He woke with a sense of wholeness turned to agonizing loss.

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He meant to check out the Alaskan gold rush, but after stopping to change boats in San Francisco, he never left. To the best of his recollection, he and Drusilla had never been there, so no chance of running into them. He fell in love with its eccentric characters and queer pixilated charm. The city was in the midst of a crime wave. Hoodlums, harlots, arsonists, and murderers provided fodder for an army of vigilantes and do-gooders, but Spike was more interested in the demon population. The fog-draped city was perfect for the occasional daylight foray and in addition, there was a decent system of tunnels.

Luckily, he was visiting Westbury at the time of The Big One and it wasn't a coincidence either. He owed Eliza his life.

One thing he tried to avoid was entangling himself in human affairs, other than the Maxwells' and Eliza's. It was true what he told her. He worked alone. How Angel handled a gang – watching them go by attrition, Spike would never know. And then young Will Maxwell persuaded his parents to allow him to join Spike, and then talked Spike into letting him assist in the mission. With perfect logic on his side, he pointed out that his family had always been in the business of fighting evil, but
due to his sex he could not take as active a role as he'd like (and no, he'd no head for business, and
didn't want to join his papa) -- wouldn't Uncle Spike please...?

That was Spike's first mistake.

Three months later, he returned the boy in a sealed coffin. Charles' heart was broken and Ann was
dangerously silent and flashing-eyed.

Not since the first time he was unfaithful to Tara did Spike feel like such an utter shit. The remorse
was something he felt he'd never get over. He didn't stay for the funeral – he couldn't, with Ann in
the state she was in. Charles was absorbed in Ann, and Eliza hastily drew Spike aside and warned
him to leave and stay gone for a long time. She said she'd be in touch.

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Of course, the "gang" model did work, and eventually Spike would come around to using it. Not
surprisingly, Buffy had been the most successful and long-lived Slayer, surrounded by her Watcher,
mother, and friends as she had been. And the model worked for Angel, too.

Perhaps if Spike had had a gang, Will would still be alive.

Modeling his own group on the Slayer's, he eventually found partners to fill the roles of head, heart,
and muscle. He tried to pick the best ones he could find, let them do their jobs without too much
interference, get the job done, take care of them, and most especially, not get close. That way lay
heartache. Humans were entirely too short-lived to get close to.

Occasionally, he met a young woman who wanted to help but was not ideally suited for Spike's
purposes, but whom Eliza could train and mentor. He would send her along to Westbury, or the
second coven Ann founded in Devon. The sisters were happier apart, Ann disapproving of her
sister's business arrangement with Spike.

Ann never forgave Spike for Will's death, but unbeknownst to her, Spike and Charles met at his club
in Bath or Westbury during Spike's infrequent visits. They never mentioned the boy. Charles'
business was doing well, the two covens were flourishing, and Charles finally turned the company
over to his sons-in-law. Both Fitzhugh and Lovejoy had been fully taken into Charles and Spike's
confidence, and were looking forward to Spike's business tips coming to fruition. Charles retired and
was very taken up with his grandchildren.

Spike's heart broke a little each time he saw Charles. His friend was grayer and shakier at each
meeting but never lost his deathless joie de vivre.

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After a night of patrolling and keeping his city safe, Spike slept deeply. A telepathic thought from
Eliza woke him abruptly.

It's time.

"Huh?" He sat bolt upright.

I'm sorry, William. It's Charles. He's had another stroke. He asked for you.

With terrible foreboding, Spike got dressed. "Where do you want me?"

Step forward.
He did so, stepping into Eliza's little stone cottage.

"Watch your step." Her face had lost the horsey handsomeness of her middle years and she was as withered as an autumn apple.

He gripped a chair back, getting his bearings. "Pity you can't send me to my wife that way."

"I've told you, it's transportation, not time travel," she said patiently.

"Yeah, yeah—I prefer an airplane. Let's quit wasting time. Take me to him."

She was already holding the door. As they walked quickly to the big house, Eliza briefed him. "Ann is wild with grief. I've made her see reason, a bit anyway, and she's agreed to five minutes. I knew you'd want to have a moment together." She opened a side door and ushered Spike into Charles' and Ann's bedroom. The room smelled of medicine and death. Spike knelt by Charles' side.

Charles' eyes lit up at the sight of Spike. He couldn't speak, but he gripped Spike's hand with his good right hand. Spike just looked into his eyes. Mortality, man's old enemy. What was the use of making friends when they just died? He really wanted to hurt something. He hoped Eliza would find him some really ferocious baddie. But right now, his friend needed him.

He could feel Ann's anguish beating off her in waves. Acutely conscious of her counting the seconds in the next room, Spike knew he had to make it quick. "Charles, I love you like a brother. Wish I could do something." Charles shook his head. "Your family wants you and I can't keep them waiting." Charles tugged Spike's hand up to his face and kissed the back of his hand. "Never loved a man better. Not my father, not Angel. No-one, 'cept her. Just wanted you to know." He softly kissed Charles' temple and left by way of the garden door.
After Charles' death in 1928, Spike stayed away from England for nearly ten years. He settled down to protecting his adopted city by the bay, and even bought a house, but the greater mission took him away from it all too frequently. Eliza had assignments for him that he could not turn down, and Sunnydale's slayerless Hellmouth required a visit every few years to cope with some fresh hell.

The sleepy seaside town heated up anew after the latest national disaster. Not satisfied with the financial ruin wreaked in the big cities, deaths by suicide and easy pickings among the homeless, a new horde of demons descended upon Sunnydale. Some vampire with designs of (what else?) world domination had arisen and was gathering followers. It was not clear to Spike or Eliza exactly what the plan was, but they both knew Spike needed to blend in and learn what they were up against.

For old time's sake, he swung by 1630 Revello Drive. Room for Rent read a sign outside the shabby bungalow. A Mrs. Morris was a thin, tense-faced grass widow in her thirties. Spike knew the type. When local industry dried up and blew away, so did many women's husbands. A woman alone was forced to find means of support, and running a rooming house was one of less demeaning options. The uncurtained room she showed him had a narrow cot and a linoleum floor.

"I'll take it, but I'll need something to cover the window. I'm a light sleeper," he said by way of explanation. All she knew was what he told her: he was employed at one of the small factories, working the night shift, and he would be sleeping most of the day.

She left him alone and he looked around the room with a grimace. At least it was clean. He felt a surprising stab of homesickness for his Queen Anne house on Russian Hill, bought with Westcott monies. Charles had made them all embarrassingly rich. He allowed himself a brief fantasy of Tara ensconced in the big bed, a fire glowing in the grate, and damp evening air wafting over her as he--

Well, that's enough of that, he thought. Back to business.

He followed up what few poor leads Eliza had provided. He was directed to "Hooverville," and as he scouted out the dockside Depression-era shacks, he picked up what gossip he could, but got no new information on the newest threat. He returned late in the evening to be greeted by his landlady as he wiped his feet in the foyer. With a mixture of shyness and stiff-backed formality she informed him that he was welcome to sit in the parlor and read or listen to The Lone Ranger on the radio with her, if he felt so inclined. He smiled his thanks and followed her into the small, bare parlor, aware of what the offer had cost her. He sat quietly while she listened to the crackling radio, pretending to read the paper as he mulled over the evening's events. Frustrated, he knew from experience that this new challenge was not going to be solved by a sudden siege, but rather a long, drawn-out war of attrition. And patience had never been his strongest suit. Perhaps Eliza would have some new slant on it tomorrow.

He could feel Mrs. Morris' eyes on him as he stared sightlessly at the paper. Suddenly uncomfortable, he got up, folded the paper, and bid her good night.
Twenty minutes later, lights out and in bed, she joined him.

Thus began one of the more successful affairs he had during his protracted wait for Tara. He had stopped hating himself for needing this release, and reminded himself of Charles' words: that Tara would understand. Sometimes he even believed it. He didn't hold it against Mrs. Morris, either. (Dee, as he called her--"Doris Morris" being such an unfortunate name.) She was a respectable woman without a outlet for her frustration, reduced to taking in roomers while making a home for her children. She was discreet and put no demands on Spike. They put a landlady-tenant face on things, but not infrequently, after her children were asleep, Spike would find Dee in his bed. He wanted to help her but she would accept no help. The frequent basket of produce, ham, or sack of potatoes appeared on her back porch, though, and she'd shoot him a sharp look, but never said anything.

Spike returned her look blandly. If this happened while he was "at work," he couldn't be held responsible, could he?

Sniffing out the new big bad was as slow a process as Spike sensed it would be. During telepathic conferences with Eliza, she surmised that whoever it was must be employing dark magicks to shield their presence. The demon population seemed to be operating on a "need to know" basis, and Spike didn't want to tip his hand by torturing them for information or taking them out too early.

So time passed. He came and went from Dee's house, oddly enjoying the approximation of family life. Her house was clean, her children well-behaved, and she took care of him without falling in love or making a fuss over him. In 1935, she got a job with one of Roosevelt's alphabet-soup programs, and in 1936, she had an opportunity to marry her foreman, her absent husband having conveniently passed away. Spike knew it was time to move on, too.

Seeking verisimilitude in his cover, he sought out his old crypt in the cemetery. Eventually he sniffed out his new nemesis, with the help of one of the inner circle, a bookish vamp who reminded him of Dalton. He readily spilled what he knew when Spike properly applied pressure. The master, or rather, mistress, was Adalwolfa, an ancient Teutonic vampiress, blonde as a Valkyrie, nearly seven feet tall and heroically proportioned. She had been sent by Germany's superstitious new führer as a softening up tactic, with long-term plans for America's eventual invasion and conquest.

She had her own plans for conquest.

Spike called her "Beelzebarbie." He took her out in a deeply satisfying, apocalyptic knock-down, drag-out fight. The Hellmouth was settled for another year.

~~~

The 1940s were a time of intense spiritual activity for Eliza. As ever, demonic activity mirrored world events, and world events were nothing to sniff at, either. She had passed her one hundredth birthday, and there was no let-up for her at the coven. Buried in the country as they were, the Westcott Academy opened its doors to children evacuated from the bombed-out cities, and she and her nieces had their hands full with evacuees, while occupied with their real business. She and Deborah ran the Westbury coven, and Penelope managed the Devon one, that Spike referred to as the "branch office." There was no help but for Eliza to roll up her sleeves and do what she did best. The girls were lots of help, but they weren't getting any younger. After all, Deborah was past eighty and darling Penny approaching it. Their daughters Araminta and Anne showed potential, but there was no substitute for her own efforts.

Spike held down the Hellmouth himself, suppressing one supernatural crisis after another. As ever, he "passed" in the human world but was not really a part of it. As she instructed him, when asked his business, he'd say, "War work. Confidential. Can't talk about it," and did what he did best. She was very pleased with his progress. He had turned into an admirable sort of person, she thought with
In the 1950s, Eliza took a breather. Other than nuclear proliferation and a brushfire war beginning in southeast Asia, things had calmed down globally enough that she could let Spike and the girls handle things.

Penelope died in the Summer of Love. She was 103 years old. Spike was summoned to her bedside and they made their tear-filled goodbyes. She sentimentally referred to him as her first love, and he tenderly kissed her good-bye. He felt fierce grief. She was the second to the last person who remembered his day-long marriage. Now there was only Eliza.

The sixties had seriously begun to pall for Spike. If ever was there a group of softer, sweeter, more vulnerable easy pickings for vampires and other lowlifes, Spike had never seen them. What a change from the drug-spiced banquet he'd found them to be first time around. Things hadn't changed, but he had. He kept his city clean of scum and greatly added to its reputation as a safe haven for free and brotherly love.

In 1970, for what felt like the umpteenth time, he was propositioned by a teenage hooker, although "teenage" might have been a stretch. She was a gracile Native American girl, all coltish limbs and spill of inky hair. Something so jarring in the contrast between her fresh beauty and her apparent profession made him sputter in outrage, "What are you--twelve?"

She was insulted. "I'm fourteen!" she said, as though she'd been defrauded.

"Yeah, well." He was still miffed. "Buy you a cup of coffee and that's all."

Over coffee--she drank cocoa--he learned that she had hitchhiked to San Francisco for the usual--peace, love, and hippie tribalism. It turned out she wasn't a hooker after all--she was just charmed by his freaky mop of blondish-brown curls and tight bells. She got by doing beadwork and giving psychic readings.

As Spike paid for the drinks she asked again, "So, you wanna ball?"

He'd never gotten used to the "One lump or two?" bluntness of this generation. Not a blush in the bunch. He pushed aside an unwilling thought of Tara's delicacy and answered, "No, but I'll take you home."

She snorted inelegantly. "Home's South Dakota. You're gonna drive me halfway across the country?"

He shrugged. "Could do with a road trip right about now. This sitar music's gettin' on my tits."

Her name was Darlene Ghost Horse, but she went by Bird Woman. Spike called her Birdie. They talked most of the way, when they weren't rubbernecking at the sights. It was winter, so he swung south to Route 66 for the first leg of their journey. How had he missed the Grand Canyon by moonlight his first time around?

They slept days and drove nights. Even though she was just a little kid, Spike found Birdie easy to talk to and he figured he wouldn't see her again, so he opened up and told her much of his story. The
reaction he got wasn't what he had expected after pouring his heart out to her. She laughed! Of course, he was insulted. "It's the truth!" he insisted.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she wheezed. "It's just--" she was still trying to catch her breath "--you're the first white heyoka I've ever met."

"The hell you say!" Then, admitting ignorance, he muttered, "What's a heyoka?"

"A contrary. A sacred fool."

"Ah. Well. Always knew I was a fool for love," he conceded.

"Not just that. You were a bad poet, a weak man--hey, you said it, not me!" Laughing, she leaned away with a "don't hit me" look. She ticked off the evidence on her fingers. "You became a bad-ass vampire who fell in love with his murderer, loved her for 100 years, fell in love with a vampire slayer, got a soul, died to save the world, thought you were rewarded with your soul mate only to lose her, and now you're waiting a hundred years, more or less, to get her back? Sounds like the spirits have been playing with you, man! But it's a blessing, really." She leaned away from his scowl.

"At least, they say it is. It's uncomfortable for you but it means you're important, spiritually."

Spike's mouth twisted in disbelief.

Abruptly, she changed the subject. "She misses you." There was a touch of jealousy in her voice.

Spike winced. "How can you know that? She won't even be born for ten years."

Her dark eyes were fathomless. "It doesn't matter. Time's an illusion. You know I'm psychic."

He stared at her wordlessly, mouth open, then remembered to watch the road.

She added, "I think she might be a little cuckoo, too."

"What!?" He swerved to the right, brakes screeching. "What the bloody hell do you mean?"

"She's so lost. She thinks you're dead."

"How do you know this?"

"I just do. I'm not playing with you--it's just there, so strongly. When I get these feelings, if they're bad, I don't usually tell the person. It's too upsetting for them. But you're strong--"

"That's enough! I don't want to hear any more."

~~~

Before they reached South Dakota, Spike was sure Birdie was half in love with him. She had changed her mind about going home, and begged him to let her stay with him. "I want to help, too--I could be your faithful Indian companion," she joked, but he could hear the serious intent underlying her words.

That would work out well--not! Spike thought in Sunnydalese, practicing up for his return. After hearing much of Birdie's background and the real reason she left home, and privately weighing leaving her on her own or turning her over to the foster care system, he agreed with her reasons for not wanting to go back. He got a sudden inspiration. "You like women?"

"I love women. Too." She pretended to pout. "Why?"
“You say you want to help. Know a place...girl like you'd fit right in. They could use you, too.” He explained the coven and its role in the greater scheme, and made her a proposition, although not the one she wanted to hear, he was certain. She looked dubious but agreed. Spike wasn't worried. It wasn't irrevocable.

Using a communication talisman, he summoned Eliza and told her he had another candidate for her, one with a serious bump of telepathy. Eliza opened a teleportation doorway and Birdie stepped through with a longing backward look at Spike.

~~~

That night he dreamt of Tara.

It was the night of the rite to send them back. Again, he forced Tara back into the sacred circle, but this time, he watched her silhouette shrink and then turn sideways, flat as a sheet of paper. She was just disappearing into the portal when he leapt after her, trying to catch her but only grabbing her heel. The force of his catch pulled her back, Tara-sized now, and she hung suspended for an instant, and then fell heavily across the rim of the portal. She was cut in two as neatly as though by a paper cutter.

With a shout he awoke in a tangle of sheets, aching with loss. The book he had been reading lay open on his pillow and his eyes fell on the poem that had been in his thoughts as he drifted into sleep:

_Sometimes hidden from me_  
in daily custom and in trust  
so that I live by you unaware  
as by the beating of my heart.

_Suddenly you flare in my sight,_  
a wild rose blooming at the edge  
of thicket, grace and light  
where yesterday was only shade,

_and once again I am blessed, choosing_  
again what I chose before._

God, he missed his wild rose.

Why could he not let go and move on? He'd worshipped Drusilla for more than 100 years, and then the Slayer--it had been like light to love her. Both times had felt like eternity, like an illness. And like illness, when it had passed, there was the memory but not the immediacy of the feeling. He remembered Drusilla with love and pity. What a sad, beautiful, damaged creature she was. His heart ached for her. And Buffy...his heart swelled with admiration for her, and pride that she had finally come to love him at the last. Of course he understood that her love was no more than a lady pinning a guerdon on a knight sure to die in battle. It was a token and a thanks, but nothing more. He was proud to have served and liked to think that his second death would atone (if only in tiny part) for his many wrongs. Nothing could make up for William the Bloody's career, but it pleased him that he had comported himself well that time.

His brief time with Tara was a glimpse of what love could be. He had only been allowed a taste of paradise, and then finally understood that she was not to be his. He didn't deserve her.

~~~
Spike had no desire to be Forrest Gump, present at every pivotal event of the twentieth century. He was experienced at avoiding trouble most of the time, and had managed to give the great influenza pandemic, natural disasters, two world wars and half a dozen smaller ones, a wide berth.

But not all trouble was to the bad. The exception to the 'pivotal event avoiding' was music.

The second half of the twentieth century, the second time around, Spike deliberately avoided places he and Drusilla had been. He took care to follow his musical quest on the Continent when first time round they had been on the New York scene, and vice versa. In September 1976, he went to the first Punk Festival at the 100 Club. Of course he’d always claimed he’d been there, but he’d lied. He should have been in his element: The Clash, The Damned, The Buzzcocks, and early Sex Pistols, pre-Sid Vicious, although Sid was in the audience wreaking total havoc. Two days of this, and Spike had to admit to himself it wasn't what he'd hoped. He discovered a sad fact: you can't relive your youth.

Still, he would go and listen. If he were in New York and sure that his earlier self and Dru weren't going to be there, he'd go to CBGB's and catch the Ramones. But it really wasn't the same.

Odd to think of it as his youth--he'd been over 120 when he first hit punk, or it hit him. With a tectonic shift in his thinking, he wondered if he were getting old. He was now older than Angel, and finally understood the other souled vampire's omnipresent brooding.

~~~

He returned to San Francisco, and took up with the group still living in his house, and resumed the mission. It was almost time. Tara would have been born, grown to young womanhood, come to Sunnydale and met Willow, all the familiar events that had passed would pass, and his other self would pluck her from her time and travel on the journey that seemed more and more to him like something he only dreamed. Ann's coven would send her back to the moment of departure. Could he simply resume his relationship with her, recapture it, or would he meet her again and tip his hat, saying, "Pardon me, Miss. You remind me of someone I was in love with in a former lifetime."

As the late '90s rolled around came the temptation to interfere in Buffy's life and spare her some of her pain. How he had loved her! But aside from not wanting to change history any more than already must have been done, he knew all the painful experiences she had to live through were what made her steel as strong as it had to be.

More tempting was the desire to pay Tara's male relatives a little visit. In spite of the soul, Spike was possessed of a most flexible morality where avenging himself upon Tara's wrongdoers was concerned. He sometimes wondered what kind of a soul he'd gotten--a cheap second-hand one, kind of battered about the edges? Still, it suited his purposes.

Eliza strongly discouraged Spike interfering in Sunnydale events.

Then in 2002, Eliza summoned him to Westbury. A "miscreant she could not handle herself" had arrived on her doorstep.

Chapter End Notes
A little poetic license: The poem The Wild Rose by Wendell Berry (at the particular time quoted in this story) had not actually been written yet.
Chapter 32

Sunnydale, 2002

Who would have thought fear felt so much like smothering?

It was as though someone were sitting on Tara's chest, squeezing off her breathing. She flailed like a blind person tangled in curtains, scrambling to re-enter the portal she'd just emerged from, but it was closed.

Tara stumbled as she landed, nearly tripping over her earlier self and Spike. He had the other Tara pinned down, shielding her from gunfire.

Blinded by tears, she scrubbed her eyes, straining to see the locked figures on the floor disappearing through the earlier portal. Screaming, "Spike!" she leaped after them, but that portal closed too. Her breath whistled in fear, sounding like the mother of all asthma attacks. She looked around, started violently, and jerked away from a patch of red on the carpet, unable to take in what she saw. The fierce color burned into her brain.

She ducked, remembering flying bullets. Shards of glass from the shattered windowpane tinkled as they fell from the frame.

Then a softer sound, Willow's fingers reflexively moving as her hand crept toward Tara.

Jerking as though she'd been stung, Tara flinched away, and then forced herself to look again. The patch of red was Willow's hair, lying in a darker red pool of blood. With a low cry, Tara flung herself to the floor and frantically tried to stanch the flow but it welled through her fingers and cupped hands.

Black was fading from Willow's leaf-green eyes, and the life was fading, too. Tara thought Willow was gone, but she heard her whisper faintly, "I'm sorry..."

"Willow!" Tara wept. She rocked over the body of her old love.

~~~

Living in Sunnydale, Xander Harris was no stranger to the weird, but to see Warren Mears appear at the side yard entrance, interrupting his reconciliation with Buffy, was upsetting to say the least. When Warren pulled a gun the shock factor ramped up to eleven. Xander had held his own against assorted badness ranging from shoddy contracting to a hellgod, but he froze at the appearance of Warren's gun.

He couldn't protect her.

Openmouthed, he stood rooted to the spot, and then Buffy shoved him to the ground to protect him. Warren opened fire and then fled.
Buffy had been shot! With a shout, Xander fell to his knees and fluttered over her, dabbing futilely at her welling chest wound. His thoughts churned in panic. What was needed? Compression? Heart massage? He didn't know CPR! Buffy was still breathing, but she was white with shock.

So was Xander.

Like a light bulb appearing over his head came the thought: cell phone! He fumbled it off his belt and punched in 911. They promised an ambulance and told him to apply pressure to the wound and keep her warm.

Tara appeared at the side door, looking like a sleepwalker in her long white dress. Her hands were bloody and so was her dress from the knees down.

"Tara! Not you, too! Did he...hurt you, too?"

She gave him a confused look and shook her head. "I heard shouting."

Xander couldn't keep a little sob out of his voice. "Warren shot Buffy." He briefly lifted his hands and showed her the chest wound. He looked confused himself. Why was Tara covered in blood and yet walking around unhurt? "What happened to you? Where's Willow?"

Tara said in a soft voice, "Willow's gone."

~~~

During the ambulance ride to the hospital, Xander tried halfheartedly to get a coherent story out of Tara, but in the face of her uncomprehending stare, gave up and concentrated his panicked thoughts on Buffy. His best friend, next to Willow, he thought in anguish. Thank God Willow was gone when Warren paid them his murderous visit! He had no idea what kind of punishment Warren deserved but he hoped it'd be good. He was fairly certain that Sunnydale's incompetent police would not figure prominently in Warren's ultimate fate.

The paramedics unloaded the gurney and rushed Buffy into the ER. They hooked her up to machines but Xander could tell from their tone (their words being incomprehensible to him) that the battle was being lost. He turned to Tara and begged, "Can't you do something?"

She blinked and dragged her attention back to him with a visible effort, her brow furrowed in concentration. "A teleportation spell? A bullet's so small. It can do so much damage, though..." Her voice trailed off and she shut her eyes tightly. She opened her eyes and said in a weirdly everyday tone, "You should try teleporting a dead horse. Now, that's difficult." She gave a little bark of hysterical laughter, and then her voice broke. "There's no life force to aid the spell." Her face crumpled and she began to weep.

Xander stared at her in horror. Clearly, she needed help, too, but Buffy was the priority at the moment.

"Riiight," he said cautiously. "You want to take a stab at it anyway? I think we're gonna lose her if you don't. Please, Tara!"

Tara seemed to pull herself together, looked up and around, all business. She recited a few words in a language unfamiliar to Xander, and a veil appeared to fall between them and the hospital staff. It was as though they were in an oasis of calm in the middle of the bustling ER. The staff had ordered them to stand back, but now they were able to get close to the gurney, bringing their little cocoon of quiet with them. The doctors and nurses busied themselves with the surrounding equipment, and Xander and Tara had Buffy to themselves for a few moments.
Tara whispered, "It's a mind-clouding spell. It gives us an illusion of privacy. Let me find..." She focused on Buffy's bandaged chest, and then carefully peeled the bandage away. The wound was bubbling with Buffy's labored breathing. Tara closed her eyes and appeared to focus. A tiny fragment of lead, warped with heat and impact, emerged from the wound. Xander snatched it out of the air. A faint cloud of red spray came with it, as though Buffy exhaled a cloud of blood when the bullet left her. The spray dissipated and the hole gradually closed up.

Tara looked troubled. "I got the bullet out, but I'm not good enough to repair the damage that it did. Her Slayer strength should kick in with healing, though. I think she'll be all right."

As if in response to her words, Buffy opened her eyes and lifted her head. "What happened?"

Xander gasped, "Buffy! Oh my God, are you okay?"

"I'm..." Buffy stared around her in confusion. "How'd I get here?"

~~~

Buffy was discharged that afternoon. The doctors could not explain it. What appeared upon triage to be a sucking chest wound was entirely superficial. X-rays showed no bullet in her wound. They could see she was stable so they prescribed pain meds and sent her home.

As they rode home in the hospital shuttle, Xander looked Tara over. She was dressed in an outfit even more bohemian than her usual strange taste. She looked like the bride at retro-hippie wedding. The blood bothered him, though. Buffy and Dawn would need to try and get more out of her when they cleaned her up.

Where was Willow? He thanked God again that Willow had missed Warren's shoot-'em-up. Xander was more certain than ever that there was no chance Warren would be brought to justice, but he couldn't wait to try. Perhaps Willow could do a locator spell.

With a start, Xander remembered that Tara's strange vacancy had not been addressed. "Hey. Tara. You okay?"

She ignored him, and just stared as though in a dream, out the window of the shuttle.


Tara turned to them and said, "It stinks here. Diesel fumes. I used to think Sunnydale was a clean little town, but it's...not."

"Huh?" Buffy blinked at the apparent non sequitur. "Tara," she spoke her name gently. "Give me your hands."

Looking puzzled, Tara showed Buffy her hands. Buffy took Tara's hands in her own and examined them. "I'm going to look at your legs now. Okay?"

Tara didn't give permission, but she didn't appear to object as Buffy raised Tara's bloodstained skirt and ran her hands over Tara's legs. She was covered in dried blood but her own skin was unbroken. It was someone else's blood. With an awful sense of foreboding, Buffy's head shot up. "Hey!" she yelled to the driver. "Can you step on it, buddy?"

The driver pulled up to 1630 Revello Drive. Buffy bounded out of the shuttle, yelling over her shoulder to Xander, "Keep an eye on her." She took the front steps all in one leap and raced through
the front door.

Xander helped Tara out of the shuttle and kept a hand on her elbow. "We'll get you cleaned up," he promised, unable to stop focusing on the blood. Uneasily, Xander shook his head. "Come on." He steered her toward the house. Tara was a little too much like her old brain-sucked-by-Glory self for Xander's comfort. He guided her into the house and led her to the couch in the living room, where he sat her down.

He heard Dawn crying upstairs. "Oh God, no," he muttered. He raced upstairs.

Xander couldn't believe his eyes. In Willow and Tara's room, Buffy held her weeping sister, shielding Dawn's face from the sight of Willow's body in a pool of blood. With a shouted, "Oh God no!" Xander now knew whose blood had been on Tara the entire time. He grabbed the sisters and started crying, too.

~~~

Buffy knew she had to pull herself together. "Dawn, sweetheart. Be strong for me, okay? We need to go downstairs. Tara needs us. Xander, will you make the phone call?"

Xander pressed the heel of his palm to each eye and nodded.

Whimpering, Dawn allowed herself to be led from the room and taken downstairs. She launched herself at Tara and they hugged and rocked. Tara, roused from her strange vacancy, started crying too.

Before the coroner's men arrived, Buffy tried to bathe Tara. She did not know what to make of Tara's strange undergarments--strange even for her--especially a canvas pouch sewn to the bottom of a corset she wore. Must be some kind of witchy thing, she thought, remembering Willow's shamefaced admission about keeping 'stinky yak cheese in her bra.' Buffy fought back tears again. Willow!

Tara would not give the corset up. She kept covering herself with handfuls of cloth at neck and thigh. Odd, Buffy didn't remember Tara being excessively modest. She really needed to bathe, though. Buffy knew that Tara and Willow had been going at it pretty hot and heavy yesterday and that morning, but the smell... Faint but unmistakable, it reminded Buffy of-- No, that was impossible. Buffy shook her head, and gave up trying to persuade Tara to undress, concentrating on washing Tara's bloodied hands and legs. Head ducked, face and neck shielded with swinging curtains of hair, Tara allowed herself to be dressed in another loose dress that Buffy pulled over her head.

~~~

Later, after the coroner's men carried Willow's body out and papers were signed, Xander spoke strongly. "What do we do now? You think Sunnydale's finest will catch that...that..." He stopped, unable to find a word bad enough for Warren.

Buffy said, "I can't think about that right now. We've just lost--" she stopped, struggling not to cry. "Something will happen, but right now, we've just lost Willow. Don't ask me to make any decisions."

They sat on the couch, huddled around Tara, looking like disaster victims waiting for someone in authority to come and make decisions for them. Dawn was halfway in Tara's lap, and Tara curled her body around Dawn, crooning wordlessly. It seemed to comfort both of them.

Xander said, "I can't...wrap my mind around this. Willow--" He stopped and got control of his voice.
"I could have lost you, too!" He reached for Buffy, over Dawn and Tara, and she hugged him around the girls, forming a pile not unlike orphaned kittens. "This is as bad as when we lost your mom."

Buffy nodded, unable to speak, and laid her cheek on Dawn's hair.

~~~

Much later, they tried to eat but gave it up as useless. Dawn ran for the bathroom and got sick, Buffy followed and gave her something to rinse her mouth with, and they returned to their huddle on the couch.

Xander looked lost and scared. "What are we going to do?"

Buffy roused herself from a comforting numbness that had taken hold of her. Sometimes her Slayerness gave her the ability to compartmentalize events too horrific to process otherwise. She shook her head. "We have to contact her parents. Do you know where they are?"

Xander looked at her with apprehension. "They're in Europe right now. But they moved away before that. Didn't you know?"

Buffy shook her head. "She never said. Maybe there's a cell phone number?"

"I'll look in her room, after--" He and Buffy exchanged wordless looks. Someone would need to clean Willow's room. He changed the subject. "I think we'll have to...you know, arrange the funeral. I don't know any other relatives. It's funny, she and I used to pretend that we were orphans. We weren't...but there was an...emotional truth to it." He changed the subject again. "We sure loved your mom." He shut up then, pressing his lips into a thin line and drying his eyes on his sleeve. "I'm gonna go find Kleenex."

Buffy stood up too, stretching the kinks out of her cramped muscles. She preferred action to this crushing helplessness. Tara and Dawn eased down into the vacated space, and Buffy sat down on the floor next to the couch so Dawn wouldn't feel she'd left her.

Xander returned with a box of Kleenex and Buffy took one and blew her nose. She glanced at her sister and Tara. Worn out with grief, they were asleep on the couch, Tara spooned up to Dawn's back.

Xander sat down on the floor by the couch and whispered, "What are we going to do about--" He nodded toward Tara. "Maybe we should have her looked at? A shrink?"

Buffy looked troubled. "She's sure not herself. Can you blame her? Losing the love of her life like that. Maybe she'll--" She stopped. What? Snap out of it? She remembered her devastation when Angel left her after graduation. What if she'd seen him die! "Let's see how she is in the morning. I don't think she should see the room the way it is. Do you want to...?"

Grimly, Xander nodded and they left Dawn and Tara sleeping on the couch.

~~~

A couple of hours later (interspersed with crying and one episode of vomiting), Xander and Buffy finished cleaning Willow's room. Buffy lifted one side of the bed and Xander rolled the carpet up. She mopped with hot water and bleach, while Xander wiped stray splashes of blood and stripped linen off the bed. Finally, they remade the bed and he helped her carry the carpet out back to the garbage. They took turns showering and returned to the living room. Buffy whispered to Xander,
"Do you want to stay? Try to get some sleep?"

He whispered back, "I don't want to sleep but I don't want to go, either." He looked lost. "I wish Ahn--" and then stopped. That was a lost cause.

As if in response to their whispering, Dawn stirred. "Buffy." She reached for her. Buffy knelt down and hugged her. "Buffy, where's Warren? What if he comes back?"

Behind her on the sofa, Tara moaned.

Buffy looked anxiously at Tara, but spoke reassuringly to Dawn. "Don't worry about him. The police know it was him, and they'll catch him. Xander and I are both eyewitnesses."

Dawn shook her head. "You couldn't catch him all year and you're the Slayer. What if he comes for you? Like you said, you're an eyewitness." Her eyes were huge with apprehension.

"She's got a point," Xander admitted. "Sunnydale police, not the brightest bulbs on the Christmas tree."

"What am I supposed to do? Kill him? I'm the Slayer, not the highest court in the land. Warren's human. Let human courts decide."

"Like that's settled anything in the past," Dawn argued. "If you did...maybe it'd be called self-defense. I'd do it myself if I could."

Buffy chided her. "Dawn, don't say that. You don't really feel that way."

"Yes, I do! And you should too. He killed Willow, and made Tara all--"

"Gloryosky," put in Xander.

"--and he nearly killed you. He needs to pay," Dawn finished.

"Out of the mouths of babes."

"Xander." Buffy put on a 'don't interfere with my parenting' look.

"I'm just saying he's ... he's just as bad as any vampire you've sent to Dustville."

Tara spoke for the first time since getting off the shuttle. "Where's Spike?"

"Spike's...not on the team anymore." Buffy's expression said clearer than words: 'and I don't want to talk about it.'

Tara hung her head.

Xander, misinterpreting her body language, said, "That's one less thing to worry about."

Tara looked away and then said, "I need to make a phone call."

Buffy looked startled, and she and Xander exchanged hopeful glances.

"Sure," Buffy said. "You know where the phone is?" Then, appearing to think better of how much help Tara needed, added, "Let me get it for you."

She brought the cordless phone and Tara took it, handling it like it was an unfamiliar object, turning
it over and looking at it blankly. "Do you need help dialing?" Buffy asked gently.

Tara looked about to cry again, and whispered, "I don't know the number."

Buffy put her arm around Tara's shoulders. "We'll look it up for you. Who do you want to talk to?"

Tara started to cry again while they all watched in chagrin. After she got a shaky hold of herself, she said, "It's overseas, but I think you can reverse the charges."

Xander said, "You want to talk to Giles?" then added to Buffy, "Maybe calling him's not a bad idea?"

"No, not Mr. Giles." Tara clouded up again, and her lips trembled. "I'm not sure who--"

Buffy said urgently, more to the group than to Tara, "We need to get you some help, too. I can't believe that the hospital let her sit there and did nothing--"

Tara said, "Can we look it up? If Willow were here--" She bit her lip.

Dawn interrupted, "Let me. I can Google it."

Buffy and Xander looked relieved that the solution might be this easy. They followed Dawn into the dining room, where Willow's computer and gear covered one end of the table. They looked at Willow's familiar spot, and none spoke for a long moment. Buffy squeezed Dawn's shoulder, and then Dawn took a seat. "Okay, who am I looking for?"

Tara looked blank, then whispered, "I don't know. It's been so long...I'm not sure what they're calling themselves now." She looked about to cry again, and then said, "Can you look up 'The Westcott Select Academy for Young Ladies'"

Buffy and Xander exchanged worried looks.

Dawn typed that into Google.com, and clicked the first hit. She skimmed the page and read snippets aloud, "'Founded in 1862 by Sir Charles Maxwell, a naturalized British subject born Kirill Mikhailovich Cohen in Vladivostok...The first school of its kind to be entirely administered by women,...in 1881, Sir Charles turned over administration of the school to his wife the Hon. Ann Maxwell, and went on to create the hugely profitable investment consortium known today as the Westcott Investment Group, Ltd.' and there's a link to its web page. You want that? I don't see a link for the school."

"See if you can find the school. Or a home phone number." Tara appeared to be making an effort to hold herself together.

"A home number--right!" Dawn snorted, and then backpedalled, saying gently, "I'm sorry, Tara. Hey, here's the school's page! It's called Westcott Women's College now. I just had to dig for it. Buffy, pass me the phone."

Buffy handed it over and Dawn dialed.

Xander whispered, "What time is it in England right now?"

Buffy shrugged.

They heard the tinny sound of the phone ringing, and Dawn handed the phone to Tara, who took it and held it like she had never seen one before. Dawn took the phone back and gently held it up to
Tara's ear.

Tara listened, and then her eyes grew round. "Miss Harkness?"

~~~

Warren Mears was not seriously upset that the Slayer wasn't dead after all. He got the news in the demon bar where he'd gone to announce his triumph. An updated bulletin said that what appeared to be a gunshot victim was only a person hit by flying debris during a random shooting. No mention of the shooter. He was more upset that he wasn't a hero to the bar's denizens. He beat a hasty retreat, nonplussed but not seriously disturbed.

That night, the ten o'clock news gave out that Willow Rosenberg had been shot and killed by a stray bullet from that morning's shooting. Killing Willow didn't bother him. In fact, he was relieved. Willow was the one he feared the most, next to the Slayer. (Her reputation as a dabbler in dark magicks preceded her.) He knew he'd better finish Buffy off. With the Slayer out of the way, the rest were no threat. Then he'd collect Andrew...or not. He enjoyed the weaker man's adulation, but also subscribed to the adage, "He travels fastest who travels alone."

The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. Let Andrew and Jonathan sit in jail. That way he wouldn't have to divide up the spoils. Jail was a good place for weaklings anyway.

Warren packed the few things he wanted to keep as he left town: a couple of changes of clothes, the trio's rare collectables, and a whole lot of cash. He reloaded his gun, and pocketed the odd bit of additional firepower.

He didn't head out of town yet. There was one last thing he needed to do.

Warren headed to 1630 Revello Drive.
Chapter 33

Tara's eyes widened even further and the pulse tapped wildly in her throat. "Miss Harkness?"

Eliza's brisk West County accent sounded far away over the crackling transatlantic connection. "Yes, my dear. So good to know you arrived safely!"

"I... Can I...?" Tara looked around the dining room, seeing her friend's confused expressions. She needed privacy. There was no way she could explain so they'd understand what was going on, and they would never believe her even if she did. "I need to use the bathroom." She scuttled away, clutching the cordless phone.

Safe in the bathroom, Tara cradled the phone. She whispered, "Willow's dead. He told me about it, but actually seeing it..." her voice broke, and it was several minutes before she got control of her voice enough to continue, "...not only that...I think he's dead, too. He said he'd catch up, but he didn't. Were you able to...?" She couldn't continue.

"No, dear, it wasn't possible." Eliza was quiet for a moment. "However, he is, well, I cannot say 'alive and well,' since he's neither alive nor has he been well. He's missed you terribly, poor soul. But he is in one piece and in this world."

"Oh!" Tara's voice broke again, and she began crying with relief. "Where is he?"

"Here, now!" Eliza spoke strongly. "I don't keep track of him. He's attending to business, as must you. You are stronger than you think, Tara. What did we teach you about focusing and staying in the moment? What is happening at this very moment?"

"I'm sitting on the toilet talking to you," Tara answered accurately.

"No, I mean, what are you facing? Willow is dead, and the next step is...?"

Obediently, Tara took a steadying breath and began, "We have to contact her parents, except they're out of the country, so I don't think--" she gulped. "There's a funeral to arrange and pay for, and I don't think there's any money for that."

"Money isn't a problem. Charles took excellent care of us financially, and you too."

"How is he?"

"Dear--" Eliza began tentatively, as though she were at a loss for words.

"How are you all? I miss you. Can I come back?" Tara sounded like lost child.

Eliza spoke slowly. "Dear...it's been 122 years since you left even if it only feels like a moment to you. Remember? Charles aged and died, as did my sister and my nieces. I'm only here myself through the most extraordinary efforts. You cannot come here; you have a role to play there and if you concentrate hard enough, you'll know that. Now back to business. You were saying?"

"Oh! Warren--Willow's killer--" Tara stopped again, to get control of her voice "--he shot Buffy, too-
"Is she all right?" Eliza interrupted.

"Yes, I teleported the bullet, and she--"

"Oh, right. With her Slayer healing, she'll be all right. Oh, well done, my dear!"

"We're going to have to find Warren, because the Sunnydale police..." She trailed off, unable to express the hopelessness she felt.

"Are not the ablest?" Eliza asked with a touch of scorn. "That's the corrupting influence of the Hellmouth for you. Well, I fancy you'll sort him out. You know we rarely follow official channels--"

"Buffy doesn't want to take the law into her own hands."

Eliza's tone was very brisk. "Indeed! She's very young, isn't she? Never mind. Let me speak to her."

Tara interrupted frantically, "But where is...?" She began to cry, but stopped with a hiccup, "That's right, you don't know."

"Dear, he's away on business, and you must attend to business as well. Doing what's right in front of you, doing what is required, and taking responsibility. You can do this, dear. You've had a terrible shock, but you're strong."

Tara's voice was almost entirely gone, but she muttered, "I don't think I want to live without--"

"Nonsense! That is not the girl I know talking. You have a responsibility to uphold. A responsibility that is yours alone, that we know you can handle. That's why we sent you back. You can do this. Now let me speak with the Slayer."

~~~

Tara emerged from the half-bath off the kitchen. Buffy and the others had left the dining room and waited in the living room with expectant looks. Tara approached the sofa, holding the phone toward Buffy. "She wants to talk to you."

As Tara began to hand the phone to Buffy, a movement through the front window caught her attention. She saw a van pull up across the street, its lights dowsed before it came to a stop. A dark figure emerged from the driver's door, crossed the street, and came to a stop on Buffy's front yard. The dark shape merged with the shadows cast by the large shade trees on the lawn. The only indication anyone was there was the faint light glinting on a shiny object he held. Trembling, Tara dropped the phone.

~~~

During her conversation with Tara, Eliza wrestled briefly with her conscience, an unaccustomed event for her. The girl was so fragile! Perhaps Eliza should have been there, or sent William. Perhaps Willow's killing could even have been averted. Eliza knew that time traveling 122 years and emerging upon what must have been a horrific shock would traumatize anyone. She also knew that Spike was in a fever to see Tara again.

Eliza had sent him to sort out the Cleveland hellmouth.

It was not that Eliza was in love with Tara anymore. She recognized her infatuation years back for
what it had been: a passing attraction for someone new and fresh, talented spiritually, and glowing with the first flush of her love for William. Eliza had wanted what she felt he did not deserve. Well, time and her partnership with William proved her wrong. She could admit that much.

It was cruel to keep them apart.

Eliza heard Tara gasp as the phone dropped to the floor. She winced at the squawk the phone made as it bounced on the hearth. (She might be 164 years old, but there was nothing wrong with her hearing.) She faintly heard several voices say, "Tara? What is it? Is someone out there?" and knew that she'd better investigate.

From previous dealings with Spike during various supernatural crises, Eliza had acquainted herself with Sunnydale and its environs. There was no time for meditation and soul travel. She opened a portal on the Slayer's front lawn.

~~~

Warren stuck the pistol in his waistband and readied the paralysis bomb. He felt a flicker of regret at having omitted a bazooka. Pitching had never been his strongest skill (getting picked last for baseball was more his speed) and he knew the grenade had to make it cleanly through the front window and into the living room if he wanted to gain the upper hand. He didn't like the odds of facing the Slayer and her pals unprepared. Once he'd stunned them, he could walk in and pick them off at his leisure. Well, after he had some fun with the Slayer.

After carefully engaging the handgun's safety (he didn't want to lose his other valuables, as he'd be needing them soon) he looked up and saw a voluptuous blonde girl in a long blue dress, silhouetted by lamplight in the middle of the living room. She looked up and saw him standing on the lawn. Her mouth moved as though she gasped.

"Mama!" he breathed softly. She was Willow's girlfriend, Tara. He remembered they'd been in the same math class at UC Sunnydale, before he'd dropped out for the full-time pursuit of robotics and world domination. He'd had a crush on her back then. Oh, this was going to be fun! He wondered if her revulsion at being dominated by a man would add to the experience. He couldn't wait to find out.

Just as Warren wound up for the pitch, a fiery dot appeared about two yards in front of him, growing rapidly into a burning circle about six feet in diameter. Warren thought briefly that it resembled something a trained tiger might jump through. But within the circle was no tiger. A lady stood in the portal, tall and imposing, white-haired, straight of spine, and burning-eyed. Like lightening striking, the air crackled with ozone.

Warren unwound. "What the--"

The woman snapped, "Vincire!"

Warren found himself paralyzed by invisible bonds. He bellowed, "Get this off me, you crazy old--" but she merely pointed to his lips and hissed "Bizaan-ayaa." Warren was silenced, collapsing to the ground as though he'd been pole-axed.

~~~

In the living room, Xander shouted, "Get down! " But Buffy had already pulled Tara off her feet, shoved Dawn to the floor, and dashed out the front door.

"You're hasty, my dear. You should look before charging into danger as you do. But that's the Slayer in you." Eliza looked Buffy over. She "remembered" her, from the glimpses she'd had of Spike's
memories so long ago. She was a little thing, dainty as a china shepherdess, but with a stern no-nonsense air about her that Eliza found attractive. She knew that the black-and-white worldview Buffy held came from her strong moral convictions and her vocation. Her uprightness was tempered with an ability to compartmentalize the different roles she played, Slayer, sister, friend, and lover. She was fierce as an Amazon and as pretty as they come. No wonder Spike had been so besotted with her.

"Well, you clearly know who I am," Buffy agreed. "And you are...?" She trailed off, and looked down with amazement at Warren, lying immobilized on her lawn. "Warren Mears." Buffy spoke his name like a judge rendering sentence.

"I'm sorry, Miss Summers. I haven't introduced myself. I am Miss Eliza Harkness. I was speaking with Tara--"

"In England." Buffy's voice was flat with disbelief.

"Yes. I heard the commotion and thought I should drop by and see if you needed a hand."

Xander stood on the front steps, gazing at the shimmering portal, then at Miss Harkness and then back at the portal. He finally gained control of voice to mutter something.

Eliza said, "What, young man? Speak up." She glanced at the portal, and in an aside, muttered, "*evanesco.*" It disappeared.

In spite of the dim streetlight, Xander looked as though he might be blushing. "I said, 'there *is* such a thing as a tesseract.'" He looked embarrassed to be quoting from a kid's book.

Buffy said "Huh?"

*A Wrinkle In Time*, Buffy," supplied Xander.

"Saves nine?" Buffy prodded the prone Warren with her toe.

Eliza looked dryly amused. "I read that to my great, great, great, great, great-nieces. However, I'm 164, not a 'paltry few billion.' Though 'wild nights *are* my glory,' I'll grant you." She offered her hand to the speechless young man. He had the startled eyes and dogged look of a hopelessly ordinary, though good, person assisting in an extraordinary mission. "You must be Mr. Harris. Why don't you and Miss Summers carry this..." she curled her lip "...person inside and we can continue this conversation where we're less conspicuous? With your permission, of course." She looked expectantly at Buffy.

"Okay." Buffy shut her open mouth and took Warren's shoulders. Xander took his ankles.

"One thing," Eliza cautioned. "I want to talk to you both at length about the upcoming crisis you face, but not in front of Tara and the child. There is something I need to do, but first we'll need to get Mr. Mears out of sight, and then I will ask you to bring him to me. But you'll have to arrange a safe place for Tara and your sister whilst we speak."

Buffy, unaccustomed to being managed, began, "Listen, lady, I'm grateful to you for wrapping up Warren and delivering him to me but--"

"Do you have a better plan?" Eliza, accustomed to doing little *but* managing, gave Buffy a cool grey stare.

Buffy's eyes widened with dislike but she made no reply. Eliza knew she would resist being given
orders in her own home, but the young woman would need to accept it, and quickly.

Buffy and Xander carried Warren inside, and Tara flew into Eliza's arms. "There, there, child," Eliza said soothingly, patting Tara's back. To Buffy and Xander she directed, "Put him on the sofa, and pull the drapes." She whispered in Tara's ear, "It's all right. You're safe...and remember, so is he." Tara made no response. "Dear?" She looked at Tara in growing concern.

With unnecessary roughness, Xander dropped Warren's lifeless legs. They thumped off the arm of the couch and banged on the floor. Warren sprawled uncomfortably slantwise, glaring mutely at Xander, arms and legs invisibly bound. Losing control, Xander yelled, "Sucking chest wound, buddy!" He got right up in Warren's face. "Know what else sucks? You!" He thumped Warren's chest for emphasis, hard.

Buffy looked in two minds about intervening, but bullying the helpless might be where she drew the line. "Yeah, I don't like him either, Xander, what with the near-fatal wound and all but--"

To forestall an imminent explosion, Eliza said to them all, "Children, please accept my condolences on the loss of your dear friend. I am here to help in any way I can."

Tension defused, their eyes dropped, and Buffy and Xander muttered their thanks. Tears overflowed Dawn's eyes, and Tara left Eliza's arms to go her. Tara began to cry, too, soundlessly. Eliza would need to see to her, too. Perhaps William could...but first things first.

"Very well," Eliza spoke briskly, "I need to ready a place for Mr. Mears. I'll open a portal in an hour. I offer you a way out of your dilemma--due to the likelihood that he will never be brought to justice. My group will contain him, keep him from doing harm--which he seems to excel at--see to his humane re-education, and attempt to teach him empathy, which he is sorely lacking." She looked around the room. "Are we of one mind?"

Xander agreed with alacrity, while Buffy nodded but looked dubious, as though she were not used to solutions arriving so neatly on her doorstep. On the easy chair, Tara rocked Dawn on her lap while their tears slowed. Neither answered.

Eliza opened another portal, this time without the burning circumference. Xander commented on this, and Eliza made a dismissive gesture toward Warren, saying, "The other circumstance called for smoke and mirrors, I felt." She nodded to the group at large and stepped through the portal. It disappeared with a faint pop.

~~~

"There's only one place to take them." Buffy looked grim.

Xander answered after a beat, "What? Are you nuts? After what Spike did--"

"Xander, I've had enough bossing-around for one..." She widened her eyes at him and gave tiny shake of the head. "I'll get the coats." She left the room.

Xander followed her, muttering, "You're not really gonna leave them alone with Mr. Attempted-Rape?"

"He wouldn't hurt Dawn. I--he physically can't. Besides, he wouldn't. He likes Tara and he loves Dawn."

"Well, after the other night, I'd say all bets are off on what he's capable of doing."
"Dawn feels safe with him and Tara is a mess. I'm not leaving them alone in this house, after-- We don't have a choice. Right now, he's all we've got."

Xander looked disgusted but shut up.

~~~

On the ride to the cemetery, Tara looked more alert. Not only was she willing to go to Spike, she seemed positively eager. Xander and Buffy exchanged baffled looks.

Xander parked outside the cemetery, grabbed weapons, and they made their way to Spike's crypt. Buffy shoved open the door without knocking. "Spike?"

From the armchair in front of the TV, Clem exploded in a shower of junk food. "Suffering cats!"

Buffy was nearly as startled. "Wha--?"

Clem clutched his chest. "Where did you come from?"

"Oh. Sorry, Clem, I--I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's, uh, it's okay, you just snuck up on me is all." He chuckled ruefully. "I was napping."

Buffy apologized, "I made you spill your snacks." He really was the most harmless demon.

"Nah, don't worry about it." He waved nonchalantly, wiggling his loose skin. "Like I need any more of this." He waved at the rest of them. "Hi, guys."

Dawn gave him a tiny wave, but Xander just scanned the crypt warily, as though Spike were about to leap out at the girls. Tara looked around expectantly, but said nothing, worry growing in her eyes.

Clem spoke hospitably, "Can I get you anything? I was about to mix up some Country Time."

"We're looking for Spike, actually," Buffy admitted.

Clem looked puzzled. "He didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"He left town."

Buffy's face fell. "Oh."

So did Tara's.

Dawn spoke for the first time. "He just took off?"

Clem was expansive. "That's why I'm staying here for him. Sweet pad like this goes empty for a few days; you'll lose it for sure. Plus, I don't have a TV." He looked around, smiling with satisfaction.

Buffy was taken aback that he'd left without saying-- Of course, after the terrible altercation in the bathroom, it was probably all for the best, but--

"I'm surprised he didn't tell you. He kind of left in a hurry, I guess." He went on making hospitable noises, but Buffy cut him off.

"We're fine, thank you. Um, you could do us a favor. Do you think maybe Dawn and Tara could
hang out here with you for a while? We have some stuff we need to do--kind of an emergency--and, uh, I really don't want them to be alone."

Dawn reiterated, "I still don't see why we just can't--"

Buffy cut her off. "Dawn. We've been through this." She asked Clem, "What do you think?"

"No problem! I'd love the company." He smiled at Dawn. "Do you like Parcheesi?"

"Sure."

"Tara?" Clem looked puzzled when Tara didn't answer.

He looked from Buffy to Dawn. "She okay?" In an undertone, he added, "She's not herself, is she?"

He gently took one of Tara's elbows while Buffy took the other, and they sat her down in the easy chair.

Xander seemed to be channeling Military Man, and returned from prowling around lower level of the crypt. Grim-faced, he still hadn't spoken.

Buffy hugged Dawn. "We'll be back as soon as we can. I promise." She tried to catch the eye of the unresponsive Tara.

"Bye." Dawn gave her a small smile.

"Bye." Buffy smiled back. To Clem she said sincerely, "Thank you."

Clem nodded to her. Xander opened the door for Buffy, but before leaving she turned back and asked Clem, almost as though she were ashamed, "Did he say when he'd be back?"

"Spike? No. Only that he could be gone a while."

Buffy's nodded tightly and left. No-one looked at Tara.

Outside the crypt, Buffy spoke urgently. "Xander, we have to hurry. She said she'd open the portal in an hour."

~~~

Tara sat in Clem's easy chair, hugging herself and rocking . Where was Spike? He said he'd catch up to her. Miss Harkness said the coven couldn't send him after all, and then for Tara to arrive as she had...Willow! ...no, don't think about her...think, if he'd had to wait for her...he would wait for her, wouldn't he?

He would have to have endured--how many years had it been, Miss Harkness had said? Funny, she'd changed so little. Her face was wrinkled and her hair had gone white but her essence was changed only in that it was stronger. She fairly radiated power. Why had she not been able to send him to her? Think, now. Miss Harkness said to focus. If Spike had had to live all those years alone, waiting to come back to her, would he have taken care to keep in one piece so he could get back? Or would he have been as devastated as she was now, and gone recklessly charging out into one fight after another? Would he have survived? He did survive--Miss Harkness said so. But she doesn't know where he is. Does she really know he's okay?

There was so much against it: Angelus and Darla thirsting for revenge, his own reputation as William the Bloody making him the focus of generations of slayers, and his more recently-minted souled self
making him a target for demons. His own loneliness and hopelessness making him careless, perhaps? If he'd survived, wouldn't he have been here today?

What had Eliza said? He was safe? Oh, no. Clearly not. Tara had felt hope when Xander drove them to the cemetery (but wasn't the crypt the home of the other Spike?--her Spike's earlier self?) And again, no. No Spike. Where was he? There was only one answer. He must be dust.

It wasn't fair. Today was her wedding day. It was the happiest day of her life and the cruelest. Her thoughts went round and round in a circle, digging a little deeper with each revolution.
Chapter 34

After the latest wannabe Big Bad was quashed in Cleveland, Spike booked a red-eye home. This time next year, Cleveland would be crawling with newly fledged slayers, and not a moment too soon, he thought with distaste. It was an ugly town with all the defects of any blighted Rust Belt city: poverty and pollution, but none of the charms of a big city. He couldn't wait to get back to San Francisco.

He drank and napped for most of the flight but awoke for the landing. He especially enjoyed the last few minutes before touchdown. The plane dropped low, almost skimming the surface of San Francisco Bay, the lights from the entire South Bay Area glittering across the water. The wheels bumped once, twice, and with a roar, the braking jet juddered to a stop.

Spike was first off the plane. He always flew first class, liking the booze, bigger seats, and attentive stewards. No, that's not what they were called these days--flight attendants, he reminded himself. He'd lived through the first years of the twenty-first century twice now--best watch his PC "Ps and Qs." He'd be seeing Tara soon.

Fingering the ring he wore on a chain around his neck, Spike allowed himself the rare luxury of a fantasy of her. Was she as beautiful as he remembered, or had memory idealized her? No matter--he'd find out soon enough. He tabled persistent worries about getting to know one another all over again. To her, it would still be their wedding day. Their wedding night!

His eardrums popped as he debarked. The sea-level air in San Francisco felt softer and more humid than Cleveland, its polluted lake notwithstanding. He grabbed a cab and got home in good time, as the 2:00am bar rush was past.

Luckily, his associates had finished remodeling the garden-level apartment of Spike's Queen Anne house. He used to sleep in the big south-facing master bedroom upstairs, but one earthquake too many taught him that no amount of drapery would shield him from the sun when the curtain rods fell down. With San Franciscan nonchalance, Spike figured it was a small price to pay to live in the best city on earth, and went to ground.

The apartment was comprised of the old laundry room under the kitchen, part of the tuck-under garage (Spike drove small, expensive cars these days, so it was no sacrifice) and a bit of tunnel. Gary, the group's scholar, had pinpointed the city's nearest tunnel and they excavated a side tunnel to join it. It was sealed with a demon-proof door and shielded with the coven's best protection spells. Gary archly referred to the apartment as "the priest hole," an allusion to Spike's celibate status these days.

Their psychic, Gary's partner Dan, had decorated it. He had voted for subterranean Bauhaus but Spike overruled him, remembering Tara's fondness for antiques. The apartment was therefore tastefully traditional--mostly--with the odd objets d'art acquired during Spike's travels. North-facing French doors opened onto a walled garden. The night air was cool and damp.

Spike built a fire, microwaved a pint of blood, which he drank while checking messages, and then took a shower. He went to bed but was too wound up from the flight to get to sleep right away. He listened to night sounds: far-off traffic, the soft splash of water in the garden pond, raccoons fishing
for his koi, most likely. Otherwise, the neighborhood was still, and Dan and Gary, sleeping in Spike's old bedroom upstairs, were dead to the world. Birdie's nephew, a part-time USF student and full-time demon hunter, lived on the top floor, and rounded out their team. Lad's room was too quiet—must not be home yet. Oh, right, he'd gone camping in the Sierras. It was with sharp reluctance that Spike agreed to Rain coming to stay in the first place—it reminded him too much of his failure to protect young Will. But Rain was nothing like Will, tough as hickory and seemingly unkillable.

Spike had just dropped off to sleep, when he startled awake. Dan had padded downstairs and was about to knock when Spike opened the door. With exaggerated patience, Spike said, "Yeah?"

Dan rumpled up his hair and looked puzzled. "I was dreaming. Don' remember much, which is weird for me. Just a...real sense of unease, like just before the Loma Prieta semi-Big One."

Spike snorted. "You're as useful as those earthquake-detecting pets."

Dan shook his head and looked more baffled, then shrugged. "That's all." He gave Spike a brief hug, and shuffled back upstairs. He stopped at the top of the stairs. "Oh, and a girl," he added. "A girl?"

"Yup." Dan yawned. "In a red and white dress."

"Candy-striper, huh?" Spike asked. "She pretty?"

"I'm prettier." Dan yawned again, until Spike's jaws ached in sympathy. "'Night, Spike. Good to have you home." He went back to bed.

Spike's bedside phone rang shrilly.

"The fuck!" Spike bellowed. "You were gonna tell me when she got here!"

"It's magick, not rocket science!" Eliza protested. "We could see the point in time we were sending her to, but not the date. It's not like those fanciful movies you're so fond of, with the pages of a calendar indicating the passage of time. We...'nailed it,' so to speak. She arrived at the moment you and she--your previous selves--departed for 1880. She telephoned to say she'd arrived," she finished lamely.

After a wordless growl of frustration and rage, Spike groaned, "Oh, you cocked up this time, Harkness, and so did I." He writhed inwardly, thinking of Tara's shock and disorientation. Not to mention the danger she'd been in!

"Don't swear at me, young man--" Eliza began frostily, but Spike cut her off.

"Where is she?"

"The Slayer and Mr. Harris tucked her and the Slayer's sister away before delivering this...package...to me." Spike could hear her revulsion. "I need you here--"

"Yeah, well I need to see my wife, so cough up! Where is she?"

"She's with her friends--she's all right for now. I need you here right now." Eliza sounded unsure of herself, something Spike almost never heard in her voice. "Never saw a young couple so taken up with one another," she muttered.
Not distracted by being referred to as one-half of a "young couple," Spike spoke witheringly, "You really don't get it, do you?" She did not reply. "Oh, very well, open a door." He'd waited 122 years; he supposed he could wait another couple of hours. It was the middle of the night in California anyway. Best let Tara sleep.

"Come on over," Eliza said, relief evident in her voice. She opened a portal.

He stepped forward, into Eliza's small study at the coven. "What's wrong with your place?"

"I've magicked it into a jail cell. The 'package' to which I referred is Warren Mears, Willow's killer, and as you well know, Tara's killer in the alternate universe Willow sent you back to remedy." She looked worried, and Spike's unease grew into real concern.

"Get to the point." Spike was in a fever to get back to Tara, but it looked as though the only way would be sort Warren out first.

"I've used a binding spell, removed his weapons, charms, talismans--any sort of magickal supplies, and even had Mr. Harris perform a," she spoke with distaste, "body cavity search." She shuddered theatrically.

"Bet he enjoyed that." Despite himself, Spike smirked. "He's not all that formidable, is he?"

Eliza looked away, and then spoke reluctantly, "I took a look. Into his mind, as I did when I met you." She looked grieved but implacable. "He is irredeemable. I dislike him as much as I used to dislike you. I don't know what to do with him. I cannot commit the ultimate sin, any more than I could against you. I wish you would--"

"Execute him?"

She looked away.

Spike smiled grimly. "Sometimes it's handy knowing the likes of me, eh? What's one more black mark on my spotted escutcheon, eh? Okay, lead me to him."

"It's sunny, as you can see. I'll have to open a portal into the cottage. It's shuttered, so you'll be safe, but be careful of him. He may try to escape."

"Yeah, yeah, let's just do this. Dying to get back to my wife, here."

She nodded and spoke the words, and a door opened into her stone cottage beyond the beech grove.

Before stepping through the portal, Spike turned to her and asked, "There isn't any chance you got it wrong?"

Eliza raised a hand and the doorway closed like a camera iris. She seemed to understand his moral qualms. "Any chance he's not really guilty, you mean?"

Almost sheepishly, Spike nodded. Before he'd gotten the soul, he'd have had no reluctance tearing Warren's head off. "Not goin' soft on you. Just want to make sure we've got it right."

"You have my word that that is what is evident from his thoughts. When I first clapped eyes on him, the creature was positively gloating, although not any longer. I imagine he'll do or say most anything to get you to free him. Three more things: the Slayer and Mr. Harris are eyewitnesses. While you may not be fond of Mr. Harris, he strikes me as reliable. And as you know, the Slayer is upright and honest."
Spike nodded.

"He was without remorse over killing Willow this morning," she continued, her face hard as granite.

Spike's mouth twisted as though he wanted to spit.

Eliza went on, "The last thing is...he was planning on raping your wife and the Slayer, before killing them. He's got a taste for killing women, I'm afraid."

Spike's usually mobile features shut down. He listened without expression. "Right."

Eliza opened the door into the cottage once more and Spike stepped on through.
"Spike?" Warren sounded boyish and eager. "I wouldn't have recognized you, with the hair. That's a good look on you."

Spike smiled easily. "Figured I'd move with the times. Always been my strength." He looked around at Eliza's cottage. It was much the same, though unobtrusively modernized, and bore evidence of Warren trying to escape. Spike gave a little laugh. "Hell of a place, Warren. It's like a kryptonite cell built to hold Superman."

"It is, isn't it?" Warren laughed nervously. "Hey, I didn't know you'd read Superman!" he exclaimed, seizing what appeared to be an opportunity to be Spike's pal.

Smarmy little shit. "I found it lacking in irony," Spike said, not paying much attention, waiting for Warren to tip his hand.

Predictably, Warren returned to his misfortune. "The old lady thinks I've done something bad. Hurt Willow...Rosenberg? I don't even know the girl! I may have been...well, lurking on Buffy's lawn last night but that's easy enough to explain. I've got a little--well, you won't tell on me, will you?--crush, that is." He gave a little self-deprecating laugh.

Spike chuckled chummily with Warren, who looked more relieved as moments passed and began to laugh with him. "Not at all!" Spike reassured him. "Done a little lurkin' myself years past, crushin' on the Slayer." He lowered his voice intimately. "She's a hot one, isn't she, Warren?"

"Oh, yeah," Warren agreed fervently. He warmed to the topic. "You know, Spike, you and me, we could go places. Get ourselves a couple of girls, hell, help ourselves to pretty near anything we wanted!" He looked Spike over, as though wondering if he could let him into his inner circle. "I had a couple of--" he seemed to weigh the risk, and spoke daringly, "--partners in crime." Spike didn't look shocked by this, so Warren continued, "They were soft and stupid. I need some muscle. Someone with a brain. We could--"

"Where are they now?" Spike interrupted. Get Warren off girls, 'fore I do him here and now, he thought in disgust.

"Sitting in jail--"

"Sort of like you. 'Cept, they'll get a trial. Unlike you." Spike's voice was expressionless.

"I know! It isn't fair." Warren gave Spike another appraising look. "I could help you, Spike...if you'll help me. That chip--I figured out--it's for behavior modification, isn't it? My partners and I discovered an abandoned lab when we were scoping out a new lair. They were doing experiments on non-human life forms, vampires--am I right? When you had me examine your chip, I saved the data. I could deactivate it."

Spike pretended to consider Warren's offer, while wondering why he didn't just do it--twist the fucker's head off. The Initiative had removed his chip 125 years before, during Spike's previous journey through the 21st century, so no worries there. He was quite capable of harming a human,
and though Warren was human (if entirely lacking in humanity), at this stage it was probably best that Warren didn't know that. Warren was the same age as Tara, and as different from her as possible. They're like snowflakes, humans, every one of them made from the same stuff but completely different.

Still talking, Warren sat down in Eliza's hearthside rocker, gesturing expansively toward the other chair. Spike fought back the urge to knock Warren into the fire. With distaste, he took the proffered seat, loathing the mockery of mateyness. He reminded himself he'd had enough experience infiltrating evil organizations. He could do this in his sleep. They were still at the "job interview" stage of the charade.

The faint whiff of fear emanating from Warren had subsided and he wore a fat pleased expression, his huge ego apparently congratulating him that he was going to get away with it. Why not just send him to Hell right now? Spike thought, picturing Warren's shock and horror upon arrival. He was a little bothered by his own dilatoriness. Was it only because Warren was human? Spike may have had a soul, but he lacked a bleeding heart. Did the poisonous little pustule have a bad childhood? Bad enough to explain this? Tara had been dealt a bum hand, too, but didn't work out her issues with mind control, sexual domination (hell, world domination) and megalomania. As always, power-mad pipsqueaks with delusions of world domination.

He steered his thoughts back to Warren's babbling. Warren had Spike high on a mountaintop, showing him the kingdoms of the earth. At Warren's mention of the Buffybot, Spike said softly, "Back to the women."

"Oh, yes!" Warren responded eagerly. "A 'bot's good but only so far. There's the utter compliance, which is nice, and lubrication--slipperiness--and body temperature are easy to achieve, but what's hard is getting that...randomness that women have, hell, excel at! Know what I mean?" He all but dug Spike in the ribs.

Suppressing an urge to smack him, Spike gave him his best approximation of a smile of evil complicity.

Warren unloaded his big guns. "Tonight, I saw the most beautiful--Spike, I know you like Buffy, but imagine taller, softer, bigger--" His hands described chest-high parabolas. "She's a dyke, but that doesn't matter. I developed this little gizmo, a cerebral dampener, and what or who she wants is not in the picture. You're a vampire, Spike. She could be a girlfriend and tasty treat, until you got tired of her and wanted more. And don't we want more!" He leaned in and said intimately, "I don't mind sloppy seconds."

A low humming in Spike's brain blotted out Warren's noise. With vampiric speed, Spike had Warren out of the chair and pinned up against the stone hearth. "Shut up! Just...shut up." He was not aware of it, but his face had changed. He leaned in, his stare fixing Warren like a pinned bug.

"Wha--? I don't get it. We're partners, aren't we? Oh! You want to be the boss. You can lead it. I had my turn, and it didn't go that well. I don't mind. You can do it." The preceding whiff of fear that Warren had given off now grew to a positive stink.

Did he have to spell it out for the boy? "Warren, you've been tried and found guilty. I'm here to carry out the sentence. If you have any messages you want delivered, any peace you want to make 'tween you and your maker, I'll give you a moment. Might do your immortal soul some good, but 't won't keep me from doin' you."

"No! I heard you--talking to the old lady. You don't think I'm guilty. I haven't done anything except build a few toys. It's just--stuff! Petty crimes. I haven't hurt anyone!" Warren chattered, wide-eyed
with panic. There was a strong smell of urine as his bladder cut loose.

Spike held Warren one-handed, fingers tight on his windpipe, not squeezing too hard. Yet. With the other hand, he counted off on his fingers. "One. Your girlfriend. The one you killed and tried to pin on the Slayer."

Warren choked, "It was...an accident!"

Spike ignored him and went on, "Two. In another timeline, you killed my wife. 'Cept, she wasn't my wife yet." He locked burning eyes on Warren's darting ones. "Three. Willow went mad with grief, sent me back to fetch her darling. My darling, now. Yes, Warren, that lovely girl you saw tonight is my wife. You shit." He gave Warren's windpipe a little squeeze and continued, "Four. Willow's spell sent the girl and me traveling through time, for which I might thank you, but the getting back to her is the most exquisite torture I've ever endured. So I do not thank you." He squeezed harder. "Five. You killed Willow and put my girl in danger." Warren's eyes bulged with terror as Spike continued to compress his windpipe, saying, "You exposed her to something she should not have had to see--her ex-lover dying in front of her."

A fresh stink told him that the terror had reached Warren's bowels. Time to squash this insect. "Warren, I don't think there's any hope for you. One thing I am certain of, though. You're not hurting any more women." With a sound like a cracking egg, he crushed Warren's windpipe and threw him thrashing to the ground. Warren's mouth moved helplessly as he tried to breathe, drowning in his own blood, and Spike watched the horror and shock fade from Warren's eyes as he passed out of this world and into whatever awaited him in the next.
From the scrying mirror in her study at the school, Eliza had watched what transpired between Spike and Warren at her cottage. She was drained from all the recent spell-casting, and teleporting any time soon was out of the question. Instead, she rode home in an electric cart that Birdie had pinched from a nearby golf course. Too tired to notice that some wag had affixed a bumper sticker bearing "My other car is a broom" to the back, she climbed in and quietly putt-putted the mile and a half home and parked in front of the cottage.

She spoke the necessary words undoing the protection spells, and the wards guarding her little home fell away. Spike opened the door, standing well away from the square of sunlight that flooded the doorway.

"Sorry I can't hand you out," he said.

Muttering, "I am not an invalid," Eliza climbed carefully out of the cart and hobbled in the front door. She felt every one of her 164 years.

Once inside, she stared expressionlessly at a lumpy bundle on her floor. Spike had wrapped Warren's body in an old blanket and tied him into a neat package. Even without asking, she knew Spike had cleaned up the mess Warren must have made right before he died. Eliza was fairly sure it didn't pass muster for Spike's hypersensitive sense of smell, but it was good enough not to offend an elderly human nose such as hers.

"Good. That's sorted," she said flatly. "And how are you?" She gave Spike a penetrating look.

His face gave no clue of his feelings. "Vampire, remember? It's what I do."

"That's not all you do," she said in a mildly reproving tone, and went to the kitchenette. She took out tea things and a flask. "Do you want your whisky with or without tea?"

"Without," he said, accepting a glass from her. "Shouldn't we get rid of the body first?"

"I need to fortify myself," she answered, without interrupting her tea-making.

"Here. Let me." Spike gently steered her to her chair and brought her a cup. He looked a touch surprised that she allowed herself to be taken in hand like this. After the tea steeped, he brought the pot and poured her a cup.

She added a good-sized dollop of whisky into the cup and took several thoughtful sips before speaking. "The last time I took on a human was 1895. It was a wizard who styled himself 'The Great Beast.' I believe that Aleister Crowley modeled himself upon the creature, but in his case, The Great Beast actually did possess the power that that paltry imitator only aspired to. The Beast was every bit as evil as Mr. Mears, and although not possessing the technological advantages Mr. Mears did, had dark forces at his command and the will to use them. He lusted after--"

Spike said sarcastically, "Wait. Don't tell me. World domination, right?"

Eliza detested being interrupted, but merely continued, "He wanted Ann." She sniffed. "And me, if
you please! Well, Ann in the usual way and me for my power. He said he'd take us both, sort of a package deal. Naturally we said, 'No thank you,' but he wasn't the sort to take 'No' for an answer."

"You killed him."

"Ann did, with my help. He'd threatened to kill Charles, thinking perhaps that that was the only impediment to Ann succumbing to his charms. I was immune, of course."

Spike smiled slightly. "Didn't think she had it in her."

Eliza eyed him narrowly. "You were in more danger than you knew when young Will died."

"I knew. Had to bring him home, though, didn't I?" He sighed.

"What I'm getting at...is that this is war." She nodded toward the body on the floor. "I know he's not your usual foe, but he was no less the enemy. If you'll recall--"

"Thanks, but I don't need a pep talk. I'm not brooding, just...thoughtful. It's been over a century since I took out a human in that way--face-to-face 'n' all..."

"It's not always the heat of battle. Ann and I killed The Great Beast over coffee and queen cake." She was anxious to make it right. "I don't say this often, but you have proved yourself an admirable person. I'm very pleased...proud, really proud--to be allied with you."

Spike fidgeted uncomfortably and had trouble meeting her eyes. "Let's just do this." He arose from the table and picked up the blanket-bound body. "If you're too tired to open a portal, I can tuck him in the cellar until nightfall, then get rid of it."

Eliza patted her lips with a napkin and said, "No. You're right. Let's dispose of him." With a nearly undetectable sigh, she spoke the words opening a small portal. A distant roaring rumbled from it. "Be careful," she called. "Just toss him in."

Spike complied, recoiling from the blast of hot air coruscating forth. "Hotter'n hell in there!" As Warren's body was swallowed up, the portal snapped shut.

Eliza fanned herself with the napkin. "Close. It's the Port Talbot blast furnace."

Spike strolled back to the table with a little smile, pretending to dust off his hands. "It's rather intimate isn't it, disposing of a body together? I feel we should kiss or something."

Eliza was startled, and then her face crumpled into a rare grin. Giving him a little shove, she said, "Oh, you."

"Speaking of kissing, I want my wife," he said, growing serious. "I know you're tired--all the portals, an' spells and such, locking up the littler Big Bad. Just tell me if it'll be quicker for me to fly or wait for your batteries to recharge so you can send me to her. But I'll fly if I have to."

Eliza closed her eyes briefly, steeling herself for the unpleasant task ahead, but Spike didn't give her the chance to explain.

"No. No, no, no, no! I don't like that look. What? She okay? Tell me!" he demanded.

"No. She's all right physically, but her mind...she's had a terrible shock, losing both her lovers. It's only been a day to her, but coming upon Willow's death as she did...it affected her mind. I fear she may be going into a decline."
Spike stared in disbelief. "'A decline'!" he bellowed. "Could you be any more old-fashioned? I'm nearly twice your age and I don't express myself in that bloody stupid-- What do you mean! Is she off her rocker?"

Eliza bore his sarcasm stoically and admitted, "I believe that she's experiencing what is known as post-traumatic shock."

"Well, let's get her! Come on, jump to, open a portal, as in five minutes ago! Now, Eliza!"

She shook her head. "This isn't the best time to tell you this, but you'll have to hear it soon enough. You'll recall the last time you lived through 2002, up to the spring of 2003, The First Evil worked on you. Through you. I believe the modern term is 'mole.' You were its tool. Do you know--can you say for certain that you won't be used in similar fashion if you go there once more? Its...'MO'...was... is to act through you and others who've died--"

Frantically, he interrupted, "No, I'm not buyin' it. I'm wise to it and besides, Watcher found the trigger. It's deactivated. Liza, you're not keeping me from her."

"Can you say for certain that you won't put them in danger if you go there? Put her in danger?" she repeated patiently.

"No!"

"One more thing," Eliza was relentless. "This is a different world. You and she changed it by coming back. Willow is gone, Tara has taken her place, and yes, she'll need help. A lot of it. But what else is different? Two of you, and yes, I know your previous self is on his way to Africa right now in search of his soul, but how do you know that you won't increase the danger she's in? We have certain advantages: we can provide the Slayer and her band with vital information; the coven can help from afar, and you can help--do help, sorry!--but I think it's best if you stay away from the Hellmouth while there are two of you. Do you understand?"

The look he gave her was one of dazed incomprehension. "No. No! Of course I'm going to her. We'll explain ourselves to the children--they're no strangers to the weird happenin' in Sunnyhell: two Xanders, Buffy an' Faith switchin' bodies--what's hard to swallow 'bout a little time loopin' and two of me? She'll be glad to have me back--she'll not have had 120 years to go astray."

"William. While you may not think you could be vulnerable to the influence of the First, I do. It's not clear, really, when it started, but you'll recall it was 'awakened' by the Slayer's return from the dead... the second time, so in theory it could have been in operation from early this year, just biding its time. Your behavior toward the Slayer...sorry, your earlier self's behavior was...alarmingly atypical."

Spike sputtered, "You...you...you have no idea the nature of my relationship with her! It was all about fists and fu-- She was a zombie, or next door to it, when her pals yanked her out of heaven. What she had with me was the only thing that made her feel anything. I know that it wasn't love, not like--" He shut up and looked bereft. "What I'm saying is that comparing that train wreck of a relationship with what I had with Tara, implyin' it'd degenerate into that--"

Eliza began delicately, "That episode in the Slayer's bathroom--"

Spike winced. "Don't."

"Remember, I've experienced your memories. What you did--tried to do, is not the person I know. Even your unsouled self, killer though you were, didn't--"
"Oh, didn't I? What do you think I went an' got the soul for? Bad man like me needs brakes."

"My dear boy..."

Spike looked wildly at her. "Eliza, that won't help. There's nothing you can say--"

She said quietly, "I'm only trying to say that I think the First was working on you, even then."

"You're wrong." From the set of his shoulders and jaw, she knew that he was unmoved by her words.

"Very well. You may be right, you may no longer be vulnerable to The First. I cannot stop you if you are determined to do this, but the last thing I wanted to say is that this is uncharted territory. Your other self needs to play his part. This is a different world, changed by Willow dying, by Tara living--bless her!--and you being in it, too, with your other self. I don't think you and he can both be there. If you go there, you'll endanger them all. You'll endanger her."

Eliza didn't think she needed to speak her final warning, but she did in spite of herself. "If you go back now, William, there is a very good chance the future could be affected too much. The First could win and then you'd all be dead. Is that a chance you truly want to take?"
Without another word, Spike bolted toward Eliza's bed alcove, grabbed a blanket, and tore out the front door into the bright spring sunshine.

"William, stop!" she cried after him, but he was already out of sight. As quickly as her aching feet could take her, she hobbled to the cupboard where she kept magickal supplies, withdrawing items she ordinarily did not use: sweetgrass, an eagle foot, and feathers. She handled the sacred objects reverently and said a little prayer. Thank the Lord and Lady that Birdie's approach to magick was so eclectic! Eliza might not be able to make it rain yet, but she was damned if she couldn't produce a cloudy day.

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Spike whipped along, cursing himself for every kind of a fool, shifting the position of the blanket over his head, and beating out flames when and where they would ignite. He paused for a moment in the ceremonial grove, taking advantage of the shade while coming up with a hasty plan. What possessed him to run like that? And in broad daylight? Easy—Tara needed him. He was damned if he'd stand by and let the Scoobies mismanage the First Evil while his girl filled in for Willow. Should have stayed and talked Eliza into sending him home. Persuaded her to open a portal, that San Francisco was far enough away from the Hellmouth, that he just needed to pick up a few things, hell, told her anything, and then high-tailed it for SunnyD. As it was, he needed to get undercover now and somehow contrive to get halfway around the world, whilst avoiding Eliza's meddling. No telling how opposed she'd be to him crossing her, or what means she'd use to stop him.

He felt a moment's anguish over Tara's pain. Intellectually, he knew that it would only have been a day for her, but he felt her shock and hurt as acutely as though it were his own. He pushed those feelings down. They were an all-consuming constriction in his chest and throat he could not afford. Right now, he needed coolness, cunning, and well, not to combust before reaching her! He looked around. The weather was favoring him. A heavy cloudbank had rolled up and thunder rumbled. Livid clouds lit up from within. Far from feeling it was ominous, Spike took it as a sign of favor and, now that he was shielded from the deadly rays of the sun, he loped back to the school, the blanket waving behind him like Superman's cape.

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Birdie stood mixing up pancake batter in the kitchen of her little home in the made-over sheep shed. It had a quaint charm, like those old mews in London. She was happy here, with the frequent absurd feeling the stone walls were informed with the generations of contented sheep that had preceded her. But no sheep remained. The school's surrounding pastureland and moor had given way to the rolling manicured green of the neighboring Westcott Golf Course and Westbury Riding Academy. At least the school still had horses, she thought with satisfaction. That counted for a lot. Coming from South Dakota, you'd have thought she was born in a saddle, but she'd never ridden until she came here. In addition to the arcane arts, teaching horsemanship to the girls was her duty and joy. She was grateful to Spike for sending her to the coven—how many years ago? She'd been just a kid then, and on a dark path. Who'd have thought she would have blossomed like a prairie flower here in Westbury?

It was with deep satisfaction too, she thought of the riding master at the neighboring dressage
school. True, he was half her age, but Westcott women rarely went for mates of obvious suitability. What mattered more was—what did Eliza call it?—"an uxorious desire to serve the women's mission." Friedrich had that, in spades, and such pretty blue eyes! Nearly as pretty as that other blue-eyed devil. Funny that Spike should be so much on her mind this morning.

She was about to turn from the window to the stove when she saw a flamboyant Pendleton blanket—her gift to Eliza—moving along at a good clip. From beneath it, smoke billowed forth and familiar Doc Martens pounded below. Stupid vampire had no business being out in broad daylight—!

Birdie hastily shoved breakfast aside and hollered out the window in her loud Western voice, "Git in here!"

Spike veered toward the direction of her voice. He'd been heading for the school's garage, hoping for a vehicle with necromanced windows, but was pretty sure he'd find nothing. Plan B had been any vehicle and some spray paint à la his old blacked-out DeSoto, but Birdie's summons worked just as well. He needed to get under cover, and quickly.

Birdie held the door open and shooed him in, scolding, "Ho-wah! That blanket cost me 200 bucks, big guy! It's all scorched now." She ruffled his hair, beating the sparks out.

Spike waved her slapping hands aside and flung himself in a chair, narrowly missing the descendant of the cat he'd once warmed Tara with in the loft above them.

Birdie closed the door and turned to him. Fists on hips, she looked him up and down. "You look like you don't know if you're afoot or astride. Want breakfast? I was about to make pancakes."

"No."

"Coffee? Thirty-two years here and I still hate tea."

"No."

"I think I got blood left over from the last visit." She rummaged in the freezer and withdrew a couple of plastic pouches.

"Not hungry."

Something was definitely up with him. He was usually such a chatterbox. She put the pouches in the microwave and set it to defrost. "Wanna tell me what's going on?"

He shrugged.

"Well, lemme guess. You come hell-for-leather from the direction of Eliza's—burning holes in my Yule gift to her, by the way—near-setting yourself on fire, and there's a big black cloud rolling up on a sunny day. I'd say there was a difference of opinion 'tween you and her. Am I right?"

He looked away.

"Well, at least she doesn't want to burn you up." She stopped prying and returned to making breakfast. "Want breakfast?" she repeated. "Pancakes," her voice lilted temptingly. "Rounds or funny shapes?"

Spike's face crumpled and he swallowed several times before muttering, "I'm getting off this... rocket ride. I've been a good boy longer'n I was evil, and I'm not just leavin' her to muddle along as best she can without me. Don't care. Don't care if it puts 'em in danger. I want my girl and I'm going to get her."
Birdie put aside breakfast, and brought coffee and blood to the table. "You'd better tell me everything."

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Spike finished dolorously, "So you were right. She is a little cuckoo."

In an apparent non-sequitur, Birdie answered, "You know, Eliza shared your memories with me. She's like an elephant — she never forgets. I gotta say, I agree with her. That thing in the bathroom — that wasn't you. Remember our road trip? You were a perfect gentleman, damn you." She couldn't resist a little pout.

He just stared at her. "Back to my wife."

She settled down. "I'm getting there. If the First Evil was— is—starting to put out feelers...looking for a 'vehicle,' like we do when we soul-travel, I think it's best you steer clear of the Hellmouth until its hash is settled. But I agree with you, too. And your wife! I could feel her missing you, ten years before she was born! This need you have, to go to her in spite of what's sensible or safe—the Iroquois call it 'ondinnonk.' It's an impulse of your angelic nature."

He laughed without humor and muttered, "Don't have much of that. Just know I want her. 'Sides, Eliza'll have something to say about this. Don't fancy waking up on fire."

"Silly. Who do you think produced that?" She jerked her chin toward the window. The black clouds were now discharging fat raindrops. "She'd never hurt you... unless you turn evil," she finished brightly.

Spike just rubbed his temples as though they hurt.

Birdie pressed her lips into a thin line. "I have something to say about this, too. Araminta is grooming Phoebe to run the Devon coven, but I'm taking over here when Eliza retires."

Spike just looked at Birdie with speechless gratitude. A beautiful woman still, she wore her years like a mantle of grace and power. All he could manage was a whispered, "Thank you, Birdie." As much as he'd grown to appreciate Eliza over the years, and all the good that had been between them, she'd put him in an impossible position. He felt he couldn't bear the break that this would cause. He'd been this close to threatening the old woman.

Birdie was still talking. "It's like Dr. Freud and that id of his. You repress it with your superego, it makes you crazy. But ondinnonk's not this animalistic thing to be kept in line like the id—it's a source of wisdom and guidance. "With ondinnonk, you should listen to it. But I'm gonna help as well." She nodded firmly.

Spike relaxed with relief.

"So let's get busy. We'll let Tara know I'm coming for her, since you can't. You can call her right now. I've got an amulet I want to make for her and I want to mix up a potion." She stood up and began to clear off the table, giving Spike an encouraging look. "We'll fix her up, and you and she can get to the sexual healing." She gave him a wink. "No-one'll think to look for you here while I'm gone. I'll go bunk with Fritz for a couple of days."

"'The Lipizzaner stallion?' He raised one eyebrow.

Birdie chortled appreciatively. "Hah! How'd you guess I call him that?"
Eliza was not the only one with a memory like an elephant, Spike thought as he dialed Buffy's number from memory. He then realized with a shock that she'd probably hang up on him, or at least, not let him talk to Tara. Hastily, he handed the phone to Birdie and said, "You ask for her."

Birdie took the phone between cheek and shoulder while she continued to grind exotic-smelling ingredients in a mortar. "Hi! Can I talk to Tara?" she said in a happy, harmless-sounding voice. "I'm a friend from school."

With his enhanced hearing, he could make out a noncommittal murmur on the other end, and then after a too-long wait, Birdie finally gestured with her shoulder to him. "Here. Take it."

Spike took the phone with eagerness mixed with trepidation. "Baby girl?"
Chapter 38

Spike could hardly believe that he was about to speak to Tara. It had been, what, one hundred and twenty-two years and change? Especially change. He held his breath. On the other end he heard her pick up the phone and say, "Yes?" It chilled him, the indifferent way she spoke, as though she were without hope.

"Baby girl?"

He felt, rather than heard, her trembling, and her shifting the phone for a better grip. She whispered, "Is it really you?"

Trying not to break down, laugh and cry at the same time, a little chuckle was jerked out of him as he said, "Who else?" Aware that they were talking trivially, he tried for a serious tone when what he really wanted to do was shout with jubilation.

"Listen. I can't come to get you right now, but this nice lady here at the coven, Birdie by name--she's gonna--" He glanced up at Birdie, who had finished tying an assortment of magickal ingredients into a beaded pouch.

Birdie nodded to him. "All set. Tell her, whenever she's ready."

"She's gonna open a portal and come get you. Do you… Do you…still want to see me?" He couldn't believe how on tenterhooks he was, how much depended upon her answer.

Tara answered obliquely, "You were going to be here. You said you'd--"

With a terrible sense of compunction, he knew how badly he'd failed her. Why hadn't he been there? He should have been, should have shadowed the Slayer's house all spring. Things always went to hell at that time of year on the Hellmouth. Should have eliminated Warren the second he turned up there. Spike knew he'd grown soft. Taking Warren out face-to-face earlier today had rattled him. A surgical strike in Sunnydale would have done the trick. He'd trusted Eliza too far--assumed she had it all in hand, knew the exact date. They'd both fucked up.

"Tara. Baby. I promise you I will make it up to you. I know, being there, facing your girl's death, alone like that… It must have been… I'll do whatever it takes to ease your pain, just…" Spike had an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu, hearing himself beg. It had been a long while since he'd begged anyone for anything. But for Tara, he'd do the last hundred yards on his belly, if need be.

Tara's soft voice said, "Of course I want to see you, but I don't know…if they can spare me. Buffy's working a lot…and Dawn needs looking after."

With a shock of unreality, Spike thought, babysitting? More important than seeing me? Spike could hear Buffy's voice in the background, reassuring Tara that it was okay to go.

In desperation, Spike muttered, "Tara. Please." He felt lower than he had in ages, as though his assumed reward were about to be withdrawn. Suddenly, he had a sense that this might not be good
for her. Maybe a vampire, crazy in love, was not the best therapy for a disturbed young woman. Maybe staying in familiar surroundings, among friends, was in her best interests. He started again, "If you're not comfortable leaving Sunnydale right now, if you feel they need you--of course they do need you--" The ever-present constriction in his chest now felt as though something inside him might break.

Suddenly, Birdie plucked the phone out of Spike's hand and said briskly, "Tara? This is Birdie in Westbury. I can feel you coming apart at the seams. Got some healing I want to help you with. Thought you could do with a ritual, maybe a sweat. Okay? I want to come get you in ten. Be ready."

She shot Spike a frustrated look, and handed the phone back.

Tara had already hung up.

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Spike watched Birdie make her final arrangements, laying out the magickal ingredients for the portal. Where'd Eliza keep hers, he thought irrelevantly--in her bra? Birdie made a quick phone call to Fritz to confirm their meeting in an hour. To avoid eavesdropping on their conversation and Birdie's chortles, he left the room. All the happy couples, he thought bitterly. What the hell had happened to him and Tara? When Birdie hung up, he returned to the kitchen.

"Stand back," Birdie directed, and spoke the words opening the portal. "Half a sec," she promised. It was considerably longer than that, and Spike found himself holding his breath once more. Silly habit. He should break it.

After a too-long wait Birdie emerged, drawing Tara through the portal by the hand. "Come on, honey," she coaxed.

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It's a trick, Tara thought. Obviously, the Powers were playing tricks on her. That phone conversation, for example. It sounded like Spike, but if it were really Spike, he'd have been there. He had promised he'd always be there for her. That he'd take care of her. It was another trick--a way to punish her.

She was uneasily aware of her handicaps. Her background. Her memory had been played with three times. Twice, thanks to Willow, but Willow had been an amateur compared to Glory. That time, which she barely remembered, she had felt herself slip away, except for a tiny kernel of Tara-ness, tormented by irrelevant thoughts, nagging worries and doubts, and a sense of the undone. It was a bad trip, a nightmare. Spike had been sweet to her back then. And Willow--no, don't think of Willow. She must be very careful.

Avoid. Avoid. Use her responsibilities as an excuse. Throw dust in their eyes. Present a moving target.

A Native American woman, with black hair in a braided cable over her shoulder, appeared in a portal. She stepped through and smiled warmly at Tara. "I'm Darlene. Bird Woman, but Spike calls me Birdie. You can call me Birdie, too."

"Spike calls you--?" Buffy frowned. "You know Spike? Where do you know him from?" She moved in front of Tara, who sat rocking herself with clasped arms.

Birdie turned from Tara to Buffy, who stood over her fragile charge with a fierce protective air.
"Hello, Buffy. I've heard so much about you." The words were cordial enough, but Tara thought she detected an arch undertone in Birdie's greeting.

"Why does everyone know me all of a sudden? That old lady, too," Buffy said. "I thought you were from that coven of hers. Where do you know Spike from?" she repeated suspiciously.

"There's a lot you don't know--which I don't have time to go into right now, but let me just say that Spike saved me about thirty years ago. Right now, it's Tara who needs help. I'm sure you'll agree." Birdie's voice was mild, but her manner plainly showed she would brook no interference.

"Spike was evil thirty years ago," Buffy said stubbornly, not moving aside from her protective posture in front of Tara.

Smiling enigmatically, Birdie merely said, "That's all you know."

Buffy watched her through narrowed eyes, then shrugged. She said reluctantly, "Tara? I don't like this. You don't have to go with her if you don't want to."

Tara merely shrugged and got up. "It's all right. I have to do this."

"Wait!" Buffy moved aside, but only as far as the curtain-pull on the right of the living room drapes. She pulled, and the room was flooded with sunlight. The rays fell full upon Birdie's face and bare arms.

Birdie's mouth crooked in a half-smile. "I know you're just doing your job, Slayer. But I'm on your side. Really I am." She took Tara by the hand. "Come on, honey."

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Eyes squeezed shut, Tara thought, if I never travel by portal, time travel, or any other non-standard way to get from Point A to Point B again, it'll be too--

One hand held fast by Birdie, she allowed herself to be pulled through the portal. She looked up and flinched. There stood Spike, or a simulacrum of him. Oh, they're good. They're very good. The Powers tormenting her had provided a look-alike of her beloved, right down to the light brown hair. It was not a glamour, either. He stood staring at her, with such love in his eyes. She could drown in those eyes. She must be very careful not to.

On edge to see what the next hurdle would be, her eyes slid away from Spike's and took in her surroundings. She was in a small stone building with a timbered loft overhead, that looked very like the sheep shed in which she and Spike had taken shelter the night before meeting the Maxwells and Miss Harkness. Books and riding trophies now lined the walls. She looked out the window. It was a rainy day here, but across the damp green yard she could see the sprawling farmhouse housing the coven. On the north side of its second floor, she could make out the room where she had spent her wedding night. Oh, the attention to detail was astonishing. She wondered what she'd be hit with next. Knowing she needed to get through this, she set her jaw and looked back at Spike and Birdie.

Birdie's lips smiled gently but her eyes were filled with pity she couldn't hide. Spike's eyes were wild with fear but he spoke calmly enough. "Birdie? You had an amulet or something you wanted to give her?"

"Yes. And a potion, too." Birdie turned to the stove and uncovered a simmering pot. "It's ready." She poured it into a flowered china cup and brought it to Tara. "This is for calmness and emotional balance. We know you've been through, well, hell, and we want to help."
Tara eyed the cup suspiciously but accepted it and even took a sip.

Birdie blew out a tiny breath of relief. She glanced at Spike. "I don't know that I should leave you at a time like this, but Fritz is expecting me, and you and she will have to go through this sooner or later." She picked up a beaded pouch and gave it to Tara. "This is for strength. You can wear it around your neck or tie it to your waist. Even put it in your pocket." She held it in front of the unresponsive Tara until she made herself look at it. "Go on. It won't hurt you."

Tara took it and nodded without answering. She slipped it in her pocket.

Birdie continued, "Tara, please listen to me. I know you're afraid and suspicious, and in your place I'd be, too. Spike's here to help you, and so am I. I'm going away for a couple of days, but here's my cell. Friedrich's number is where I'll be and you can call me anytime, day or night. But I think you and Spike should talk. Let him help you. He'd been through a lot himself, and you can help him, too. Okay, sweetie?"

Tara didn't answer, but gave a tiny nod and looked away.

"Well, okay then!" Birdie said with false heartiness, and gave her a big hug, which Tara did not return. She gave Spike a brief hug, too, and brushed his cheek with a kiss, whispering, "Good luck." Aloud, she added, "When I get back is time enough to beard Eliza in her den, have a ritual, maybe a ladies' sweat…"

Spike didn't acknowledge her, but only looked at Tara.

Birdie sighed, picked up an overnight bag and left. She climbed into a battered truck parked outside, and drove away.

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Spike looked at his beloved with a horror he tried his utmost to conceal. Tara was thinner than he remembered, and her eyes were smudged with umber shadows underneath. She had bitten or picked at her lips and they were lined with bloody wounds. Her nails were chewed to the quick. He turned away and said, "You hungry? Wonder what she keeps in her fridge. I usually eat up at the big house when I visit here."

"She's a big ol' meat eater, sorry. Oh, look. Corn bread. There's butter and honey, too." This is insane, he thought. He wanted to grab her and crush her in his arms, and kiss her until-- No, he wanted to beg her to snap out of it. He was desperately afraid his girl might be gone for good. This really is insane. Go slow, you wanker, he told himself. The pain in his chest lent credence to the old saw about one's heart breaking.

He brought butter and honey to the table while Tara watched him. "Let me warm the bread." He put the dish in Birdie's microwave and set it to reheat. "More tea?" he heard himself say. It was all he could do not to--

"Yes, please." Tara pushed the cup toward him, and gave him a veiled look.

Wanting to shout, he merely said, "Comin' up." He brought the pot to her and refilled her cup. "Taste okay? It smells…interestin'" Must keep the ball of conversation moving.

She didn't answer for a moment, while sipping. Finally, she said, "It's what she said it was. A-potion for calmness and balance. I was afraid…she might be trying to poison me."

Spike was relieved to hear that much out of his silent beloved. He laughed a little. "Who, Birdie? Birdie's entirely too forthright. She might punch you--has done, on occasion--me, I mean, not you,
but she'd never poison you."

The microwave dinged, and he brought bread and plates to the table. "She doesn't allow Demon Rum in the house, but there's a little brandy in my coat pocket, if you'd like a drop--"

Tara shook her head. "I'm a little--" She clammed up.

"I understand."

She slid him a sideways look that seemed to say, ‘Do you really?’

He was desperate to get through to her. It had been so long. "Well, okay, maybe I don’t. But I have seen someone I loved die in front of me and not been able to help. I know the…hopelessness and self-loathing from not being able to stop it.” He stopped, wincing, and continued, "I'm sorry to be so blunt, but I love you so much. I know you're in a tailspin and I can't help. I want to, though. So much. Let me help." He felt without looking at her that his clumsy muttered words had only made it worse.

Tara's head hung down, and she said softly, "What's upstairs?"

Spike's head shot up. "In the loft?" His eyes went round with surprise and he gave a little laugh. "Don't know. Haven't been up there since I was up there with you. ‘Spect it's her bedroom."

She looked up at him, as if to say, ‘Well?'

Speechless with surprise, Spike finally found his tongue. "After you." He gestured toward the circular stairs that replaced the old wooden ladder.

As they climbed, his anticipation turned to uneasiness. It was too good to be true. Only moments before, hadn't she made excuses about wanting to see him, and been afraid that Birdie was trying to poison her?
Up the circular staircase, Tara climbed before Spike, her face hidden.

Her sensible shoes rang on the uncarpeted steps up to Birdie's bedroom. The lacy design of the iron was stronger than it looked. Well, so was she. As she climbed, she laid her plans.

She always got screwed. It was practically her defining characteristic. There was a certain amount of control, though, in submitting on *her* terms. She had learned that as a young girl, when her father would come to her after the household was in bed. There was a certain relief in hurrying it up and getting it over with. She could make him finish and leave her alone.

Unable to protect her, her mother taught her the trick of detaching from unpleasant reality, and Tara was a past master at turning her feelings off. She'd been failed by her mother and damaged by her father, and after going away to school, she met Willow.

She thought her luck had changed, but it hadn't. She'd been betrayed by Willow, brain-sucked by Glory, and terrorized not infrequently by the odd monster while living in Sunnydale. Then, she'd been reconciled to Willow, got shot back in time for more terror, and fell in love with the one person who, ironically, had never hurt her.

She had always had a thread of iron under her submissive exterior. It was Spike's tenderness that had started the metal fatigue. His unfailing care for her had started her on a path of fragility she couldn't tread safely. There were bigger challenges ahead and no room for weakness. When had she been so sensitive to bad food, cold, discomfort? She was country-bred, and tough. She was *used* to getting screwed. She'd get this...passage...with him over and done with. When he was good and relaxed, she could...what? Open the curtains?

Gaining the loft with its big bed, she saw that Birdie must have carefully closed the drapes before leaving. *Birdie* expected her to give herself to this monster. Tara didn't think that magick was the weapon she'd choose to use on him. She needed to hoard her strength. She might have to take Birdie on later. With a pretense of shy dallying, Tara went to the window. Good. The window faced west and the sun would flood the room with lethal light later today. She stroked the curtains with mock solicitousness, as though to make doubly sure that no ray would set him on fire. Time enough for that later.

She was aware of his presence behind her, this...what? Who was he, really? Clearly, he wasn't her lover. Perhaps he wasn't even a vampire. He might even be human, because no vampire besides Spike could telegraph his feelings like that. That look in his eyes-- She closed her eyes briefly, steadying her thoughts.

Well, human, monster, or no, he was not Spike. Just another hurdle to get over.

Tara turned to him. The real Spike had a keen nose for deceit, and this creature passing itself off as Spike might too. She hoped it would take her trepidation for the shyness of the bride. She felt a tiny wavering, a sense of uncertainty. It might be him after all. The likeness was incredible, right down to her class ring--her wedding ring for him--on a silver chain round its neck. It made no move to approach her, but hung back, just looking at her with awe and discovery in its eyes. She squeezed
hers shut. She was used to getting screwed, but this was really...excruciating.

She felt a moment's stab of anger at the injustice of it. She had hurt no-one; she didn't even eat meat! Why was she singled out like this? Aware that she was giving in to weakness, she shoved down her confusion, pain, and anger. This wavering wasn't helping. Time to get it over with.

~~~

Spike watched Tara look around the loft, walk over to the window, and then smooth the curtains. She kept giving him furtive glances and looking away, as though she couldn't make up her mind about him. Well, no rush. He enjoyed just looking at her. They'd take it slow. After all, he'd waited this long.

In spite of everything--her haggard thinness and shadowed eyes, she was even more beautiful than he remembered.

He wondered what was in the drink Birdie had given her. What kind of help they could offer her. A ritual he could envision, but what in the world was this "ladies' sweat" Birdie mentioned? Eliza, Birdie, and the ladies were Tara's best bet for getting back to her old self. Getting Tara back to health wasn't just for him, although he wanted her desperately. She'd been brought to this time for a reason, and right now she was a wounded soldier medivacked to temporary safety, to be patched up and sent back to fight.

If he could take the cup from her! He hoped to hell Eliza was wrong. There was no way this fragile girl could take on the First Evil herself. Well, there were the Potentials and the Slayer herself, not to mention his own role first time 'round, but Willow's spell empowering the Potentials had been key.

Tara circled closer, sliding him secretive looks, and if her hammering heart was any indication, trying to make up her mind about going to bed with him. He started. What the hell was wrong with him?

He'd allowed his enchantment to go on too long, drinking in her beauty and woolgathering over what to do. Better let her off the hook. In her frame of mind, any perceived pressure was the last thing she needed. "Sweetness? I know this is a big step--I don't want you to feel there's anything I expect. Truth be told, I didn't sleep last night--sorting out nasties on the Hellmouth Lite. I'd just as soon--"

She launched herself at him with almost vampiric speed, cutting off his words with her mouth.

His words were lost, and laughing and moaning his appreciation, he tried to return the kiss with interest. Tara tugged ineffectively at his jacket, while trying to unbutton him and take off his shirt without getting the jacket off first. "Tara? Let me--" She ripped the shirt, and began clawing at his belt buckle. In spite of her frantic urgency, he could tell, he could smell, that she wasn't aroused.

"Come on!" she growled.

Where had he heard this before? He'd had one--almost two--experiences fucking someone back to life. Trying to fuck them back to life, more like. First time was the Slayer, poor messed-up girl that she was, after Willow yanked her out of Heaven. How he had loved her! And yet he failed her, letting things turn sexual as they did. Well, didn't know better, though, did he? Soulless monster that he was. And the 'almost two times' was...Tara. That night in his mother's parlor, when he told her Willow died; she threw herself at him, wanting him to make the pain go away. Well, the answer now was the same as it was then.

Gently but firmly, he grabbed her hands and held her so her struggles were ineffective. "Listen to
me. Listen to me! I'm not going to be the means of you hurting yourself."

"Don't!" she spat. She looked like a child holding tears at bay with anger.

"'Don't what?" He was genuinely baffled.

"Don't say things he would. You don't fool me!" He saw actual hate in her eyes.

"Ohhh." His voice swelled with illumination. "You think-- Oh, Tara." He transferred the armful of struggling girl to his right arm and held her while patting her skirt, looking for Birdie's cell phone. Finding it, he dug in and withdrew it. He flipped it open and found the menu, punched Friedrich's number. With poorly-concealed impatience, he muttered, "Come on, Birdie. Come up for air," then yelled, "Damn it! They've shut the phone off." He hurled the phone at the wall.

Mad with frustration, he held her, rocking, saying in a low voice, "What am I going to do with you?" then shouting, "Eliza! Need a little help here!" For Tara's benefit, he explained, "She's got this telepathic instant messaging she does, sort of like Willow used to do, 'cept I broke her of it, dammit! Didn't like her talkin' in my head." He buried his face in her back and fought not to weep. "Eliza! Call me!" he bellowed. Oh, Christ. This was...acute. Well, he'd get control of himself in a bit, and maybe...find something to restrain her with? Then go for help. Maybe telephone Eliza? He was in dutch with her but that didn't matter. Tara mattered. What was he going to do with her? He ground his teeth in frustration.

Slowly, Tara stopped struggling.

With a flicker of hope, Spike loosened his grip on her. He shifted her slightly so he could see her face, but she kept her head down. She finally whispered, "Thank you."

"For...?"

"For not being horrible." She wouldn't look at him. "Huh?" "You're almost like-- Like he would be. Gentle, and not--"

The pain was like a knife. "Baby, I am him. I'm yours. I told you--" He hugged her fiercely.

"Please, Tara! Please--" The tears that he'd fought off won and even though he managed not to bawl like a baby, he did dampen her sleeve. When he could speak, he muttered in a thick voice, "Should never have-- There was no choice, though. It was impossible, but still... Should never 'a' let you go. I am so sorry. I am so sorry."

Spike held her for a long while, nearly motionless in an anguish of remorse and fear for her. Why had she come up here with him, if she did not think he was her lover? Her husband? He realized that she'd come to do battle with him, that she perceived him as another foe. He knew he'd been in danger, was still in danger, but that was piffling compared to his grief over the twists and turns that existed in her mind. She was so ill, his girl! What could be done for her? If he were a praying man- - But he wasn't. Not since before he'd been turned. He didn't think God, if he existed, would listen to the likes of him. Still, what could it hurt? He prayed for Eliza or Birdie--anyone!--to look in on them.

Time passed. He thought of the futility of the wasted years, of all the love they'd had and the time they'd lost. Rocking Tara and trying not to weep, Spike felt her hug him back. Her body relaxed and she began to cry softly. She tensed and shuddered and then relaxed with each long drawn-out sob, keening almost soundlessly. He held her while she cried. The rain had stopped and Tara's tears, too. He heard one tentative note from a bird taking shelter under the eave. Trying to catch her breath, she stuttered, "It's you. It-it's really you."
"It's me. Are you with me?"

Like a child in the dark, she whispered, "I'm here. Are you here? Is it really you?"

"I'm here. I'm with you." He held her tighter.

"Oh! Please, Spike. Take me to bed and hold me. I'm--"

He chuckled a little, without humor. The situation was the farthest thing from funny, but he wanted to lighten the mood. "Thought we went over that."

"No! Just...hold me." She made no sound, but began to cry again, soundlessly.

"All right." He stood up, still holding her tight, and carried her to the bed. He laid her down and she pulled him to her, not letting go for an instant. She moved toward the center of the bed, locking her arms around his neck and hooking one leg over his hip. "Don't think the sex is a good idea, my girl--with you in the frame of mind you're in."

She just shook her head and got closer still, a small animal burrowing in.

With creeping dread for Tara's sanity, Spike did the only thing he could.

Until Birdie or Eliza turned up with their healing magicks, he could only hold her and whisper reassurances. Tara's tears slowed and she asked him over and over if it were really he, and he told her he was and that he loved her.

The events of the previous day and a half--sorting out the other hellmouth, killing Warren, his falling-out with Eliza--all faded into insignificance compared to his anguish over Tara's mental health. He held her even closer and felt her body relax against his. With a touch of irony, he thought how unlike this was to the perfect reunion he'd envisioned. When would they ever catch a break? For years, he had schooled himself not to give into self-pity and now sternly told himself to stop. His emotional wheel-spinning had worn him out, he realized. For now, they were safe. Finally, he let himself relax, too.

They slept.
Chapter 40

Troubled with an inescapable sense of foreboding, Birdie cut short her interlude with Fritz. She gave him a last lingering kiss and very nearly didn't leave at all, but finally tore herself away.

Damn!

She stopped by Eliza's cottage on the way home. Before she could knock, Eliza opened the door without a word and let her in. Birdie knew she was in a heap of trouble.

"You went over my head." In spite of Eliza's semi-accusatory words, her face was expressionless.

Unfazed, Birdie lifted her shoulders in a graceful shrug. "I did." She knew they'd need to settle this, and now was as good a time as any. "Sorry." She smiled broadly, not looking sorry at all.

"Do you wonder why I never promoted you?" Eliza's grave eyes held Birdie's.

"Well, I wouldn't call it that. That military, or corporate way of putting it--" Birdie began, but Eliza cut her off.

"You're easily the most talented witch here. Your power is astonishing. The Powers have been lavish with their gifts. I know my nieces Phoebe or Phillipa expect... But it is I who will make the final decision." Eliza's erect carriage slumped, and she allowed herself to sink back into her chair with a tiny sigh. She closed her eyes briefly.

Birdie couldn't get over how much Eliza had aged. She'd known Eliza for, what?--thirty-two years--and knew her real age, as they all did, but Birdie knew the reason Eliza endured. Knew what was behind it and what Tara (and indeed all of them) were up against.

With a fair approximation of patience, Birdie waited for Eliza to get to the point. She wasn't unduly worried. Rank never bothered her. What mattered was doing the next right thing. She wished Eliza would quit hemming and hawing. She needed to look in on her charges at home.

"I was waiting for you to buck me and for events to prove you right. As they have." Eliza's eyes dropped as though in deference to Birdie.

"We need to--"

"Very well, but it's your call. We need to help that poor girl."

"I agree. Let's go."
Nearly seven hours later, Spike woke to unaccustomed warmth. Tara had curled into a ball in her sleep, her round bottom pushed against his stomach. He curled around her and held her softly without awakening her. Was she really back? Could she trust him enough to get her help?

She pushed back against him and murmured in her sleep. "Missed you."

"Missed you, too, sweetness. You'll never know--*hope* you never know--how much," he whispered into her hair.

"Mmm." She wriggled a little, moving back against him, pulling his hands around front to her vulnerable belly, and one leg over her hip, so that his body formed a protective cage around her.

She was starting to wake up. "Was it 120 years for you?"

"'Fraid so." He wanted to get her off it. Ease her mind. "It's over. I'm here. We're here."

"Oh!" She turned to him and hugged him hard. "I'm so sorry! It must have been--"

"It's over." Time enough later to give her a catalog of his sins. He wasn't looking forward to that. She got closer than ever, if that were possible, and reached for his zipper. "Thought we weren't gonna... Oh, Tara."

Half welcoming the sound, half damning it, he heard Birdie's key in the lock below.

"Knock, knock," she called out. "Hello, young lovers wherever you are...?"

"Up here! Give us half a sec," Spike called down. He sat up, dragging his eyes away from Tara's bereft expression, and buckled up his jeans. He turned to her. "Hey, now. Gotta talk to the ladies, get you fixed up, don't we? Plenty of time for love-makin' later." He almost believed it.

Tara sat up, her back to him. She rubbed her eyes. "I'm going to take a shower. You talk to them."

Her voice was flat. Without another word, she disappeared into the bathroom.

Spike raked his fingers through his sleep-disarranged hair. "Coming."

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Spike descended the spiral stairs and faced the group Birdie had in tow. He gave her a brief smile and nodded coolly to Eliza. He wondered how much trouble he was in for bucking her ruling that he stay away from Tara. Well, bugger that for a game of soldiers! She had only said, "Stay away from the Hellmouth." He lifted his chin and stared her down. Of the rest of the group, he recognized only Deborah and Penny's girls Araminta and Anne, and their daughters Philippa and Phoebe. Funny how the Maxwells ran to daughters. They were a long-lived bunch.

He flashed briefly on how long he'd have with Tara, and his thoughts flinched away from it. If her mental state weren't sorted out, she might not live at all. He had a sudden panicked urge to check on her, fearing razor blades and bathrobe belts, and other dangers the bathroom might hold.

"William." Eliza spoke for the first time, her eyes full of compassion. "She's all right for now. I'm keeping an eye on her."

Inside him, some hard wall damming emotion broke, and he sat down with a thump. He put his head in his hands so they wouldn't see the sudden tears that filled his eyes. He felt a hand, then two hands, one stroking his hair and one on his shoulder, squeezing it comfortably. "She didn't know me," he muttered. "She thought I was some...ringer, some beast she had to take on." He swallowed hard,
Eliza stopped stroking his hair and fished a handkerchief out of her pocket. Spike took it, but only to hide it in his hand. He scrubbed his eyes with the back of his fist and threw back his head. "Can you help her?"

Birdie gave his shoulder a final comforting pat and said, "Oh, I think so. She's not half as freaked as my aunt Jessie when she got back from nursing in Da Nang, and we fixed her up right enough, didn't we, Liza?"

Eliza's chin lifted with pride. "That we did. William, we failed you once--"

"When we couldn't send you with her," she explained gently.

His shoulders slumped. Tara wasn't the only one who'd been traumatized.

Eliza continued, "The event that she was sent to sort out will not wait. Birdie's suggestion--and I agree with her--is that we keep Tara this summer, healing and strengthening her whilst you tend to business."

Spike scowled.

"Doesn't mean you can't visit. Gotta keep busy, though, while we give her a little tune-up."

"Where I come from, that means a beating," Tara spoke from the stairs, coming down. She was dressed in the crumpled blue dress, and her hair was wet. She did not look at Spike, but went instead to stand by Eliza.

"Oh, hon. No. Just a little...Berlitz course," Birdie spoke encouragingly. "Get you up to speed for the Big Bad that's coming next spring. A year'll go fast."

Tara didn't answer, but only leaned into Eliza's shoulder. Eliza put her arm around Tara.

Spike's shoulders sagged. "Good. Well. That's sorted." He'd gotten what he wanted and was strangely disappointed. The meeting appeared to be over.

The women surrounded Tara, and Birdie said briskly, "No time like the present. Sorry it didn't work out the way you wanted, but I think it's best we get started. There'll be a full moon, and we have preparations to make. You won't mind if...?"

"No." Spike was crushed, and felt a stab of sexual jealousy at leaving her with the coven. Before, long before, the coven made their witchy preparations and he had Tara to himself. The heat and electricity of their love-making had helped in its own way. When would he and she resume their interrupted honeymoon? Hell, their interrupted life!

Birdie was finished laying out magickal artifacts, and spoke the words opening a portal.

"Where am I going?" Oddly, Spike hadn't thought to ask before. Baseless though it might be, he still had trust in the coven. Eliza was right, though. He'd been let down before.

It'd be good to get home and finally get some real sleep, if his reunion with Tara was to be cut short. Tonight after he'd slept off his jet-lag, or portal-lag, he'd find some really nasty beastie and twist off
"Cleveland. Sorry." Eliza looked abashed. "That latest evil you quashed?"

Spike's mouth twisted. "Lemme guess. Didn't take." Could his luck get any worse?

"Yes. Sorry. It's like that monster movie you tried to explain to me--a metaphor for the rebirth of evil?"

"Jason?" Birdie looked tickled and about to bray with laughter, but controlled herself, seeing Spike’s stormy expression.

His voice was flat. "Right. Jason. You want me to go kill Jason once more. In Cleveland."

"I'm afraid so." Eliza looked grieved.

"Fine." He spat the word out like a grape seed. He looked back at Tara, but her face was down, her hair obscuring her expression.

He couldn't leave without saying goodbye, but couldn't they leave them alone? Apparently not. He contented himself with calling across the room, "Tara? I love you. I'll be back for you."

Tara still would not look at him. She nodded and gave a flicker of a smile.

With filling eyes, Spike nodded agreement to Birdie and stepped through the portal.
Chapter 41

Cleveland -- May 2002

Like Wile E. Coyote suspended over a gorge after he'd run off a cliff, Spike was having an "oh, bollocks!" moment.

No! He was not going to be separated from Tara again. He had just stepped through Birdie's portal and found himself in an alley in Cleveland, deeply disgusted with himself and pissed-off beyond belief. "Birdie!" he bellowed, wheeling and throwing himself back at the portal, just as it closed like a camera iris. It just missed amputating his arms, but did shear off the flaring corner of his coat-hem, neat as you please.

Spike rocked back on his heels, arms aloft, and sucked in an unneeded breath in relief. Good to avoid the loss of one's limbs. He took this as a sign. Very well! If this was the next right thing, then so be it. He strode angrily away, senses alive, seeking out anything that needed killing. He needed to kill something, and badly.

To avoid the sunlight, attenuated by the smoky air though it was, he kicked in the loading dock door of a warehouse at the foot of the alley. He cold-cocked the foreman, roared at the scattering workmen, and accessed the tunnels beneath. On the way, he encountered a couple of his old contacts and had a discussion involving his knuckles and his steel-capped boots and their information on this reborn big bad he'd been sent to sort out. No, his snitches said. No big bad of any special quality that they knew of, but an overwhelming quantity of evil of the lesser sort: an unusually high number of vamps and other lowlifes in Cleveland lately. They had moved into the power vacuum produced by Spike's recent removal of the previous big bad. Odd, Spike thought. Eliza was rarely wrong. He privately thought that perhaps "Jason" might actually be the First Evil, slowly gathering power under Sunnydale, but she knew that. Still, Spike felt a bitter sort of satisfaction. There was a job here that needed doing, and he needed to stay busy to keep from going mad with frustration.

He returned to his old digs and waited for sunset. A nearby nest that he'd recently cleaned out had repopulated itself with the inferior sort of vamps he'd been alerted to. He felt a grim satisfaction in twisting off their heads, and then set off to learn what he could about this so-called Jason.

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Westbury -- September 2002

Tara sat at the base of the biggest beech tree in the woods, and leaned back luxuriously. Filtering between the remaining golden leaves, the still-warm autumn sun shone down, and the forest floor was filling up with silvery fallen leaves. The earth gave off a spicy smell. She turned her face from the sun and stretched out upon the singed blanket spread beneath the tree. It had been a good summer. What had started out as perhaps the lowest point in her life--a descent into darkness and madness--had ended in an unexpected blessing, like the tiny golden treasure hidden in the heart of the nested box toy Charles brought Penelope from India.
Not unlike her first visit here, the coven had initially concentrated on Tara's healing, but this time it had been her sanity that was in danger. They gave her relief from her pain, and then their focus shifted to meditation and mind control. That is, control of her own mind.

Tara learned to table her longing for Spike, and to compartmentalize her grief over Willow's death and the old hurts from her father and Glory, until each could be addressed, and they were addressed. Birdie had emphasized that Tara possessed strength that needed to be acknowledged and tapped, and Tara did so with dogged determination.

Eliza had taken Tara far along the path of the visualization of the cosmic all, using the lovely metaphor of Indra's Web, among other tools. Tara was comforted with a historical sense of her love for Spike, and his for her, and its recurring nature. She cultivated patience, worked on her own recovery, and grew strong.

Penny's granddaughter Phoebe, who lost her own lover in the Great War, taught Tara about the satisfaction that comes from turning from immediate bodily gratification, while leaning hard into the task at hand and faithfully doing one's duty. Tara understood that this was sublimation, and could not but feel that her ultimate reunion with Spike would be that much better for the wait and the battle won.

Still...

With a sensuous shiver, Tara imagined Spike stretched out on the blanket beside her. It was the same one he'd stolen from Eliza and nearly burned up while fleeing to Birdie's. Tara was grateful to them all: to Birdie for recognizing that she and Spike needed to see one another, although their reunion was frustratingly brief, to Eliza for agreeing that Tara needed to join the coven for a while, and allowing Birdie to assume leadership, and to the coven itself for their power and the healing they effected. She'd come a long way that summer.

Next spring, on the first warm night after they defeated the First Evil, Tara promised herself a midnight picnic on this very blanket with Spike, with blood and wine and a light meal, and Spike for dessert! She chuckled, thinking of an extraordinarily vivid dream she'd had the night before. It had been a warm spring day and they had been boating. For a puzzled moment, her thoughts touched upon the Shanshu prophecy, but she shrugged it off; it was only a dream, after all. Spike was fine the way he was. The soul completed him; in fact, she thought the man he had become in the summer following Buffy's death, was a good enough man by almost anyone's measure. Dreams were funny.

Tara chalked up the abnormal fact that Spike was with her in the sunshine, as being a simple wish-fulfillment dream. One in which they were normal people who lived normal lives, taking a vacation, boating... They were on a large body of water dotted with wooded islands. With tacit agreement, they landed at a tiny peanut-shaped island and tied up the boat. One half of the island was shaped like a skull, the bare rock baking in the sun, while the other end held a green hollow shaded with pine trees. There they spread a blanket and stripped and made love. It was a golden afternoon very much like today, the air cool without chilling them, the sun warm without burning them, no insect bite distracting them, and nothing interfering with their naked bliss. Now, Tara touched herself, remembering how in the dream they grasped and tangled and coupled, the lapping sounds of the water mirroring their own lapping and sucking. The cry of gulls mimicked their cries as they peaked. The creaking boughs and the sough of breeze in the pine needles blended with their own groans and sighs.

She stiffened, teeth clenched, breath sucking in, and then, in a sweet agony of release, riding waves of sensation, she relaxed as her breathing slowly returned to normal. When this was over, she would never let him go. Eliza's edict, the upcoming battle, that "year-and-a-day" business be damned.
With all that she'd learned this summer and all the power she'd gathered, it still could not alter the fact that life was too short. She wanted him and would go to him and live with him, for however many years the creator granted her. As her breathing slowed, she willed herself to take the long view as Eliza had taught her, but the momentary lapse into longing left an ache that physical release only intensified. Tara resolutely turned from her pain and concentrated on the next right thing.

She reminded herself that she was surrounded by love. The gods, her friends, even Mr. Giles had turned up and renewed his acquaintance. He lived in nearby Bath and he would come over to ride of an afternoon, or to dine at the school in the evening. He paid her an unintentionally ironic compliment: "Tara, I know it must have been terrible for you. I am so sorry. But if things had gone differently...let's just say that I'd hate to have seen Willow's reaction to losing you."

Tara only smiled enigmatically. She wondered how far into their confidence he'd been taken by Birdie and Eliza? Time enough to brief him later, she supposed.

The coven loved her and supported her, and had healed her body and mind. She was gathering heretofore-unknown strength, and had a job to do. Buffy had called yesterday, asking if Tara were coming back for fall semester at UC Sunnydale, and offered her a room. With a twinge of irony, Tara took it to mean that school had started for Dawn, which meant that things were beginning to heat up on the Hellmouth and that soon, Tara would be needed. She promised Buffy she'd be there day after tomorrow.

Tara shivered, suddenly remembering the last part of her dream. How could she have forgotten the feeling of foreboding? She needed to recall the bad with the good, so she forced herself to re-experience it all. She and Spike had made love again and nearly missed the sound of a boat engine as it circling closer and closer, so immersed as they were in one another. The sound began as an annoying buzz like a mosquito, easily overlooked, but grew to an ominous mechanical gnashing sound.

Like rabbits in a cornfield, a combine getting closer, the First Evil would not wait.
Chapter 42

It didn't take long.

Tara had no sooner returned to Sunnydale, learned of the various "monsters of the week"--as she thought of the lesser evils of Sunnydale, before the yearly apocalypses--than she was on the phone to Birdie. There were vengeful spirits in the new high school, a skin-eating demon, and this timeline's Spike resided in the basement of said high school, crazy. It broke Tara's heart.

"This is silly," Tara insisted. "We know what's going to happen. Why don't we just tell her so that she can be prepared? This is too much like one of those pointless Watcher tests: 'see Buffy fight with her feet in a sack'."

"Do we? Do we know it's the same, this time around?" Birdie asked.

"Well, I don't know, but it doesn't seem fair not to bring her in, you and Miss Harkness knowing what Spike knows--"

"Tell me what? What does Spike know?" Buffy had appeared in the doorway and stood looking at Tara with an expression of equal parts concern and suspicion.

"Um...Birdie?" Tara tried to keep a guilty look off her face. "Cat's out of the bag."

"It's probably just as well. Let me talk to her."

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The summit at Yalta (as Spike later thought of it) was held in Westbury shortly after Tara inadvertently spilled the beans to Buffy. Birdie had sent a tentative telepathic greeting (unlike Eliza's preemptory summons of yore), they conferred, and he agreed to come. As a courtesy to him, it was held in the evening.

He stepped through the portal Birdie opened into Charles' library. Well, not Charles' any more, Spike amended, although he could still detect a faint aroma of cigars, blended with the smell of old leather-bound books. The classics remained, but Charles' collection of Victorian pornography had given way to grimoires, and a scrying mirror now hung where a rather fine Turner had previously been. He stepped over luggage, steeling himself to look at what remained of the Scoobies. Based upon the bags, it looked like they'd be spending the night. Tara and Dawn had not arrived yet. He tabled his excitement and turned to face Buffy and Xander.


"What's he doing here?" Xander interrupted. "Murdering, raping--"

They all spoke at once: "Xander, this isn't helping--" began Buffy.

Birdie bit off, "He's key--"

"That will do, Mr. Harris!" Eliza barked, rolling her Rs frostily.
Drowning them out, Spike acidly interjected, "Was about to say...'right sorry about Willow'."

Xander had the grace to look abashed.

Spike continued, "Would have given a lot--more than you know!--if it weren't so. She and I got to be friends, different time an' place. What I tried to do for her--" he broke off, grinding his teeth, then finished, "She did more for me than you'll ever know."

Xander glared, opening his mouth to retort, and then subsided, mumbling with a twisted mouth an inaudible acknowledgement of Spike's condolence.

"Thanks." Buffy's voice was soft as she smoothed her skirt over her knees. She glanced up at Spike, then looked away.

Spike had been avoiding looking at Buffy, although her smell was unforgettable, even over the flowery scent she wore. How long had it been since he'd seen her? Over a hundred and twenty-five years. To her, it was three months after his past self's attack upon her in the bathroom. She would be understandably reluctant to trust him. He remembered his newly-souled self's encounters with her, not long after his return from Africa, and remembered how desperately he wanted to get right with her--how dearly he wanted her approval. He was looking forward to this meeting. If dying to save the world didn't count for something, he didn't know what would. He hoped she'd get that. They had that much, at least, in common.

Buffy still fidgeted with her skirt, not meeting his eyes.

Wanting to ease her discomfort, Spike turned down the wattage of his gaze. Xander's eyes flicked back and forth between them. Buffy was still a hell of a woman, if thin and worried-looking, but...water under the bridge. What was important now was lightening her load and saving as many lives as possible. Those Potentials that would soon come to her--could the ones lost in the last battle be saved? Could Anya?

Spike looked back at Xander and saw the familiar look of loathing firmly back in place. It had been a long time since he'd felt the young man's ire. He'd forgotten how much Xander hated him--not only for sleeping with the cast-off Anya. It must rankle that Spike had gotten to both of the women important to Xander. Spike pitied him, but kept his expression carefully neutral. This meeting was supposed to bring them together. Slayer needed a team, not dissension in the ranks.

Pattering footsteps in the hallway heralded the arrival of the slayer's sister and his beloved. Tara's face lit up at the sight of him. She controlled herself and announced to the room, "Sorry we're late." She dimpled, eyes gleaming with hidden secrets that threatened to spill out. Spike gave her a small private smile. If his heart could beat, it would have hammered in his chest.

Dawn looked shocked to see him. He remembered that in the previous timeline, she'd just threatened to set his earlier self on fire. He gave her a benign smile.

She looked puzzled, and said tentatively, "You seem different. I don't just mean the hair. You."

"That's what we're here to talk about," Birdie began. "Not your hair," she interrupted herself in a goofy aside, as Spike chuckled. Birdie had no trouble poking fun at herself, along with everyone around her.

Eliza sniffed.

"Right." Birdie sobered. "Well, let's get to it." Tara and Dawn sat on the loveseat flanking the library table, and Birdie gestured Spike to a nearby chair. Spike shook his head. It looked a little too much
like a hot seat. Birdie and Eliza, Buffy and Xander sat at the library table, and Spike stood apart, arms folded. He knew he was in for a long siege. He fought the urge to go to Tara, but wanted to forestall the Scoobies' attack that he knew would come soon enough.

"OK, the reason we brought you here is that we have foreknowledge of how the apocalypse will occur. Might occur," Birdie amended. "You see, time has looped and it's possible that it will go down differently this time, but Spike shared his memories of the previous time--"

Xander opened his mouth to object, but at a sharp look from nearly everyone in the room, closed his mouth and let Birdie continue.

Birdie directed her remarks to the core Scoobies. Spike tuned her out, wondering where Anya was. Oh, right, in that no-man's-land of the overall poor regard demons were held in. Mustn't forget one's status as a second-class citizen, he thought, with a flash of irritation at how Xander had treated Demon Girl. He resolved to pull some strings, try to help her if he could. Save her. Could this timeline be any more altered than it already was? What was that expression of Anya's that Tara told him? Her term for an alternate universe was "a world without shrimp." Spike would settle for a world without tiresome dissention from Harris.

Here it comes, thought Spike grimly.

He was surprised by 'it' coming in the form of a muffled squeal from Dawn as she launched herself at Spike.

"I knew it!" she cried.

Touched, he bore her embrace for a moment, before peeling her off his chest and setting her back down, burbling and bouncing, next to his girl sitting quietly on the loveseat. He looked down at Tara and noticed for the first time what she was wearing. A blue gauze dress from India, the same color as the ball gown she'd worn to the Lovejoy's dance, if memory served. Its drawstring bodice showed off his mother's pearls. He didn't speak, but only drank her in with his eyes.

Birdie finished bringing the story up to the present, and opened the floor to discussion.

Xander started in, "OK, that you're witches, I grasp. My best friend was..." He swallowed and changed tack. "I'm from Sunnydale, not Missouri, but I'd like you to show me. Time travel? How can you travel in time? It's already happened. And even if it were true... Those potential slayers I can see coming in handy against...üervamps? But an evil priest?"

"Don't follow the news much, do you?" Spike muttered, while Eliza gave him a reproving look.


"I remember the First Evil." Buffy spoke for the first time since Birdie began.

The group just looked at her--she was unusually quiet, for Buffy. She said reluctantly, "It tried to take over Angel." She looked as though she'd been sleeping poorly.

Xander looked unmoved, and returned to his theme: "Tara? I'm sorry but...are you crazy?" He looked embarrassed again, but plowed ahead. "Sorry, Tara. I mean, he's a soulless--"

"Xander." Buffy spoke up.

"Huh?"
"He's not soulless." She looked down.

"What?" Xander looked baffled, and then burst out, "Him too?"

"Believe it." Spike was getting tired of the knee-jerk 'hate Spike.'

"It's true." Buffy looked at Spike, and looked away again. Spike remembered the church, where he hung smoking on a cross, still half out of his mind, as he told her.

"Well?" It was the first time Eliza had spoken since her initial admonishment of Xander. She looked from Buffy to Xander. "I sense disbelief in both of you." She waited.

"Yeah, well, sorry to use a cliché, but that's one leopard whose spots don't change."

Eliza's expression softened. "I think you're feeling a combination of desire to protect your friends...and sexual jealousy."

Xander's jaw dropped and he turned a muddy red. "Listen, lady--"

"One is commendable; the other, unnecessary. I felt as you did once, but it didn't take me nearly so long to get over it. What altered my opinion was a look into his mind. You're right; he was a soulless killer, and there was much to hate and fear, but if you knew what he'd sacrificed--not only for you--I think you'd look upon him with more charity. I can share this with you." She reached out her hand toward the suspicious young man.

Tentatively, Xander took Eliza's hand. As though he'd been hit with an electrical force, his head was thrown back and he flinched. They sat for a long moment, Xander wide-eyed but unseeing, and then Eliza, perhaps taking pity on him, severed the link and patted his hand. Xander hunkered down, elbows on knees, head down, gasping. Eliza gave him a final pat and turned toward Buffy, holding out her hand.

Buffy spoke up, "Thanks, but it's not necessary. I believe...most of it." Eliza lifted one eyebrow, but Buffy only said, "Enough so that I'll work with you. And him."

She gave Spike a veiled look, and he understood. Buffy looked from Tara, unshaved legs and unpolished toenails, in a cheap Pier 1 dress and Birkenstocks, then down to her own slinky slit skirt, smooth neat legs ending in shrimp-pink toenails and high strappy sandals. She smoothed her skirt self-consciously. Clearly, she didn't believe that she'd been replaced in Spike's affections. If it comforted her to believe that...

He knew that to her, he was like gravity. She had never acknowledged him, but believed that he'd always be there. She never needed to question his loyalty or support of her. And how right she was! Spike gave her his gentlest smile.

Eliza spoke again. "I thought we would get more covered tonight, plans and such, but... Birdie, I think it's best we retire. This has been more fatiguing than I expected, for me certainly, and I believe that Mr. Harris needs time to integrate what he's learned too."

"Absolutely." Birdie hastened to Eliza's side and helped her stand.

Eliza gave Spike an approving pat. "I'm putting you in your old room. I thought that would please you, and make up for sending you to Cleveland again."
Spike deadpanned, "Nothing can make up for Cleveland." Eliza looked startled, and then grinned, and he gave her his best gallant grin in return.

To Tara, Birdie said, "Sweetie, will you show your friends to their rooms? I'm gonna run Liza home." Birdie led the old woman away, leaning on her arm.

"Sure." Tara was all smiles, and picked up the bags. Her eyes locked with Spike's for a moment, and then she turned away, face flushed a faint pink. "Come on, guys."
Birdie tucked a lap robe around Eliza's legs, and Eliza pushed her hands away impatiently. "I am not a consumptive."

"Don't want you catching cold," Birdie mock-scolded, checking the old woman's seatbelt. "You're our secret weapon."

Eliza harrumphed.

Birdie climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. "Poor Xander. 'Sexual jealousy'? Ouch. That's nailing the boy with a couple well-chosen words."

"Didn't mean to 'nail' him. I feel for him. He's a good solid sort, and the only one here without powers. Or superpowers. (The Slayer's sister's not all she seems, is she?) Yes, sexual jealousy. There's no sharper sting. How well I remember." Eliza looked silently out the window, ruminating, and then continued, "While I'm thinking of it, we'll need to undo Willow's 'My Will Be Done' spell for him as we did for Mr. Giles."

"Yup. Gotta talk to him first; see if he wants to stop being 'a demon magnet.'" Birdie snorted. "That Willow was a caution. Too bad you couldn't have reached her in time...reached out to her, like you did me." She laid her hand on Eliza's. "Shil nzhoo, Unci."

In a grumpy voice, Eliza said, "Save the soft talk for your riding master," but she took Birdie's hand and held it.

Smiling, Birdie gave Eliza's hand a gentle squeeze. "Yeah, ol' Xander--is it just me, or is attraction part of his antipathy for Spike? 'Methinks he doth protest too much'."

"Not on any level he's aware of, certainly." Eliza added meditatively, "He is attractive, even to me." She was not referring to Xander any more.

"Eliza!" Birdie gasped and shortled, and Eliza joined her in snort of laughter.

They laughed like loons for a moment, and then sobered as Eliza asked, wiping her eyes, "Where were we?"

"Scoobies are briefed. What a silly name," Birdie added parenthetically. "But cute." She continued, "Rupert is too--briefed, not cute--well, he is cute too ... and says he'll come to the 'ways and means' meeting tomorrow night. We'll let Xander process what you socked to him, and then undo the 'My Will' spell. Funny, I checked--Rupert and the boy both needed the undoing spell, but Spike was unaffected. Whatever lingering effects Willow's spell had, don't affect him any more." She shook her head, bemused.

Eliza stared out the window. "He was healed with a 'magick' more powerful than any spell."

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Walking lightly, Tara led Buffy, Dawn, and Xander to their rooms on the second floor of the
sprawling farmhouse. Tara was eager to see Spike again, but her friends needed to get settled for the night. They reached the room that Birdie had prepared for Xander. He had been silent and hollow-eyed since his telepathic tour of Spike's mind. "Here you go. Bathroom's across the hall." Reluctant to leave him, Tara stalled. "Xander, will you be all right?"

He spoke for the first time since his loud objections in the library below. The words seemed to be pulled out of him with difficulty. "I'm glad you're alive. I...wish Willow were, too, but losing you changed everything." His eyes looked naked and hurt.

Tara hugged him, her eyes filling. "I miss her, too." She could feel pain radiating off him in waves. She tried to communicate calm and healing with her touch.

Xander bore her embrace for a moment, then tore himself away. "She caused this! I blame him, too-he should have said no, but she should never have--" His voice broke, and he stood looking at the floor, gulping.

"I know. She sure didn't use good judgment sometimes, did she?" It was hard to talk around the lump in her throat, but she managed to add, "But we loved her anyway." Tara wanted to acknowledge his anger and confusion, and calm him down at the same time. She wasn't sure if he should be left alone.

She and Buffy exchanged worried looks. "Xander--" Buffy began.

"There's always consequences,'" he muttered.

Buffy spoke up again, "Why don't you show us our room, Tara? I'll get Dawn tucked in--"

"Hey, I'm not three!" Dawn said, aggrieved.

Buffy raised her eyebrows at Dawn. "--and then I'll come back to sit up with Xander," she finished. At that, Xander hugged her, and Tara nodded silent approval to Buffy, over Xander's shoulder.

Dawn petted his back, and he turned and gave her a hug, too. "I'll be back in a couple of minutes," Buffy promised. Xander swallowed and nodded. He stood dumbly outside his room.

With a backward glance at Xander waiting patiently, Tara picked up Buffy and Dawn's bags. "This way." She led them down the hall and stopped outside of a mahogany door. Buffy opened it and Tara entered, saying, "Dawn, will you hit the light?"

Dawn found the light switch and turned it on. Tara set the bags on a bench at the foot of one of the two single beds. "This is one of the few rooms with its own bath." She nodded toward the far end of the room, and Dawn turned on the light in there, too.

"Ooh, English bath salts! Buffy, I'm gonna take a bath before I go to bed." Dawn emerged from the bathroom with a stricken look. "Unless...you want me to come with? When you go see Xander?"

"No, I think he just wants to talk and then go to sleep himself, probably. You take your bath and go to bed. If you're asleep when I get back, I'll see you in the morning." Buffy turned to Tara and seemed about to speak, but waited until Dawn finished getting out her pajamas and toiletry bag, and disappeared into the bathroom once more.

"Tara?" Buffy hesitated, shooting one last look at the closed bathroom door.

Tara had been expecting this. The Talk. She knew that when you started seeing someone's ex-lover, there were apt to be lingering feelings: jealousy, resentment, or even a warning--if said ex were a bad-ass vampire--however unnecessary that warning might be. Birdie had given Buffy and the
Scoobies "the big picture" downstairs, but Tara didn't think that Buffy had emotionally grasped that Spike was a different man now. Not hers any longer; at least, not this version. Tara would have fainted from shock if Buffy had given her outright blessing, but Tara wanted at the very least to forestall hard feelings. She liked Buffy so much. Buffy had stood between Tara and disaster more than once, starting with the time Tara's family came to fetch her back to their bleak bosom. Tara felt a warm rush of affection for her, because she had stood by her that day.

This was a different world altogether. Who knew? Perhaps seeing the relationship that Tara had built with her Spike might change Buffy's feelings for the damaged creature now living in the high school basement. Though she had not been deliberately avoiding him, Tara had not seen him yet. He wasn't hers. Her Spike had told her that Buffy had fetched him that time and persuaded Xander to put him up. Xander's 'hospitality' went as far as a bed in a storage closet, but at the time Spike had been grateful to get away from the Hellmouth.

Perhaps they could all learn from the man that Spike had become.

Tara met Buffy's eyes. "Yes?"

Buffy's voice was urgent but low, perhaps so Dawn wouldn't hear her over the sound of the running water. "Tara? I don't get it. You're gay--"

"When did I ever say I was gay?" Tara gave her a teasing smile. "That's Willow's word."

"Huh?" was all Buffy could manage to get out, with an amazed look.

"I love the person, not the packaging. Gender's just part of the packaging."

Red-faced, Buffy muttered, "You said it once. When I had you check if I came back wrong, and you figured out about...me and Spike, you said, 'I'm a fag'--"

"You were feeling so low," Tara explained. "I wanted to show commiseration. It's just a label. I get it, Buffy. I really do. Feeling ashamed and needing to hide. But there's no need. He really is a good man." She gave Buffy an encouraging smile, hoping she could help her get past her prejudice.

"No, you don't-- I get that you were stranded and he saved you. You depended on him. He's good for that. He can be very dependable." Buffy's eyes were wide with disbelief. "He can also be wildly unpredictable, and--" she broke off and turned even redder. "He's too much for an ordinary woman, let alone a Slayer. I don't want you to be hurt, Tara. I wonder if you've thought it through."

Tara had. She blushed herself, and impulsively leaned forward and hugged Buffy. "I gotta go. 'Night!"

Her footsteps pattered away.

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From the sounds Dawn made in the bathroom, those of a contented otter, Buffy figured she'd have time to talk to Xander, and maybe snag a midnight snack. Birdie had said, "Our house is your house." Dinner had been strained for Buffy. She'd been nervous, knowing that Spike was going to be there later. In consideration of Tara's vegetarianism, Birdie served something called Welsh rarebit and though Buffy had been assured it wasn't rodent--it looked like runny cheese over toast--she hadn't been able to eat much. And Buffy liked cheese! Dessert was fruit and more stinky cheese. Buffy inwardly meeped. What she wouldn't give for some Chunky Monkey right now, but Xander was far more important.
Buffy retraced their steps back to Xander's room. He had gone inside, but the door stood open. He sat cross-legged on the bed, staring vacantly.

"Hey." Buffy approached. "Mind if I pull up a chair?"

Xander shook his head as though to clear it. "Sure. I'd ask you to sit on the bed, but I don't want to compromise you."

Buffy gave him a light thwap on the arm. "Don't worry. You're safe from me," she kidded, trying to coax a smile from him. "You channeling Victorian Spike now?" Instead of pulling up a chair, Buffy sat next to him on the bed.

Xander shivered. "It really is a trip. Like they say, when you're dying, and your life flashes before your eyes. I got the whole...big picture...in one dose." He shuddered convulsively, and then looked around wildly. Eyes wide, Buffy looked too, but couldn't see what he was after. Xander sprang from the bed and grabbed a wastebasket. He was suddenly and disastrously sick.

Buffy brought tissues and laid a hand on his shoulder, murmuring, "Let me get you something to rinse out your mouth."

"No! Don't go. I'm OK...it's just kind of...overwhelming." He took the proffered tissue and wiped his mouth.

Buffy said with sympathy, "It must be terrible--reliving all that violence."

Xander gave her the oddest look. "He never stopped loving you, not even after you beat him so badly. He would have burned up come dawn, but he figured it was all he deserved. It was Clem that helped him home. Another damn demon."

Buffy turned brick-red.

"He did burn up."

"What?" Appalled, Buffy stared at him with incomprehension. "Oh, you mean the Hellmouth! That's what they meant when they said--"

"Yeah. I mean, it hasn't happened yet, but we thought--will think--fuck! He's right--time travel messes with your verb tenses," Xander muttered.

"You know this? I mean, of course you do--you saw it through Spike's eyes. The witches said as much, but you...reliving it. That's so amazing. Spike did that..." she trailed off. Only an hour before, she had heard it from Birdie, but to talk with someone who'd just 'experienced' it was the difference was between hearing described a really hard punch in the nose…and feeling it. Spike had closed the Hellmouth! Would close it. That selfless act was light years from the creature who attacked her in her bathroom. In a hushed voice, Buffy said, "Tell me."

His head in his hands, voice alternating between pain and awe, Xander told her what happened…what was to happen, while a quiet tear slid down her cheek. She wiped it away before he looked up.

Xander was still talking. "--point is, we took credit for it. That huge crater... The whole Hellmouth was destroyed by Spike, and we thought we did it? C'mon!"

"What? We would never--"

"Be so crass? 'Fraid so." Xander snorted with humorless laughter.
"How could you know this?"

"He was there, for just a moment. What's the word--incorporeal? It was a gift from the Powers That Be. He knew. And we joked about the shopping mall and Starbucks. You didn't tell us."

"I would have--! I would have gotten him out!"

"He wanted you out. He wanted you safe. So you could look after Dawn." Abruptly, he changed the subject. "He loved you so much. Why didn't you--" He broke off, a muscle jumping in his cheek.

Buffy could see the conversation was wearing Xander out, but she had to defend herself. "That's between Spike and me. Regardless of what you saw, what you 'remember'...oh, God." Buffy shut up, pulling her head down like a turtle withdrawing into its shell. She realized that Xander now possessed 'memories' of her erotic misadventures with Spike. She blushed furiously.

"It's not what you think. I don't think less of you." Xander's shoulders sagged. "If you want the truth, I'm envious."

"Hey!"

"No, it's not that," he said with impatience. "As much as I loved Anya, I never even came close to--" He finished, "It's a good thing I didn't marry her. She deserves more than this, this...puny thing that passes for love in me."

"Xander, don't be so hard on yourself. You did what you felt was right. If it didn't feel right, it probably was best you didn't go through with it."

He laughed without humor. "How can a vampire know more about love than me? Well, learning it at Tony and Jessica's knee, maybe not so surprising."

Buffy felt a thousand warring feelings, and could not give voice to a single one of them. She was unaccustomed to feeling so wormy and small.

Xander looked up. "I'm all right," he said, exhausted. "Thanks for looking in on me. Not gonna guilt you any more, just...damn sure I won't underrate Spike again."

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"Have you seen her dressed in blue?"

Spike sung snatches of the song to himself as he waited in the library, poking the fire and listening to the household settle down for the night. He imagined that the spaced-out Xander would require some talking-down, his tender-hearted girl would help, and then probably have a word or two with Buffy. He tried to look upon the wait for Tara as an exercise in patience. God knew he had enough practice.

He was taken by surprise when he looked up and saw a petite blonde vision reflected in the mirror. She had done something to her costume and looked more provocative than ever. The slit in her skirt was arranged to reveal one tanned thigh, and the little sweater she wore had several buttons undone so the tops of her lacy demi-cups showed, along with a fair amount of her.

"Hello, lover." Her look was possessive; her voice husky with desire.

His lips stretched over his teeth in a humorless smile as he scanned the figure in the glass. He set the
poker down. It would not do any good.

Gripping the edge of the mantelpiece, Spike fought to keep his voice level. "That's quite good. 'Course, the smell's missing. Pity. There'd be an ironic perfection in that. She was wearing Je Reviens tonight."

He turned to face the First Evil. "Hello darkness, my old friend."
With the hair on his neck rising, Spike fought to keep an unruffled demeanor, when what he really felt was ruffled in the extreme. "Thought you couldn't appear to anyone outside of SunnyD."

"Oh, I get around." The First Evil wore Buffy's appearance like a bird in borrowed feathers. It slowly ran its hand along the back of the loveseat vacated by his beloved. It arranged itself upon it in a Récamier-like pose and patted the satin seat, a seductive smile on its painted lips.

Spike smiled back and shook his head a millimeter. "You can't touch me, so why try? Maybe you should give this up. I know how the apocalypse's gonna go down."

It threw back its head and a pretty laugh chimed out. "You do? Or you think you do?"

Spike didn't answer. With the panic of a besieged soldier running out of ammo, he thought of the witches who had just left, and Buffy upstairs with her sister and the traumatized Xander. Tara was upstairs, too, waiting for him. None of them, not even the real Slayer, could help him now, but Tara especially needed to be kept away from The First Evil. He hadn't been alone with her in three months, let alone had a chance to gauge her readiness to take on the First. The coven had assured him Tara's mental state was much improved, but there was no sense in taxing her strength or endangering her before the big showdown.

He thought of the futility of matching wits with this thing, and drew a shaky breath, steadying himself. He needed to end this before Tara came downstairs looking for him.

But perhaps he could learn a bit from it before it left.

The First Evil rose, and walked over to him like a cat stalking a bird. "You're so quiet. What's on my boy's tiny mind?"

Not taking the bait, Spike said, "Not your boy any longer. Remember?"

The First Evil lifted its manicured hand as though to pet him, and then let it drop. Green eyes regarded him with a proprietary gleam. "You'll always be mine. All demons are, but you're special." It gave a mocking pronunciation to the last word, as though Spike belonged in remedial classes.

Don't let it piss you off.

It laughed again, as though it followed his train of thought. "How are you enjoying Cleveland?"

"Bit raw when the wind blows off the lake," Spike admitted. "So... I understand there's a new big bad in town. Can't say I'm pleased. I'm supposed to be the baddest--"

It broke into his words with a delicious giggle. "Are you pumping me?" It turned and bent over, wriggling its slit skirt up, and waggled its bottom at Spike. "If only you could! You'd like that, wouldn't you? How well I remember!" The simulacrum of Buffy wasn't wearing knickers.
He closed his eyes for a moment, wishing he could pray. On second thought, he wished he could put his boot up its shapely ass, but that was impossible, incorporeal as it was. "It's not working," he said in as calm a voice as he could manage.

"What?" There was that detestable cooing voice.

"Mooning me. 'S childish." He averted his eyes.

"Oh?" It threw in another lascivious wriggle, looking over its shoulder to see its effect on him.

Spike wished it'd get this farce over with. Some day, when this was all sorted out, he would take Tara and go far, far away. Finish their interrupted honeymoon. Funny. He didn't give into wishful thinking any more, but-- Focus! Don't let it get to you. Back to the First. Find out what it wants. It might only want to demoralize you, sap you of strength. Don't let it.

"So these demons you say belong to you...lot of them in Cleveland. Care to share?"

"I said, 'no pumping!'" it chided him. With a final wriggle, it stood and turned, smoothing its skirt down in imitation of Buffy. "Oh, very well." It gave him a pretty pout. "A gift for my boy. You were right about the evil in Cleveland... 'quantity vs. quality'?"

He nodded. "Lot o' garden-variety vamps. You're trying to keep me busy. Out of the way." His voice was flat.

"And it's working." It gave him an arch smile.

Spike's jaw worked as he tried to keep control of his anger.

"What?" It drew out the word with mock innocence. "Aren't the little people worth saving, too? Isn't that what you do now? You and that other chump?" It ended the last word with pursed lips.

At the mention of Angel, Spike froze. That last apocalypse, the fallen comrades, and the death of-- Focus, dammit! "Yeah. I do. Sorry to break into this little cat an' mouse game you're playin', but you wanna make your point sometime in my unlifetime?"

The First Evil's eyes narrowed as it said, "The point is, you're all about the protecting now. Protecting...Tara?"

Spike thought he detected a touch of jealousy in its voice. Get off her! was all he could think. He tried to hide his thoughts but suspected the First Evil could read them anyway. His rage rose like a sheet of red obliterating clear sight. He wasn't aware of it, but his game face leapt out as he charged... moving effortlessly through the image of the Slayer.

As though in response to his agitation, the First Evil's Buffylike appearance morphed into that of Tara. Spike whirled and took a gasping breath.

"Thought... you couldn't take the form of the living."

"What? Buffy's living." Its appearance was picture-perfect, right down to the clear honesty in her blue-gray eyes.

"Buffy died before." This was insane--mincing words with the First Evil.

"So did I." Again, that sweet reasonableness in her expression.

"That was different. Different universe, different timeline--"
"Oh, it's all one to me. Ha. Get it? 'All one.' She gave a Tara-like snort of laughter. "I like that. It's all one and you're all mine." She approached, giving him the lovely leering look she wore when she was about to kiss him.

Spike backed away, even though he knew that it couldn't touch him. He wanted to vomit.

"You wanted me to get to the point. Point is, you can't protect me. Heck, you haven't done such a good job of protecting me up to now."

Spike had no answer to that, knowing the truth of what it said. He swallowed.

This travesty of Tara said, "Where were you when my dad was fucking me?"

Appalled, Spike stopped backing up, speechless.

"'Get off her'," she mocked. "No, you were worried about the timeline. You wouldn't kill Angel, but you let my dad come to my room night after night."

After a long moment, jaw working, he muttered at last, "You just wanna finish?"

With a surprised-sounding bark of laughter, it said, "That's what I'd say to him!" It gave him a grieved look. "Where were you?" It answered for him: "Forty miles away, drinking wine in North Beach."

His control breaking, Spike bellowed, "Get to the point! 'S'not working! Well, yeah, you can get under my skin, upset me, but point is, I'm not--"

"Evil?" The appearance of Tara mercifully morphed into that of Drusilla, swathed in black silk like a film vamp. "But you are! You don't understand, my darling."

"No. No, I'm not." He was getting more rattled by the second.


"That is such a cliché," Spike said, relieved that the First Evil was done with female impersonations for the moment.

"Just because a saying's a cliché doesn't mean it's not true. Okay, you want me to get to the point. You enjoyed killing me. You were hard when you crushed my windpipe. You haven't changed one bit!" The First Evil gave a triumphant laugh.

Spike regained control of himself, at least enough to speak calmly. "I have changed. Sat through this movie once before, and you know, I'm older an' wiser. Not newly-souled and nuts. Not triggerable."

"You don't think so?" Warren's face wore a look of insufferable smugness.

"Nope. You can change bodies, taunt me, but the fact is I have changed. Changed sides, and you hate it."

Warren moved close to Spike, leaned in, and breathed in Spike's ear. "What makes you think you're immune?"

Spike leaned back, watching Warren with narrowed eyes.
"Other triggers, Sparky," it whispered.

"What?"

"I'll get you, my pretty, and your little dog, too!" Warren's triumphant face melted into Willow's, cackling in a parody of a pop culture witch, and then into Drusilla's, who said with a possessive look, "You'll always be mine. No milksop girl can come between us." Drusilla's dark beauty morphed into his own Tara's beloved face, wearing the expression of sweet intensity it sometimes did. "You see, I really want you. None of the others matter. And I'll go through her to get to you."

Tara's face remained the same, but her blue dress morphed into the jeans and tee shirt she wore the morning she was murdered. A hole in the shirt above her left breast bloomed like an obscene red flower. "You think this was bad? At least it was quick! This is nothing compared to what's in store for her. At your hands." Like a shot bird, she fell; a forlorn figure on the floor.

Unable to bear any more, Spike bolted for the door.

"Run! Cleveland may be far enough!" Her mocking laughter floated after him.

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Depressed, and with an unsatisfied sense of the undone, Buffy left Xander's room and wandered back to her own. Dawn was still doing the bath thing, singing to herself. She would be a prune if she didn't watch it.

A rumble in her tummy reminded her that she hadn't really eaten since noon. Buffy wondered if Birdie's "Our house is your house" extended to a midnight snack run, and decided to chance it.

Anything to delay bedtime. Those dreams of hooded figures, girls getting killed... "From beneath you it devours." She shivered.

It was enough to make her want never to sleep again.

She went downstairs and wandered around looking for the kitchen. She decided to retrace her steps, go back to the library, and try another direction. This sprawling old farmhouse seemed to be all wings, cubbies, and branching corridors. She wondered if there were secret passageways, like in Clue.

Suddenly, Spike burst out of the library door. Her Slayer instinct kicking in, Buffy jumped back to avoid him running her down. "Watch it!"

"I'm all done with your fuckin' with me," was his rough response, as he strode down the hall, flung open a door and disappeared into the night.

"What the...! I've never fucked with you." Buffy stared after him in amazement.
Chapter 45

Tara's arms flailed as she flung off the covers, and the aftereffects of her nightmare. Hot and hyperventilating, she clutched her nightgown, hating the sense of someone sitting on her chest. She slowed her breathing, wanting a paper bag to breathe into. She couldn't remember the dream, but it was no less awful than her state of mind upon retiring the previous night.

Her puffy eyes stung from crying, the result of long hours of worrying, fuming, and pacing. She had uttered one or two mild oaths, and finally gone looking for Spike in the library. She'd searched the unoccupied downstairs rooms, and discreetly listened at bedroom doors, lingering outside Buffy's, feeling ashamed of herself.

She made excuses for him, but nothing altered the fact that Spike had not joined her in their room after the Scooby meeting last evening. After waiting up until past two AM, she finally dropped into disturbed sleep. It was now sometime before dawn. She sat up and strained to make out a shadowy figure sitting on the window seat. She reached for the bedside light.

"Leave it. I like the moonlight." The familiar baritone caressed her ears.

Spike. Her shoulders slumped in relief. "You want to tell me what happened? I was so worried!"

"Got things to do, don't I? Places to be, beasties to kill. 'S what I do." He lifted one leather-clad shoulder in a graceful shrug.

"You could have told me. Left a note?" She made an effort to keep the hurt out of her voice.

"Something came up." In the dim light, Tara could not have sworn to it... but it sounded as though he was smirking as he spoke, laughing at her, but that was impossible.

Tara was baffled and hurt. They hadn't "been together" in ages. Had sex. Made love. It had been months by her reckoning. Over a century by his. True, they'd seen each other once, but then she had fallen apart.

While she didn't expect -- Well, yes, she did! She wanted him -- the closeness of his body, and an explanation. Reassurance. She wanted him to come to her right now, take her in his arms, and soothe her fears. Make it right. They had been so... attuned. She couldn't understand his distance right now.

She held out her arms. "Come to bed?" She hated the sound of her own voice right now -- fought to keep that needy sound out of it. She was growing more confused by the moment, and if she were honest with herself, she was starting to get angry.

He didn't respond to her outstretched arms so she dropped them, humiliated. He said, "Slayer's still got it." His voice had a suggestive tone than cut her to the quick.

Okay, definitely angry now. "You're talking about slaying, right?" She fought to keep her voice level. "You and she found some bad thing that needed killing. Good. That's... good." Her stomach twisted in a knot of jealousy.
Spike's laugh -- that sexy and playful laugh that Tara loved -- rang out. "You really are an innocent, aren't you? No. I meant what I said: 'Slayer's still got it.' It, as in 'sex appeal.' You're right -- she and I had a little reunion. Got so much in common. The killin' always did put us in the mood." He made an adjustment to his crotch, stroking it in as though in fond remembrance.

Tara looked away, astonished at how much it hurt. She could not imagine what she had done to deserve this, and then realized that she had done nothing at all. That Spike had not been celibate for -- what? -- 120-plus years was a near certainty; in fact, she more than suspected it and planned to talk it out and reassure both of them, but this! Cruel words coming from him.

Cold suspicion replaced the hurt, and then a burst of adrenaline made her almost gasp. Spike's aura...! Tara could read auras, and something wasn't right. The light was helpful but not essential. Caution mixed with fear as she reached for the lamp switch.

"I said, 'leave it'!" The voice was spot-on. The more cultured accent he used with her, the one she suspected was the real William's voice, roughened into the mockney that he used in his Spike persona.

She ignored his command and snapped on the light.

The clothing was the same: dark jeans and shirt, leather coat; the cropped hair in Spike's natural color. It was a different look for him and seemed to suit his new gravitas. Well, new to her. She needed to get reacquainted with him. But this was not he. The aura was not only all wrong, it was missing. This... thing... radiated power, but it was not human or vampiric. Why hadn't she realized it before this? Tired. So very tired.

This, then, was the First Evil.

She went cold all over, a giddy feeling wobbling at the back of her knees. She felt swooning fear, like an acrophobe standing on a precipice. Tara had been waiting for this, but she had assumed that it would be months from now, that she'd be backed up with the force of the coven, Spike at her side, and the mighty Slayer and the "other" Spike flanking her, an army of activated potential slayers standing between the First's power and her. She forced herself to remain calm and reminded herself of all the intelligence Spike had shared with her. The First was incorporeal but couldn't harm her directly. It would play mind games with her, attempt to demoralize her and sap her will to fight, but she was in no immediate danger.

She focused on breathing in and out, willing her hammering heart to slow down, and her fear scaled down from terrified to merely scared. Perhaps she could learn something useful. Mr. Giles would be here in a few hours, and then they and the coven could brainstorm.

"So, you had a nice get-together?" Her voice was high-pitched with nervousness. She repressed the urge to roll her eyes at how weak that sounded, but she wanted to draw the conversation out.

It gave her a sharp look, and then a faint smile, as though it conceded defeat. "Spike has left the building," it admitted. "You figured that out all on your own."

Tara swallowed.

The handsome mouth, borrowed from her husband, curled in an elegant sneer. "You're an innocent, but no fool. And it will benefit you not at all."

Hot anger, begun with Spike's supposed defection and stoked by First's hurtful words, flared up and made Tara incautious. "Where is he? What did you say to him? What did you do to him?" She
couldn't stop the words from tumbling out. She jumped out of bed, grabbing her kimono, its sleeves flapping like wings, and shoved her arms into it, knotting the belt with a jerky movement. She felt only slightly less vulnerable with it on.

"Which question would you like me to answer first?" It inclined its head with mock solicitousness.

"Forget it!" she snapped. "Father of Lies--"

It interrupted, "Oh, I predate him--"

"You don't fool me--"

"But I did." Its voice took on a silky tone, and it rose and stalked over to her, looking her up and down. It was not Spike, but it made her shiver, and not only from fear. "And it was delicious. Nearly as delicious as the Slayer's--"

"Shut up!"

The appearance of Spike melted into that of her father. Tara took a step back.

"None o' your sass." The figure loosened its belt. "Always did like teaching you a lesson."

Tara stood her ground. "So he's dead." Her voice was flat.

The figure of her father looked puzzled and stopped undoing his belt.

"You can only appear as someone who has passed." She took a step forward, then two. "You know, it's not working. I forgave him."

It gave her an ugly look. "You'll be with me. You'll spend eternity with him." It jerked a thumb toward her father's chest, and shook its trouser waistband until the belt buckle rattled. "How do you like them apples?"

"Haven't you got 'places to be, things to kill'? Why don't you... slouch off toward Sunnydale?" Her voice rose to a shout. "Before I drop a house on you!"

Her father's baleful, possessive look melted into Warren's smug face. It cocked its thumb and forefinger into a mock "gun," mimicked shooting her and said, "Gotcha."

Warren morphed into Willow, saying, "Tara? Be careful. You can't win." The side of its head disappeared, a plume of flying red hair mixing with a spray of blood. It crumpled to the floor.

Open-mouthed, Tara stared at the welling blood, and remembered to breathe. This isn't real. This is not real.

"Tara?" Buffy opened the door and stuck her head in. "You okay? I couldn't sleep -- I heard yelling."

Weak with relief, Tara turned to look at Buffy, and then terrified at having taken her eyes off the First Evil, whipped her head back to look at the spot it occupied a moment before.

It was gone.

"You okay?" Buffy repeated.

"No. But I will be." Tara's voice trembled only a little.
Buffy's didn't speak, but her eyes were full of questioning and concern.

Tara locked eyes with Buffy. "It's begun."
Eliza was tired but not spent. She slept poorly these days, aware that she was probably in the last year of her life. The final showdown with the First Evil would either be successful, and she could lay down the burden and rest, or they would fail and it wouldn't matter anyway. But the possibility of failure was an idea Eliza rarely entertained.

She thought of Eusebius' words: "May I be the friend of that which is eternal and abides...if any devise evil against me, may I escape uninjured and without need of hurting him." The First Evil was eternal and abiding, but she certainly did not want to be a friend to it. She shared Tara's desire to drop a house upon it. Stouthearted girl! Eliza thought they would do better to emulate the Ephesians and gird their loins for battle.

Except her. Eliza had other plans.

She had schooled herself to avoid worry and all her energies were carefully husbanded for the sole purpose of sorting out the First Evil. She was grateful to Birdie for assuming leadership in the coven, at least, nominally. Eliza herself still oversaw everything and held the power of veto. Thank the Lord and Lady that Birdie required so little help. Eliza was no micromanager. She smirked privately to be thinking in a contemporary idiom. Spike's jab about her using archaic expressions had not gone unnoticed.

Today's meeting was to be held in the large assembly hall. She allowed Birdie to help her into the house and ensconce her in the big wing chair by the fireplace. She was glad to see Birdie assume hostess duties, thus relieving her of the necessity of playing hostess herself, a duty Eliza found onerous. Birdie's entertaining style was informal but adequate, and Eliza could then concentrate on the pressing problem facing them.

She looked upon her family, feeling a fierce desire to protect them, her lips moving in nearly silent prayer.

From the meeting hall window, Eliza saw a low-slung grey car pull up to the side entrance. Mr. Giles emerged, approached the door and was about to knock, when Birdie flung it open wide.

"Rupert! You don't need to knock. Come right in!" She bear-hugged him. "Where's Livvie?"

Giles gave Birdie a more reserved hug in return. "She sends her apologies. Still morning sick, I'm afraid, though I didn't think that it was possible after the first trimester. But what do I know?"

"Tsk!" Birdie clucked in sympathy and shook Giles' upper arm as though it were to blame. "Let me mix up something for you to take home to her. C'mon, I'll make it quick." She dragged him from the room.

Eliza added Olivia to her prayers, while her eyes continued to scan the room for her other loved ones. Anne and Araminta were here, with their daughters and granddaughters. Penelope's great-great-granddaughter Althenea, a talented seer, was making herself useful tracking down the stray potential slayers. Very odd that in spite of Eliza's childlessness, she had been blessed with this huge family. All these responsibilities, true, but a happiness she thought she'd never feel. Her current
contentment had worked its way backwards and colored even the bitterness of her early years with peace and joy. She resumed her nearly inaudible prayer.

The Scooby Gang -- Eliza agreed with Birdie; it was a silly name -- appeared at the east entrance of the hall. The young Slayer, tiny but with commanding presence as usual, held Xander and Tara by their arms. They looked like twin shellshock victims. The Slayer's sister brought up the rear. Spike was nowhere in sight.

And so to work. Eliza called out, "Young man! Come here!" As Xander was the only young man, and indeed the only man now in the room, he looked around with only a cursory, 'who, me?' at her preemptory words. He hurried to her and squatted down.

"Um. Hi. What can I do for you, Miss Harkness?" His eyes were smudged with shadows but his words were courteous. "Look, I'm sorry I yelled at you last night. I was kind of an ass about Spike, too." He looked abashed.

Eliza waved his apology aside. "That's not why I called you over here. I wanted a word alone with you before we begin." She nodded to the room at large. "This little problem you have, the quality -- or curse! -- of being unlucky in love, shall we say? Would you like me to help you?"

"You mean, I'm a demon magnet? I know. I am," he admitted, dropping his eyes. "Thing is, I'd hoped... that Anya and I..." His words trailed off and he looked defeated, radiating an unhealthy aura of self-hatred.

That would never do. Eliza tried to speak words of encouragement, but could not help her natural austerity. "Perhaps if your choice were freely made, rather than being influenced by magickal meddling?" She gave him a sharp look. "Or perhaps you think that this is magickal meddling? It is your choice."

"You mean, I can choose?" His eyes held a flicker of hope.

"Of course." She wished that she were more persuasive. Why couldn't these young people see that her way was the right way? If they did, it would make things much easier all around. There was only so much time. Still, she held her peace.

With a wary expression, he finally said, "Spike trusts you. Okay."

Eliza's expression softened. "Unbutton your shirt." She removed from her pocket a small jar containing an aromatic ointment. She dabbed some on his temples, muttering the undoing spell.

Embarrassed, Xander unbuttoned a couple of shirt buttons. His torso was pale and puffy. He would need to train, Eliza thought. They all would. Eliza anointed the skin over his heart, drawing with her finger the shape of a mystical rune, and finished her incantation. She added a twist to the undoing spell, a goodish dollop of healing, and a protection charm. The lad had got a powerful shot of magic last night, and was certainly unaccustomed to it, even coming from the Hellmouth as he did. It was no place to bring up children. What had his parents have been thinking? She normally didn't cotton to boys, having next to no experience with them, her family running to girls as it did, but she felt an unwonted maternal feeling for him.

"There!" She screwed the lid back on the jar, pocketed it, and pressed a dry kiss to Xander's forehead. Reading him. "I think you're in for more happiness than you know. There's a big task ahead of you, but the reward is great. Keep your eye open," she advised.

At the word "eye," Xander shuddered.
Poor boy must have gotten a fair jolt from Spike's memories of Caleb, but Eliza did not know what to say to buck him up. She squeezed Xander's shoulder. "We haven't much time." She gave him a little push. "Go now. Send my darling Tara along."

Xander nodded and headed back toward his friends.

Tara was already scanning the crowd and had spotted Eliza. She gave Xander a brief hug in passing before reaching Eliza. She curled up at the old woman's feet.

Eliza smoothed the hair off Tara's forehead. "My dear. You had a visitation in the night."

Tara shot her a startled look, and then said, "Yes, I did. But you know, I actually feel better. I knew this was coming, and I know now that Spike's not--"

"Faithless? Don't think that for a moment. Of course, don't let down your guard, either, where the First Evil is concerned! You did very well, my dear, very well indeed." Eliza gave her an approving pat, and Tara rested her cheek on Eliza's knee. Looking around the assembly hall, Eliza continued in a soft voice, "We were more happily met here that other time."

Tara smiled tightly and swallowed. With a visible effort, she said, "Are you kidding? Happiest day of my life." She snorted a gust of humorless laughter from her nose. "Also... the worst day of my life, but who's keeping track?"

Eliza shook her head and sighed, still stroking Tara's hair as they watched the younger coven members, Birdie, and Giles set up a sacred circle. Tara looked uncomfortable sitting while the others were working, and jumped up to help move chairs.

Once the circle was complete, everyone took their places. Birdie and Eliza exchanged glances. Eliza gave her a slight nod, and Birdie spoke: "I'd like to open with a moment of silence in respect for the potential slayers who have already died." She lit a large shell full of sage and other herbs, and the aromatic smoke filled the air, billowing slightly in the drafty room.

They all bowed their heads, and then Birdie continued, "Oh Goddess, there is great sadness, our cherished ones are gone, emptiness engulfs us, loss languishes within, help us bear this grief. Accompany their spirits, comfort us who grieve. Let us rejoice in their life. May their essence be recorded in the Great Book of Shadows. Renew our remembrance with joy."

Hard-faced, the Slayer stood apart from the group, while her sister looked on, silent tears running down her face. Xander put one arm around Dawn, and a tentative other arm around Buffy. He looked up and caught Eliza staring at them.

Birdie continued, "Since we're 'up against it' this time, I'd also like to say a prayer for the safety of --well, the whole planet! Considering what's at stake." She looked around in expectation.

There were murmurs of encouragement, and Birdie nodded. "Let the sacred circle remind us of the miracle that is the Earth. Let Her love and peace encircle us and guide us in all we do. For our gifts from Her are abundant! Holy Earth, mother of us all, our beloved, living home! Receive the healing energies we send to You, as we receive Your most holy healing power, alight."

The coven spoke as one: "So mote it be."

Suddenly, the dim hall was lit up from within. There was no source of light other than candles on this grey winter day, but the whole room now glowed with a warm, lambent light. The dying fire behind Eliza crackled back to life, giving off welcome warmth in the drafty hall.
With an indelicate grunt of approval, Eliza muttered, "First time I've been really warm all day."

Birdie threw her a broad grin. "Let's do this."

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Buffy watched as the candle sconces lining the walls blazed into torches. The temperature in the chilly room became balmy, almost Californian. She disliked the lack of central heating here and groused inwardly, wanting to get home and get busy. She wondered if ceding leadership to the coven was a good idea. She and Giles -- really she -- had handled a half dozen or more apocalypses and she wasn't about to take a back seat to this -- what was her name? -- Birdie? And that incredibly old woman doddering in the corner. True, Eliza had wrapped Warren up neatly enough, and delivered him like a package right to Buffy's doorstep, thus saving her a foray into yet another booby-trapped nerd lair. But Buffy was not impressed with parlor tricks. Her own brain, and Giles', their group's combined research efforts, and her own planning and Slayer strength, were all that were needed.

Usually.

"Welcome," Birdie said, and gave a tiny nod to Eliza, who stood and surveyed the group. "Take it away, Liza," she whispered.

Eliza was silent for a moment, appearing to gather herself, and then she spoke formally. "I also bid you welcome. Girls, allow me to present Miss Buffy Summers, The Vampire Slayer."

Buffy stood and nodded to the group at large. "Hi." She gave a little wave, and sat down, flushed, wondering why she felt so uncomfortable. She reminded herself that she and these women were on the same page, all about the world-save-age. Her animosity seemed a little unreasonable to her.

Eliza was still speaking, "To her right is Miss Dawn Summers, the Slayer's sister. Stand up and say hello, my dear."

Dawn lurched up, grabbing the chair to keep from up-ending it, and blushing, chirped, "Hi-ee," then reseated herself.

"To the younger Miss Summers' right is Mr. Alexander Harris. Please welcome him."

Xander stood but did not speak, only ducked his head in embarrassment, nodding to them before sitting once more.

"Our neighbor Mr. Rupert Giles, formerly Miss Summers' Watcher--" Giles stood and flashed a brief smile to the room before reseating himself "--is familiar to most of you, and you of course all know our sister Tara." Tara did not stand, but only smiled.

Eliza was beginning to sound a little winded and paused before continuing in a stronger voice, "As most of you know, the yearly crisis which Miss Summers and her associates usually sort out quite handily may not go so smoothly this year. We are gathered to offer her assistance in any way we can."

She sat down with a thump and looked fuddled. "Birdie? Please continue." Her voice sounded breathless. She leaned back and closed her eyes.

Birdie stood, and eyed Eliza for a moment, worry creasing her dark brows. Finally she spoke. "Buffy, I hope you don't think we're here to steal your thunder. You're it. You're The Law West Of The Pecos. But we're here for you -- we've got a lot of power at our disposal and want you to use us
in any way you see fit. We're already working on some aspects of this behind the scenes. As we do." She shot another worried glance at Eliza. "As we've always done." She left her place and moved to sit by Eliza, motioning Tara back to the seat she'd vacated. They switched places, and Birdie took Eliza's hand, saying to Buffy, "Now I'd like to turn this over to you." She put her arm around the old woman.

Buffy stood up, relieved. "Thanks." She looked around the room and took a deep breath. "Normally, we don't have a group this size. It's always been just me, Giles, Xander, and... Willow, who we lost in the spring." There was a sympathetic murmur in the room. Buffy smiled tightly and continued, "But now we've got Dawn, budding researcher extraordinaire. Can't forget you." She laid a hand on her sister's shoulder, grateful for something to hang onto. Buffy didn't want to get sidetracked into grief and weakness. "I've got some ideas of my own, but I'd like to open this up to discussion before I say more."

Xander, who could always be relied upon to lighten the darkest situation with levity, said, "So what are our main objectives, other than not dying in some spectacularly painful way?"

"Thank you, Xander, for putting this in a nutshell as usual." Giles turned to Buffy, saying, "Before we get into the particulars," he lowered his voice, "let me tell you how sorry I am that I left you last year, to handle things on your own. It could not have been more ill advised, and I'm told is a remnant of our dear departed Willow's 'my will' spell. I was blind, about you especially. I will not leave you to sort this out on your own again."

At his words, Buffy's eyes filled. She had managed to stave off the tears she'd been dangerously close to during Birdie's prayer for the murdered Potentials, but now she thought of how much she'd needed Giles and missed him. "Thanks," was all she could manage to say.

Giles squeezed Buffy's hand, and then looked around the room. "Where is Spike? I was told he was to be here. And souled! Extraordinary."

"Which Spike?" Dawn asked. "There're two now, you know."

"Um, this Spike," Giles said, with a little smile of amazement.

"Your Spike," Xander said to Tara.

Giles' eyes went round.

Stony-faced, Tara answered, "He didn't come to bed last night. I had a visit from the First Evil... It tried to make me think it was him. I think it said something to him, to scare him off. Except Spike doesn't scare easily." Her lower lip quivered, then tightened. "I think it said something terrible to him."

While Tara was talking, Giles said to Buffy in an undertone, "'To their bed'? Oh, dear." He turned to Tara, saying, "Tell us about your encounter."

She said, "You know the drill -- the coven must have told you. It appears in the form of someone who's died, plays on your weaknesses, says things..." Her mouth wobbled as though she might cry, but she finished, "It messes with your mind. I tried to learn what I could. I think it can read our minds."

"Excellent. Explain." Giles gave her an intent look.

"It played me like a violin. It zeroed right in on the things I fear the most." Tara looked reluctant to elaborate, and shot Buffy a look that she could not interpret.
"Can you tell us more?" he asked.

"No." Tara gave Buffy another look, and closed her mouth.

Buffy could not say why Tara was giving her these mistrustful looks, but tried to coax her. "Tara, we need to know all we can if we're gonna defeat this. Please."

Tara looked stubborn. "I've told you all I can."

What in the world? Buffy stared at Tara. Tara's involvement with Spike produced more than what amounted to switching sexual orientation in midstream. The usually tractable Tara had dug in her heels and was refusing to cooperate! Buffy sighed with impatience and decided to let Tara settle for a bit, and get back to her later. Just goes to show you, Spike was not a good influence. She hoped he hadn't suddenly gone evil. Buffy was glad Spike wasn't here, although where he was, was a good question. Too bad, because she had a million questions about the impending showdown, but the next best thing were those who shared Spike's memories.

Her next question she directed at Birdie, Eliza, and Xander. "I want to get people out of Sunnydale. How many people did you say were there before the last battle?"

Birdie did not respond, as she was whispering to Eliza, so Xander answered, "I dunno. A few. Not too many."

"I want none." Buffy's voice was crisp.

Birdie looked up and said, "We can send people prophetic dreams. Give them what amounts to a compulsion to get out of Dodge." She looked around her group, and smiled at the answering nods.

Xander grimaced. "Look, you're going about this all wrong. Remember? Well, no, you don't remember -- but Andrew killed Jonathan. Used his blood to open the seal of whosis."

"Danzathar," Giles supplied.

"Thanks. Point is, where are they?"

Buffy said, "Sitting in jail, awaiting trial. Why?"

"What if they get out?"

"What about it?" Buffy said. "Jonathan's not the only person walking around full of blood. I pay attention -- I listened to you guys talk about Spike's memories. What about your Home Depot demon date? -- which incidentally, I don't recommend you going on, this time around! Anyway... in Spike's memories -- she bled you over the seal. Spike was bled over the seal. What if we seal the seal? Bury it good and deep?"

Giles said, "No. No, that's no good. Andrew and Jonathan knew enough to dig it up in the first place. It's not as though it's a secret there's an opening there. The Hellmouth has been a locus for demonic activity since time immemorial. Need I mention Angelus and Acrathla?"

Buffy shuddered. "Then it's back to Plan A," she said. "Spike will close the Hellmouth. I hope."

She thought about the cuckoo creature now residing in Xander's closet.

Her worries about her slim resources, what a liability Spike was, his trigger which still had not been defused, people already dying in Sunnydale and the murdered Potentials worldwide -- turned into massive irritation with Tara. "Tara? I need a little help here. You're the only one who's had direct
contact with the First Evil. You've got to tell me what you know!"

"Leave her alone, Slayer. Got no idea how upsettin' it is, face-to-face with the First."

Tara stood, knocking her chair over as Spike crossed the room in three long strides, and they hugged feverishly, trying to occupy the same space. Desperately embarrassed, Buffy couldn't look and couldn't not look. Tara clutched Spike like a drowning person clinging to a life raft, and Spike tried to peel Tara off his chest and yet not let go either. Tara cried and murmured inarticulate endearments, and Spike muttered, loud enough for Buffy to hear: "Sorry. Sorry. I was halfway to the airport and couldn't leave without saying..." He cradled her in his arms. "Needed to be here." He tried unsuccessfully to push her away, and grabbed her closer, then pushed her again. "Been warned off you."

"By who? The First? And you believed it!" Tara let go one hand that was clutching Spike's back, smacked him, and resumed her fierce embrace. She buried her face in his neck, and Spike's head rolled back, eyes closed as he swallowed.

With a twinge of guilt...and something else, Buffy remembered that look.

"Told me I'd do you harm." He gently pushed Tara away, grabbed her back, and then pushed her hard. "You don't know what I'm capable of, or how quickly it comes on me. Go. Now. Go sit by the Slayer. Other side of her. Put her between you 'n' me."

"I don't want her between you and me," Tara's voice was a furious low mutter.

"Go on now. I could hurt you in less time than it takes to-- Ask the Slayer, if you don't believe me."

"No!" Tara did not let go.

Spike pushed her one last time, then squeezed her waist. "You little minx, you're still wearing the corset!"

Tara laughed a little. "It reminds me of you."

"What?" Spike laughed, too.

"To stand up straight and be strong. I know... I'm not making sense."

"I'll say. But I love you."

"I love you, too," Tara breathed. Buffy could hear Tara's whispered words.

Spike and Tara kissed, and went on kissing for a long time.

Buffy did not want him herself, no she did not. Been there, done that, and that way lay searing pain and conflict and guilt. It interfered with her mission. Still...souled Spike! 120-plus years older, the witches had said at the meeting last night, and a full partner in the mission. Good longer than he had been evil. No! He was still a vampire. Who was still kissing Tara. He and Tara were sort of melted into one another, Tara making little moans of pleasure, and Buffy was ready to run from the room when Xander hollered, "Go, Spike!" Dawn gave a muffled squeal.

Grateful for the distraction, Buffy turned to glare at them, her eyes like saucers. "Xander!" She stared at Dawn, eyebrows very high.

Dawn stopped bouncing, but Xander looked defensive, and to Buffy's indignation, said as though
deliberately misunderstanding her, "Ohhh, you think I'm telling him to go? No, I'm cheering him on. About time someone was glad to see Spike."

"Well... why don't you go kiss him?" Buffy muttered. She was chagrined to hear her tension had found its way into her words. Annoyed, she shut her mouth with a snap.

She was grateful to see Giles wearing an appalled expression. Predictably, he'd removed his glasses and was polishing them with assiduity. She gave him a faint smile, which he returned.

Tara and Spike paid no attention. After what felt like an hour to Buffy, but was only a minute, Spike gently pushed Tara away and Tara finally allowed herself to be, her palms and fingers trailing a path on his cheeks. Spike breathed, "I've wanted to do that for--"

Tara said softly, "When this is over." He nodded. Eyes shining, Tara backed away slowly, and took her seat, at last, with the rest of the Scoobies.

Buffy remembered that near-unbearable focus Spike had for the given object of his affection, remembered how hard it had been to be that object. Remembering, she couldn't take her eyes off him, and he finally saw that she was looking at him. He turned away and removed his leather coat, holding it draped over one arm, covering the front of his trousers.

He gave her a formal nod. "Slayer."

Buffy nodded coolly, her impassive expression firmly in place, and turned to Giles. "You were saying?"

Spike took a chair halfway around the circle, smiling his greetings to the room at large. His scanning eyes stopped at Eliza, who sat in the circle of Birdie's arm, leaning against her, eyes closed. He and Birdie exchanged concerned looks.

Giles put his glasses back on. "We were discussing the seal of Danzathar. Glad you could join us. We're discussing what needs to happen before--"

"Sod that. Need something first. Had me a little visit from the First Evil last night, said it'd trigger me, same's it did time before." Spike gave Giles a narrow look. "Wait. How much do you know about this -- did Birdie an' Liza brief you?"

"Oh, we've discussed it at length, and I know about the time loop. This could be invaluable, Spike, your foreknowledge of how this will happen. May happen. There are certain critical differences--"

"Well, one thing's the same -- sodding thing's got me by the short 'n' curlies, tellin' me I got a trigger again. Last time, you defused it with a what-you-call it...?"

"Prokaryote stone," Birdie supplied. She had one arm around Eliza, supporting her, and was chafing the old woman's hands with one of hers. "We've only got one, and we gave it to Rupert to use on--"

"Me. Me, part one," Spike muttered. He spoke with irritation, "We need another name for him. This is me."

"I'm sure he feels the same way," Giles said mildly. "Do you have another name you go by, other than William?"

Buffy saw Spike and Tara's eyes meet across the room and both smirked slightly. She suppressed the urge to roll her eyes.
"William's good enough. Keep us separate when you're talkin' about both of us. I don't mind going by it. 'S what Eliza calls me, anyways." He shot Birdie another worried look, and she lifted one shoulder in a little shrug.

"Back to the trigger. You undo him -- Spike -- what about me?"

Giles replied, "It's my understanding -- although I could be wrong," he cast a questioning glance at Birdie, "once your trigger is defused, it's defused, but it's impossible to say with certainty. What the First may have said to you, about triggering you anew... I'm afraid I don't have an answer."

Birdie said, "Spike, or William -- jeez, it's going to be hard to start calling you that! -- your instinct to stay away is a good one. We don't know about...re-triggering? -- but we'll look into it, along with everything else."

Spike's mouth twisted with bitterness. "Meanwhile, Cleveland's crawling with low-level minion types. No big bad, but the First Evil's right. Keeps me busy. Damn it."

Spike looked just about savage, Buffy thought. "I'm thinking we should do a big push, get this over with before it gets any stronger. Squash it before spring. Is it my imagination, or does evil seem stronger in the spring?" She directed her last question to Birdie and Eliza.

To Buffy's surprise, it was Eliza who answered. "Evil never sleeps, but yes, you are right. It draws upon power around it, and all things are more powerful in the spring."

"Okay." Buffy was doubtful about the old woman's contribution at this point, but there seemed no point in challenging her. "Good to know." She turned to the other coven members. "So the big push is on. You guys are on locating the Potentials?"

Tara answered, "Althenea and I are," and she nodded toward one of the coven sitting across from her.

Althenea flashed Buffy a quick smile. "We're on it."

"Good," Buffy said. "We're gonna need more muscle. The people fighting Bringers in the high school, while you--" she looked at Spike "--I mean, the other you, and me and the Potentials, er, the other Slayers fight the übervamps below -- more muscle means less loss of life."

"Anyah..." Xander choked on her name.

Spike shot Xander a sympathetic look, then turned to Buffy. "Hate like hell I can't be part of this fight, Slayer, but I'll send my boys."

With a flash of insight, Buffy felt sudden empathy for Spike. She would hate like hell, too, to miss the fight of her life.

Spike was saying, "--they're good fighters, 'specially Birdie's nephew--"

"Rain," Birdie moaned, then spoke with resignation. "Oh, what am I saying? This is war. We're all risking loved ones."

"What about the remnants of the Watchers, now that it's too late to save the Council itself?" Giles asked.

Buffy doubted she'd ever trust Quentin Travers and his ilk again, but said, "What do you propose?"
Lunch was served while they went round and round, and Spike -- or rather William, as he would now be called -- reminded Buffy to get Spike's chip out. No telling what kind of baddies the other Spike would run into, and some might be human. The late unlamented nerd trio weren't the only morally questionable humans. In Spike's current state, he couldn't defend Dawn against a mugger, William pointed out.

He added, "Speaking of muscle, who busted Faith loose the other time? I wasn't there and none o' you with my borrowed memories can help."

"Faith was gotten out of prison?" Buffy was amazed. She usually operated under the radar of the authorities. She'd never thought of getting Faith out to help. Would Faith even help? She voiced her last question. "How did she seem, that other time? Was she...helpful? Was she sorry for what she'd-- I'm sorry, it's probably irrelevant, but I'd like to think she paid her dues."


Birdie spoke up. "I think Buffy's worried about an end run around the law. But we can get around that, I think. Pull some strings."

Giles had been only toying with his food, and suddenly burst out with unexpected agitation: "Look, all this is very well, but don't you see? Tara and William both had a visitation from the First Evil last night. That means it can appear to anyone, anywhere."

"So?" Buffy was feeling calmer now that plans were shaping up, and couldn't see why a visit from the First, here, was significant.

Xander's voice swelled with illumination. "So... what about the guy with his finger on the button?"

"Precisely." Giles looked a trifle surprised, perhaps that it was Xander who grasped it first.

For the first time in several hours, Eliza opened her eyes and spoke. "Button?"

"The nuclear button, Liza," Birdie said.

Xander explained, "What's to stop a Bringer from killing a soldier, the First impersonating that solder, and so on, working its way up the chain of command? Or just influence some poor schmuck in a missile silo in North Dakota! The only way you can tell it's incorporeal is by touch, right?" He looked for confirmation from Spike, who nodded. Xander continued, "Nobody paws an officer. Impersonate the guy who gives the, 'Push that button, soldier.' That'll be the last order you hear."

"Or biological or chemical weapons!" Giles burst out. "I'm going to be a parent -- I want to see this settled."

Birdie spoke calmly, "Me too, big guy. I just want to raise kids and quarter horses. Live to see my kids grow up and win blue ribbons -- the horses, that is." She gave her goofy, self-deprecating laugh. "A little dream, but my own." She and Giles exchanged little smiles, his of congratulations, hers of commiseration.

Buffy was about to speak, when Eliza cut in with unaccustomed vigor, "Mr. Giles, don't you think it's odd that nuclear weapons have not been used more than they have? Other than that one tragic time--"

"Twice, Liza," hissed Birdie.
"Oh, very well! The point is, I have not been napping these past 165 years. Why else is the world not in much worse shape than it is?"

Buffy could not refrain from saying, "Well, actually...it's kinda crummy... AIDS, famine, genocide... Sorry." She shrugged.

As though Buffy had not even spoken, Eliza declaimed, "Who do you think has been keeping watch? I."

Xander and Buffy's eyes met. Buffy muttered, "Looks like it's just us."


Buffy rolled her eyes.

"Indeed it is not just you. I have not brought this up until now, but my plan is to spare you another apocalypse. Indeed, to stop them altogether! You think, you all think," she stopped to catch her labored breathing, "you think I'm 'asleep at the wheel.' When I am not, I will have you know!" She gasped, "Tell them." She turned agitated eyes to Birdie, her breath wheezing.

"She's right," Birdie said firmly, but her eyes betrayed worry for her mentor. "Eliza's spent months, the most of the last year, really, in deep meditation... with the help of entheogenic drugs." The look she gave Giles had a touch of guilt.

"The huh?" was all Buffy could say. The rest of them just stared.

Giles' expression held a mixture of wariness and excitement. He explained to Buffy, "Entheogenic drugs contain properties that augment psychic abilities. She's trying to," he turned to Birdie, "she's trying to communicate with the Powers That Be?"

Birdie nodded. "Those of the Powers whose attention she can catch. She compared it to a teashop in Bath in the Mauve Decade, which kinda went over my head." Birdie made a moue of 'what do I know?' "Said it was like trying to get someone to serve her, when her class made her invisible. Imagine not helping her! Her proposal is to offer herself, all her not inconsiderable power and a double lifetime of good deeds, in exchange for restoring the world -- well, restoring is the wrong word -- to the magick-less mundane reality that men think it is."

They all turned to Eliza, with excitement, incredulity, protestations that she must not risk herself, but Eliza had slid off her chair and lay crumpled on the floor.
Eliza was... someplace else.

She felt, rather than heard, Birdie's anguished voice shouting, "Stand back! Spike, help me get them back. Give her air!" Very odd, since sound waves traveled on air, and air was not a requirement in the rarefied heights Eliza was attaining.

Eliza seemed to be looking through the wrong end of a telescope. She could see the coven ringed around her, and Spike pushing them away. The Slayer helped him. They made a good team, forming a barrier with their outstretched arms, holding back her relatives. Birdie was bent over Eliza's recumbent figure on the floor, Eliza's head pillowed in Tara's lap.

Dear girls! Dreamily, Eliza wished for a way to touch them, to communicate with them somehow. Birdie was performing heart massage and muttering spells. But it was unnecessary. Eliza had waited a long time for her audience with the Powers That Be. Birdie, Eliza's chosen successor, the daughter she never had, knew this as well as Eliza herself. Eliza had kept nothing from her. Surely Birdie knew there was no need for this fluttering over a dying husk. Eliza's work was nearly done. If only she could reassure them! Tara's tearstained face tipped up and Eliza could see her, gulping air and then bending back to the slack face in her lap.

Eliza wanted to comfort her, but felt herself rising like a hot-air balloon, and watched the room recede and fade away into the distance.

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Spike and Buffy struggled with Eliza's comatose form. Her long-limbed body was no help to them as they tried to move the dead weight.

"Here, Slayer, let me! You're bangin' her crazy bone on the door jamb." Spike punched said jamb, which gave a sharp crack. Xander flinched.

"I am so not banging her arm on the door jamb! If you'd just let me--" Buffy tugged the old woman's recumbent form. "She--" Buffy jerked her head toward Birdie "--wants her at her cottage and you can't go out in the sun."

Birdie gave a growl of frustration as she pawed through her medicine bag.

Dawn and Xander watched in silence, Xander's hand on Dawn's shoulder. Tara watched wordlessly, too, and then opened her own medicine bag.

"If the both of you would quit bickering like brats, I could think straight!" Birdie muttered but her words were plain as the worry on her face. Louder, she said, "I'm trying to open a portal so he doesn't have to go out in the sun, but you two won't let me collect my thoughts!"

"Buffy, let William take her. She's too tall for you to hold comfortably." Giles laid a conciliatory hand on Buffy's arm. Buffy let go, and settled Eliza's lolling head on Spike's shoulder.

Birdie gulped and began speaking the words to open the portal, but Tara had already opened one
while Birdie was trying to compose herself. Birdie gave Tara a watery smile and they trooped through, Spike leading the way with Eliza's limp form cradled in his arms.

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With an audible *thud*, Eliza's bottom landed on a plastic chair in the waiting room she had imagined in all her recent soul travels. She felt the familiar worries: what flight to catch, would she miss her connection, and what was that confounded monitor on the wall.

Eliza had never worn glasses, but after pressure from her nieces, had at last consented to use a lorgnette. She felt a brief sense of unreality as she reached in her pocket, found her lorgnette and removed it. Reminding herself that the entire situation was only a metaphor, she examined the Arrivals and Departures monitors. She snorted to see Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, and Limbo listed as destinations. How odd that her dream used symbols she did not even believe in!

Oh, yes. Right. She remembered that she had collapsed in the meeting hall. She'd been rather short of breath these past few months, and if she were honest with herself, had been experiencing more mental confusion. She wondered if her timing were off -- if she were too late. She'd banked so much on this, and if keeping herself alive all these years was for naught, she was going to be seriously displeased.

Eliza watched the travelers departing, and she waited, trying to compose herself. She closed her eyes and said a little prayer to the Lady, asking for patience, and that her offer of herself, to avert the coming apocalypse, would be acceptable.

At last, when she had let go of attachment to outcomes (her large sense of entitlement in particular, which she had to admit was a pretty chronic state with her) Penelope appeared.

"Hello, Auntie."

~~~

Spike laid Eliza out on the bed in the alcove, and Tara and Birdie arranged the old woman into a comfortable position.

Buffy said, "Shouldn't you call a hospital?"

Without turning around, Birdie answered with patience, "And tell them what? We have a 164-year-old witch whose magickal grip on longevity has loosened?"

Giles said, "I'm sure that all that can be done for her, will be." He drew Buffy away by the elbow.

~~~

Eliza eyed Penelope with interest. For months, she had craved an audience with The Powers That Be, or at least, a Power, and here was her youngest niece, in period dress! She cut quite the figure in her draped bustle and long skirt, standing before her amidst the plastic chairs of the modern terminal. Eliza felt a sharper sense of unreality and said with reluctance, "Am I dead? Are you here to escort me to the Summerland? Are you even *you*?"

Penelope threw back her head and laughed. "Such a lot of questions! Which would you like me to answer first?"

With a cold sense of foreboding, Eliza said, "Give me your hand."
Penelope put her warm hand into Eliza's withered one. "I'm not the First Evil, Aunt." Her being radiated reassurance, and Eliza's fears were somewhat assuaged.

She gusted out a little breath she did not even know she was holding. "Am I dead?" she repeated.

"No, dear. You're in a coma." Penelope gave Eliza's hand a comforting squeeze.

"Ah. Well. Then, who are you, if not the First? You're not entirely Penelope."

"Not entirely," the dark-haired girl admitted. "We thought you would be less alarmed if I assumed the form of someone who did not threaten you."

"But I sense it is partly you."

"Partly."

"Then the Hindus are right. About Atman. All souls are joined?"

"Don't take anything too literally, Aunt. It's difficult to communicate with you. You're very intelligent, but you're limited by your five senses, and well, language! We lack common terminology."

"But--"

"Once, the famous mid-twentieth century wise-ass shaman, Mr. Natural, was asked by one of his enlightenment-seeking minions, 'What's it all mean, Mr. Natural?'

"I beg your pardon!" Eliza looked at Penelope with mild alarm. The girl's eyes twinkled. "His reply pretty much summed up man's quest for eternal cosmic truth." She paused for dramatic effect, and then delivered the punch line: "'Don't mean shit!'"

Eliza was appalled at the girl's crude words, but said at last, "Oh! It's like a koan."

"Aunt, I only mean that we can't arrive at any real meaning using words."

"I admit that I'm not here to discuss philosophy, although it would be fascinating. And why this metaphor?" She gestured to the waiting room. "I would have thought Circe's island, or even Socrates' grove would be more apt, but--"

"Stop it, Aunt. What you want, why you're here -- changing reality to the magick-less materialist universe that most believe it to be -- we cannot and will not do." Penelope's look was sympathetic but her words were adamant.

"But, I've waited my whole life for this! This will work. I know it can, I've weighed the variables--"

"Have you indeed? Your plan robs individuals of the biggest opportunities of their lifetimes, dear. The chance to be heroes, larger than life. And not only the champions -- the 'little' people would be affected, too."

Eliza blinked.

Penelope explained as though to a child, "I wonder if you know how complete the change would be. If we were to agree to this plan, your career -- and it was a valuable one! -- gone. Mine, too. But you -- you would have died in childbirth in 1878, a worn-out woman, old before her time, who did not love her husband, to say the least. It would have been a relief to you."
Eliza huffed a little breath of agreement. She could well believe that.

Penelope continued, "Your plan would negate William's finest hour, his sacrifice of himself on the Hellmouth -- his finest hour up to now -- and would remove him as a future player... but to stay out of the future and just discuss the present and the past, it would mean the death of both souled vampires. Since vampires would not exist, they would have died 235 years and 120 years ago, of cirrhosis and tuberculosis, respectively."

"I did not think of that." Why had she not? This was so obvious that Eliza was embarrassed.

"Last, your plan takes William away from Tara. Do you want that? Do you still love her that way? Perhaps you do."

Her ideas and plans turned upside-down, Eliza dragged her mind back from the multiple considerations of world-changing, and thought of her best-beloved. Tara sitting on the floor earlier, her cheek pillowed on Eliza's knee. What a lovely creature she was! Eliza remembered her first glimpse of the girl, burning up with fever as she had been, bathing her, healing her. Eliza thought of her original antipathy to William, and her thorny opposition to their union. The bitter pill of performing the rite of their handfasting. She thought she was beyond envy, but if she were honest with herself, she had to admit that there was an element of truth in Penelope's question, though only a tiny drop.

Eliza could not speak for long moments. At last, she muttered, "This never should have happened."

"You mean, Willow's time travel spell? Damaging the timeline?"

"Yes." Eliza clenched her jaw, trying not to cry with frustration at the thwarting of her plans.

"Don't blame Willow. It's one of those paradoxes that... isn't. Sorry, Aunt. We lack the language. Time can't be damaged, because it's already happened and doesn't matter. 'Ripple effects' are smoothed out. Or, if you prefer, reality splinters into an increasingly fragmented multiverse. Either way, Lady Julian may have said it best: 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.' Except--" Penelope bit her lip. "I will say, though, they'll do well to keep William away from the Hellmouth for now."

"Which does not alter the fact the people are suffering and dying and are not being helped! All is not well! What are you hinting at? I just cannot leave them to muddle through on their own!"

"Dear, you don't really have a choice. The previous reality from whence William and Tara came has a problem all its own, as will this one. All those potential slayers who will be activated? It's... what's the vulgar expression? 'Shooting one's wad?' In the gambling sense." Penelope seemed to enjoy using slang and continued with enthusiasm, "Once activated, 'that's all she wrote.' No more Slayers."

Penelope simpered, but sobered at Eliza's horrified expression. "But... what will they do? You say you won't... can't do what I ask of you." Failure... this was the bitterest pill of all. All her planning, and this over-long life she'd endured. This glassy fragility. All for naught. Eliza's stomach twisted.

Penelope's voice was firm. "We will not do what you ask. But I'm prepared to offer you a... 'consolation prize': we can send you back, returned to your young, handsome self, and you were better-looking than you believed yourself to be, Aunt." She pulled a hand mirror from her reticule and held it up to Eliza's face.

Eliza's face softened in amazement. She resembled Maria Sharapova! Eliza was inordinately fond of
tennis, and followed Maria's games whenever they were televised. She allowed herself exactly three seconds of preening before looking away and shaking her head.

Penelope gave her a coaxing smile. "Things might go well for a time. Until the last slayer is gone. You'd have a chance at winning Tara's love in your lifetime. Romantic love, that is. She loves you anyway. I'm not allowed to tell outcomes, but William and Tara are in for another separation. Tara will have no one, and you know she doesn't really fit in with the Slayer's team. That annoying Sapphic will join them shortly, but surely you don't--"

"'This 'consolation prize' does nothing to solve the dilemma at hand." Eliza did not need any time to make up her mind. She was beyond that. If her long life had taught her anything, it had taught her she could make up her mind and stick to it. She thought of the multiverse, this tapestry spread out before her, and made her decision. "Back to that 'shooting one's wad' ... no more Slayers'"

Penelope blinked. "You're not going to accept? Very well. I know it's difficult to discuss in words. You can communicate with me by thought alone if you wish. It's more precise, although exact meanings will elude you until you join us at last."

Eliza spoke aloud, "Let my striving not be in vain. I refuse your counter-offer, and make you another proposition..." and then joined with Penelope in silent communication.

Penelope listened with her heart, and at last, agreed.

~~~

Dawn made tea while Birdie and Tara attended to the comatose Eliza. Spike built a fire, and said, "Slayer, settle yourself and lil sis. I could feel your hands were like ice, back there." Buffy nodded and drew up a chair. Giles and Xander moved their chairs into a grouping by the fire's comforting warmth. Xander and Dawn sat together on the one little loveseat. He, Dawn, and Buffy exchanged wordless looks. How like their helpless waiting after Joyce's death, except Eliza wasn't dead and they weren't close to her.

Why was Eliza so important? Did she really think she alone could avert an apocalypse? Her arrogance was astonishing, Buffy thought. Even if Eliza were right -- if she had been able to influence matters on a global scale like this, she was out of the running now. They were back to Plan A, as Buffy had told Xander. And it really didn't matter. Supposedly, this had all played out once before, and the Scoobies had defeated the First Evil. They'd changed the world. Well, Willow had. Buffy refused to think of all the variables. Time travel, ugh. Too complicated. Just give her a foe and a weapon. Hell, just give her a foe and let her have at it. She'd improvise the weapon.

She looked up and caught Spike looking at her. He seemed to read her thoughts. "You'll sort it out, Slayer. You always do."

William, she reminded herself. It was going to be hard to get used to calling him that, to keep him separate from his newly-ensouled younger self in Sunnydale. Her lips stretched in a thin smile that softened into the real thing.

He held her eyes. "Let him help you. He'd die for you."

His eyes were so blue. Her thoughts strayed into areas where they had no business straying. She fought to keep a dry tone to her voice, replying, "From what I hear, he did."

She wasn't sure if it were this Spike she should be thanking, but just as she was about to speak, the low murmur of voices from the bed alcove became louder, and Birdie called out to her, low and
urgent, "Buffy, she wants to talk to you."

Buffy jumped up and hurried over. Tara withdrew, Birdie's arm around her shoulders.

Eliza looked as withered as a bundle of dried weeds. Her body had little shape, and lay covered with a singed blanket. Her breathing was a thin rale.

Eliza wasted no words. "I failed. They denied my request. It's up to you."

Buffy was not surprised, but patted Eliza's hand with sympathy. "It's okay. Don't stress yourself. We'll be fine."

"Yes. You will. I want to put you under the protection of Artemis the Huntress. Bend down." Eliza's voice was a husky rasp.

Buffy didn't want to get any closer, but it was heartless to deny the fragile old woman's request. She bent down and felt the withered lips brush her forehead. Eliza muttered in a language unfamiliar to Buffy. She imagined it was some kind of blessing or benediction. "Thank you."

"Now send in my Tara. Hurry. There isn't much time."

With one backward glance of pity, Buffy left the alcove.

Tara was entwined in William's embrace, and Buffy felt the now-familiar twinge of jealousy, which was crazy of course. He was not her choice, and even if he was, and you know? -- so not going there again. Buffy set her jaw.

"Tara. She wants you."

Birdie cast a glance at Tara's retreating back, which Tara did not see, and Buffy could have sworn there was a touch of envy in Birdie's look. Birdie said defensively, "I never knew my grandmothers. Eliza's it. I love her so much."

"I'm sorry." Buffy pitied her, but was in a fever of impatience to get home. She wanted to get this over with, get back and get a jump on the apocalypse. Was this time spent with the coven worth the loss of ground back in Sunnydale? People were dying. This was not her strong suit, this political time-wasting, forging this connection. It had always been just them, she, Xander, Willow. Who looked out for them? She thought of the night of Willow's death, of her and Xander mopping up brains and blood. Where had the coven been then? In fairness, the coven had given her Giles back. He sat, not speaking but just looking at her with such compassion. He seemed to understand her impatience. Hating to ask, she said with reluctance, "Will you be coming back with us?"

"Yes. I told you I would not leave you again."

"But Olivia's expecting--"

"Neither will I leave her. She's coming with me."

"It's too dangerous."

"Buffy, the danger is on a global scale. I'll be of more help to you with her by my side."

Spike gave a little grunt of approbation and nodded. He shot a look of longing toward the bed alcove. Buffy looked away.
Tara approached the bed and laid a gentle hand on Eliza's. "I'm here."

"Thank you, my dear. Please sit by me," Eliza's voice had little volume.

Tara sat and leaned forward. She repeated, "I'm here."

"Good." Eliza gave Tara's hand a tiny squeeze. "I'll be brief. They turned me down. Said I hadn't thought things through."

"I'm so sorry--"

"It's very humbling. I thought I could play God, but I'm only a very... minor player." She coughed and wheezed. "Two things... I've left you this cottage. It's tiny, and you'll be in California with William... when this is over...but you'll need a pied-à-terre when you're here." She paused to catch her breath.

Tears made Tara's voice thick. "Please don't talk."

"I must. The second thing... I should have told you first, as I'm rather... running out of steam."

"Shh."

*Perhaps we could communicate better in linkage.*

Tara gasped when she heard Eliza's sharply-focused words inside her head. Her head shot up. *Yes?*

*There's been a change of plans. Listen...*
Chapter 48

The clock ticked on the mantelpiece.

Birdie bit a hangnail and waited for Eliza to call for her. Tara and Eliza's whispering had died out, and all Birdie could hear was thick silence from the bed alcove.

She turned her attention to the room at large. She could hear Buffy, William and Giles' quiet discussion of the upcoming apocalypse, and Dawn and Xander talking in an undertone about what the X-Men would do in this situation. Distracting herself from her grief, Birdie's anguish turned to massive irritation, but she reminded herself that no-one in the room, with the possible exception of William, was as close to Eliza as she was. They didn't mean to be callous, but why wouldn't the children stop talking about comic books? It was disrespectful.

She should never have let herself get pregnant in her forties, with its attendant physical pain and risk, not only from the impending apocalypse. Big fat target for the First Evil. What had she and Fritz been thinking? She shuddered. But right now, in her hormonal state, she wanted to smack a couple Scoobies.

Birdie turned her attention back to the bed alcove, hissing to William, "I can't hear anything. Can you?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Bed alcove's not twenty feet away. You can hear as well as I. Well, you can't, but--" His expression softened. "Okay. They're not talking. I can hear their breathing -- Eliza's doesn't sound any too good." He frowned. "Heartbeats, Slayer's tummy rumblin', Watcher's teeth grindin' -- 'spect he wants to get home to the missus -- and those two--" he nodded toward Dawn and Xander on the loveseat, "-talking about comic book heroes. That help?"

"No," Birdie's foot jiggled up and down. "Yes! Oh, they're in linkage!" Her shoulders slumped with relief. "Good. Less stress, not trying to talk." Her foot stopped bouncing and she leaned back and sighed, and then she jumped up. "Anyone want more tea?"

Before Birdie took ten steps, Tara emerged from the opening of the alcove.

"She's gone." Tara's voice, though calm, echoed in the hush of the room.

Birdie began to keen softly.

Buffy, Xander, and Dawn murmured condolences and Giles rose. He waited while William moved to Birdie and took her in his arms, and let them have a moment.

Light as a butterfly's wing, Tara laid a gentle hand on Birdie's back. "She was very tired."

"Oh, wasn't she!" Birdie wept.

Giles joined them, and the three of them -- he, William and Tara enfolded the grieving witch in their embrace.
The Fitzhugh-Lovejoy clan took over the preparations for Eliza's burial, but there was tacit understanding that Birdie retained headship of the coven. Fasting, she went into seclusion for three days, withdrawing to the moors, and reappeared, quiet and usual, for the funeral.

Eliza was laid to rest with a minimum of fanfare. There was no obituary; indeed, what could it say? She, too, saved the world a lot?

The coven itself was her monument.

~~~

Fretting with anxiety to get home, Buffy insisted the interrupted Scooby meeting reconvene the night of Eliza’s burial. Buffy and Tara told the others about Eliza's failed bargain with the Powers That Be, and that heroes would still be needed. The consequences of Eliza's death were discussed, and Buffy proposed that the coven continue to work with Tara as she boned up on the spell to imbue the potential slayers with Buffy's power.

There was the worrying matter of the missing Spike and his still-armed trigger. The news from Sunnydale wasn't good. Disappearances -- not only Spike's -- were up, and murders were on the rise. Buffy didn't say so, but she was sure they were connected. Potential slayers arrived daily, and Anya played unwilling hostess to them. Buffy was eager to get back.

They laid final plans and then made their farewells. Giles promised to join Buffy in Sunnydale the next day.

William hugged Dawn. "Love you, kitten. Was worried about you, a while back. Thought you'd gone completely Columbine on me."

Dawn hugged him back. "I would never set you on fire."

"Good to know." He stroked her hair and pulled her head to his lips for a brief brotherly kiss on her eyebrow.

William and Giles shook hands. "Watcher. I'll see you when this is over, or when I'm sure I won't do you harm. Soddin' First Evil and its threat to reactivate me," William explained, his mouth a bitter twist.

He looked almost ashamed, Buffy thought.

Giles' pager vibrated and he gave it a hurried glance, and left with a final farewell.

William's good-bye to Buffy was next. William -- Buffy found it hard to think of him as other than Spike -- clasped her hand and held her eyes a long moment. "Slayer. You'll do fine. I know it's down to you, well, you and him, but... let people help you. You're looking peaky."

Buffy smiled wryly. "Just what a girl likes to hear."

"I only meant--"

"That's okay. I-- thanks. Thank you, William... and... I'm sorry." It was hard to meet his eyes.

"Sorry? For what? I'm the one who should--"

"For a lot of things," she interrupted. She bobbed up and planted a quick peck on his cheek. She went to sit with Dawn on the loveseat while the good-byes continued.
Xander grasped William's hand and then with unspoken camaraderie, they bear-hugged. "I'm sorry for--" they spoke simultaneously, and then both laughed a little at their odd synchronicity.

Tara hung back, and Buffy hoped to be through the portal and back home, before being treated to another public display of affection between Tara and William, although she supposed this was hardly public. She reminded herself that she wasn't jealous, just... uncomfortable, which was perfectly reasonable, considering her past with Spike. Completely understandable, and why couldn't Birdie just hurry this up? Buffy struggled to remain composed.

William held Birdie, careful of her burgeoning belly. Since the funeral, she'd started to show. "Don't want the papoose pokin' me," he joked. "Knowing you an' the ridin' master, probably be born with spurs on."

Birdie didn't return his smile, but only held him for a long time. "I cry so easily these days. Gonna miss you, big guy."

He didn't seem in any hurry to break their embrace. "Call me any time. I think I can be here, when Hellmouth Lite isn't wastin' my time. I'll help Fritz pace; wear a path in the waiting room carpet with him."

Finally, Birdie let go. She gave Tara an apologetic moue. "Sorry."

Tara smiled a little and shook her head.

Birdie wiped her eyes. "I guess you'll want a moment alone."

William looked long at Tara and shook his head slowly. He replied to Birdie's offer, "That's exactly what I don't want. Fuckin' First Evil -- don't know if it was playin' with me, but I could twist off--" He shivered. "Never mind. I've been careless the last couple days." He directed his next words to Tara. "I don't want to risk a hair of your head."

Tara's mouth trembled and her eyes filled, but the lift of her chin showed pride.

William's voice was husky. "Meant what I said. When this is over..."

Tara nodded, speechless. She had her hands clasped beneath her chin like a child praying, and her eyes shone with unshed tears.

Buffy thought of the agony of her separation from Angel. But Tara was strong, and she had that Zen egoless thing going on. She'd make it.

Breaking the silence, Birdie finally said, "Well, I guess we've got..."

Buffy said, "Places to be, evil to quench--"

"Portals to open," Birdie finished. She reached inside her medicine bag for the spell ingredients, spoke the words, and a shimmering door opened.

After a glance at Buffy, who hung back with a little shake of her head, Xander made an "after you" gesture toward Dawn. She stepped through the portal and he followed her.

Buffy stood up. She couldn't believe what she was about to do, but an unprecedented impulse to do William a good turn made her say, "If you want a minute to kiss her good-bye, but you're afraid of the trigger, I could keep watch, keep you from--"
William smiled, tight-lipped. "It's good of you, but you've no idea how quick it comes on, with barely a warning. I'd get this... tingle." He shook his head. "It's been... 120-odd years, but I remember it comin' on like a steamroller, no memory of what'd happened, wakin' up with dead bodies buried all around. You'd better go -- now -- sort out Spike's arse. His whereabouts still unknown, yeah? Go on -- get."

Buffy nodded, and turned toward the door to Sunnydale. Before she left, she wanted to see William gone and Tara and Birdie safe.

He muttered, so that Buffy did not hear, "'Sides, I want more than a minute."

Birdie had opened a second portal. "Cleveland, city of light, city of magic." Her wry voice was a dirge.

"I hate that song." William said through gritted teeth. With a final glance at the three women, he ducked through the opening and the iris closed.

Tara gave Birdie a quick hug. "I'm as close as the next room," she assured her, and Birdie nodded.

"Good-bye, Slayer." Birdie used Buffy's title and gave her a formal nod. "Goddess be between you and harm in all the empty places you walk." She raised her arms in a hieratic gesture.

Buffy and Tara went home.

~~~

William kept in contact with Birdie, and fed her additional tidbits of information as they came to him. In her turn, she kept her word to Buffy, and the prophetic dreams sent by the coven created a mass exodus of Sunnydale residents, just as she had promised, earlier and more thorough than the one that William had lived through before.

As he suspected, Cleveland was no more than a waste of his time. Still, it kept him busy, and though he hated to admit it, the First's taunting about the little people being worth saving hit home. Did not unemployed steelworkers and blue-collar families on welfare deserve to live as much as Sunnydale coeds and his beloveds?

He thought of his first go-round in 2002, of being the Slayer's right-hand man and confidante, of his final dazzling hour on the Hellmouth. Now, he wanted to be Tara's protector, and all his chosen loved ones', if not for fucking Cleveland.

Each evening when he rose at sunset, he remembered the dray horses back in his day, put on his blinders and hauled the wagon forward.

~~~

Andrew was broken out of jail and spirited away to Buffy's house. (Jonathan had turned state's evidence and left.) As Sunnydale cleared out and the potential slayers grew more numerous, Buffy decided to relocate to Xander's apartment house. It had emptied, all but for him. Spike was still at large.

Tara cast a protection spell, augmented with all the power the coven could bring to bear. The house was warded against the worst the First and the Bringers could summon. The wards cast a circle of protection that covered the entire building and surrounding grounds. Kennedy trained them -- Tara and the Scoobies as well as potential slayers.
Buffy and Tara mutually decided that as little as possible be said about looped time or the other Spike, to those who did not have a need to know, and Buffy, picturing Anya being told by Xander and then trumpeting to the entire household, extracted a promise from Xander and Dawn to keep quiet.

In particular, Buffy wanted Spike's uninfluenced agreement to make the sacrifice that almost certainly would be required of him. The idea of Spike as a puppet on a string didn't sit right with her. She was sure he would balk if he felt any coercion, or even expectation, from her.

Envious of Tara's relationship with the older, more mature William, Buffy wanted to give Spike a chance to volunteer with purity of motive. She wanted to give him that, and more. But first he needed to be found.

With increasing grimness, Buffy patrolled every night. The empty town held few endangered townspeople, and after her first trouncing by one of the übervamps, she stuck to scouring Sunnydale for Spike.

~~~

Except for the core Scoobies, the potentials, Anya, and Andrew were in the dark about Tara's time travels and her relationship with the other Spike. She was thought to be bereaved by Willow's death, and treated with deferential distance. Tara was content to let that misconception stand. She was bereaved. Her omnipresent longing for William was like a toothache.

Kennedy's gaydar picked up mixed messages from Tara, and the girl tried for several weeks to get next to her.

Not sure what she was broadcasting, Tara discouraged Kennedy as gently as possible. Not that the girl wasn't attractive, but there was an upper-class smugness and a sexual certainty, an air of "I always get what I want and I'm not about to lose now."

So this woman had been Darren to Willow's Samantha. Tara was unimpressed.

Her thoughts returned to William. The ache was unabating.

~~~

Finally, Spike was found! Buffy half-carried the bruised and beaten vampire back to the apartment house they all shared now, and Spike was restrained until Giles could arrive with the Prokaryote stone. He had not returned to Sunnydale as he had promised, but stayed in Bath, as Olivia experienced intermittent bleeding, going in and out of false labor. Birdie had told him of her premonition that pregnant women in particular would come under attack, and this was the First's plan to waylay Giles.

It was working.

~~~

Spike looked up from the metal bed he was tied to. "Well, if it isn't my favorite witch." He winced, his eyes dropping, as though he felt guilty over reminding her of Willow. Tara sensed if he could blush, he would be.

Unfazed, Tara's smile was forgiving. "I brought dinner."

Spike sighed. "Drag up a seat. Sorry I can't hold the chair for you, milady."
Tara pushed the chair closer to the bed, so she could hold the straw to Spike's lips without leaning in too far. She was no fool. He had bitten Andrew earlier that afternoon, when the First Evil was upon him. This man was not the man he would become some day; there was a callow, unfinished quality to him. This Spike wasn't her lover and she didn't entirely trust him.

Spike slurped the blood up the straw, his cheeks hollowing as he strained to get the last drops. He burped delicately, dropped his head back to the pillow, and raised an eyebrow. "You feel different. You used to have this peaceful vibe. Don't mean the other witch dyin' -- God rest her soul. You used to have this calmness. Now you're putting me antsy. Whole household, too, if you want the truth. All of you gettin' your monthlies at the same time."

Tara changed the subject. "How was your blood? Good?"

"Good. Moreish. Like George Carlin said about cocaine -- makes you feel like more. That's a vamp an' his blood." He gave her a speculative look. "So, you gonna tell me a bedtime story? Make it up to me for puttin' me uptight?"

Tara set the mug on the bedside table. "What would you like to hear?"

"How 'bout... how'd you get that bite on your neck?"

Tara started. Her "look" these days, which had Buffy commented upon, was an ever-present small scarf tied sideways around her neck, or a long thin one, wrapped Isadora Duncan-fashion. She was rarely without one. She wore a long blue one today, patterned with green caterpillars.

"Come on, Isadora," he coaxed. "Gotta take the scarf off some time. Seen you paddin' 'round in your jammies an' dressin' gown at night. Seen the bite, despite your best efforts. Show me."

Tara toyed with the idea of telling him the truth. It was tempting, but a temptation she could resist. She agreed with Buffy. The truth would only confuse the issue of the upcoming sacrifice required of him.

He added, "Meant to say, too, scarf's no good while patrolling with the ladies. Some beastie could grab hold--"

She interrupted in a soft voice. "I don't patrol. I'm only in the way."

"That's what you think -- you were a big help the summer the Slayer was--"

Without a word, she pulled the scarf free, and Spike's words trailed off. She gave him a veiled look. "What do you think it's about?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Well, you're warm. I can feel you from here, and your heart's beatin'. The scar's months old, based on the healing. It's a neat bite. Not the kind you get when you're strugglin' to get away, either. Looks like fun was had."

Tara felt her face get hot. This may not have been such a good idea.

He said in a rush, "Now, not tryin' to embarrass you! Just curious. One more thing... if I weren't absolutely certain I was wrong... or nearly certain--" He looked troubled. He slid her an uneasy gauging glance and looked away.

Tara wanted to reassure him, but to say he had not bitten her was not strictly true. She kept her expression carefully neutral.
Spike seemed to take courage from her bland face. He shook his head. "I'd say I know who bit you, but it's impossible, so... thought you could fill in the details. Make up a story. Pass the time wi' me for a while?" He gave her a coaxing look.

She wondered how she could get out of this. She could just pick up the mug and walk out, but she didn't want Spike to think she was a coward. If she were honest with herself, she was looking forward to a little mental sparring with him, and she was lonely.

Spike's eyes narrowed and he added, "Not only that -- you clank when you walk. Make me think of Marley's ghost."

It was the jewelry. William's mother's jewelry that he'd given her, sewn into a pouch at the bottom of the ever-present corset. Every morning, as an act of dedication, she hooked herself into the hated thing. It was a painful, palpable symbol of her commitment to the mission. Besides, it was all she had left of him.

William had stopped calling.

Smoothing the scarf, Tara took a long time deciding, before speaking. "All right. How about... science fiction?"

"Sounds good to me." He laid back, working his head into the pillow like a child settling down to hear a bedtime story, and watched with expectation. "Tell on."

She remembered in the past, her Spike's reluctance to taint the future with paradoxical foreknowledge, but figured if she was going to shovel a 'pack of lies,' she'd choose her biggest shovel. *This* Spike would take it as fiction, so she was safe in telling him the truth. She held his eyes. "Science fiction, and time travel to an alternate reality, and some good old-fashioned fortune-telling thrown in for good measure."

"Like Prince Charles, I'm all ears." He grinned.

She gave him a small smile and said, "In your future -- we get past this, by the way," she said parenthetically, "this First Evil is all settled--"

"--That's worth it -- just hearin' you say that," he interrupted. "Go on."

They smiled at each other.

"Okay, about three years from now, Willow comes to you with a proposition--"

"Somethin' sexual? Or she haunts me? Or both? Oh, I don't like this story, Glinda. You're scarin' me." His tone was teasing.

Tara dimpled. "No, she was alive. Alternate universe, remember? She asked you to time travel back to 2002 and save me from getting shot by Warren. You said yes. The day Warren was here and shot Buffy, instead of me getting shot too, you pushed me to the floor and the bullet hit Willow." Tara's breath caught, but she steadied herself. "The spell went wonky and we -- you and I -- had... adventures in time."

"Very interestin'. Tell me some of our adventures."

"Oh, no. It would take too long. We were gone weeks."

"If that's so, where am I? Not me, *him*. Your fellow traveler -- where'd he wind up?"
"Well, that was a problem. We thought we'd come back the same way we got there -- a spell like Willow's, but there was no way to duplicate it. The witches were able to send me back, but not him. I suppose he... died somewhere along the way--" She swallowed. "--coming back to the 21st century. Lots of dangers. Angelus was after us. Slayers..." she trailed off, looking haunted. She remembered her breakdown last spring, her delusion that Spike had died and that her Spike, when they were reunited, was some damned stand-in. She shivered.

"What about the bite?" Spike prodded her.

She came out of her dark reverie. "The bite was me feeding you. It wasn't possible to feed you any other way, and it was kind of an emergency -- you needed feeding up, so I volunteered. You didn't want to but I made you see reason."

Spike gave her a shrewd look. "So. You liked him?"

Tara raised innocent eyes to his. "I've always liked you, Spike." With a frisson, she felt sudden gratitude that a similar bite on her upper thigh, just below her groin, was not visible. To her embarrassment, she felt a throb of arousal.

He reared his head up off the pillow, nostrils flaring, and studied her. "That's not what I meant -- you had feelings for him? You two had feelings for each other?"

She put on her best poker face. "That's none of your business."

"Was he...?" Spike sighed with impatience. "Don't get me wrong, I love the Slayer with a love that amounts to pure unholy stubbornness, but if it didn't work out -- and how could it? -- it'd be kind of comforting, if unbelievable, that I could come to care for another. Down the road."

Tara did not let her expression, or lack of expression, waver.

"Come on, Glinda," he urged. "As long as you're tellin' pretty stories. Want my happy ending."

He gave her a wheedling little boy face, but she was determined it was time to lighten this little confessional and end it. She put her flattened palm to her forehead and intoned, "Karnak says, 'if it doesn't work out with Buffy, you will know happiness again'."

Spike laid his head down and rubbed his cheek against the pillow. "You sound like a fortune cookie." He looked away, as though in embarrassment. "Funny. It is kind of comforting. Never happen, though." He lifted his head again and gave her a laser-like look. "Who are you grieving, the witch or him?"

He was entirely too astute. Tara stood up. "That's enough. Storytime's over."

"Wait! You can't leave me hangin' like this! Did we do it?" He broke off a guffaw, adding, "Like I said, looks like fun was had!"

She looked at him without expression. "We got married."

Spike lay silent, gobsmacked, staring at her for about five long seconds, and then he burst out laughing. "You're having me on! Almost had me, too! You're good, witch. Remind me not to play poker with you!"

She gave him a perfunctory smile, and collecting the empty cup, left.
After she left, Spike mulled over what Tara had told him. Chit seemed to have a wee crush on him. Well, he was dead sexy. Still, it was more what he might have expected from one of the potentials, not her. He thought of her as more... steadfast in her loving. Faithful to Willow's memory.

What most people didn't realize about vampires (well, most people didn't believe in vampires) but vampire senses made it near impossible for humans to lie to them. Good thing intelligence agencies didn't use vamps for interrogation -- what with their perception of heart rate, blush response, pupil dilation -- oh yes, the girl loved him. (And that smell of hers! Very nice.) She also believed that pretty story she told, or else was the most accomplished liar Spike had ever met. After a moment's puzzlement, he shook his head and returned to his near-total focus on the Slayer.
Tara's stomach knotted, and she almost dropped the dish she was drying. She suspected she was getting an ulcer. William had not called in months. Birdie reassured her that he was well, although busy with the second front in Cleveland. Tara declined the offer of a scrying mirror. Watching him when he wasn't aware of it would seem like spying. When William wanted to get in touch, he would. The Scoobies, if they noticed his absence at all, did not comment. For this Tara was grateful. Sympathy would only remind her how much she missed him. As ever, she was cast in the role of earth mother and caretaker, but she did not mind. Much. Her mother had taught her the palliative value of work. Romantic love was secondary, and anyway, if things did not pan out, they would all be dead.

"Where is everyone?" The bang of the door as it slammed shut punctuated Buffy's words. Her footsteps echoed curtly against the black and white tile of the apartment house's party room. Spike was out there already, tied to a chair. Tara briefly thought about running, and letting Spike be the victim, if they were in for another stirring speech. She admired Buffy, but privately thought she should never have dropped Speech 101. Instead Tara dried her hands, and headed out of the kitchen. "Faith and Robin took Anya and the potentials to the Bronze—"

"Don't they know there's an apocalypse going on? Besides, there's no band." Buffy's brow furrowed.

"Well, there's a sound system. And Andrew's fooling around down in the darkroom." Tara compressed her lips. Andrew's recent video portrayal of her as a latter-day French Lieutenant's Woman, haunting the widow's walk of Xander's apartment roof, hit too close to home. He thought her grief was for Willow, but his depiction was still too accurate. She swallowed her pain and annoyance, and said in a calm voice, "We all needed a break from each other. What the hell!" Buffy's face had been in profile, looking around the common room, and she turned to Tara, who now saw Buffy's black eye and bruised cheekbone. Tara hissed in a sympathetic breath.

Moving closer, Xander and Dawn said as one, "Yeowwie," Dawn wincing, and Xander reaching out gingerly to touch Buffy's face, but pulling back before contact was made. Spike growled, "You're bleedin', and not just the eye. Get Glinda to see to it."

But Buffy seemed to enjoy prolonging the suspense. She put on a lecturing tone. "Dawn, you know I've told you never to hitchhike."

"Yaa-aah." Dawn's face showed puzzlement but she played along. "Do I look stupid?"

"Right, sometimes you pick up More Than You Bargained For." Buffy punctuated her mock-grave words with firm nods, and her eyes twinkled. Xander stared at Buffy. "It's good to see you smile for a change, but what the frell—"
Spike bellowed, "Slayer! I said, you're bleedin'. Get seen to!"

Tara said, "Buffy, are you hurt? Do you need something?"

Buffy's voice was innocent. "Can you sew?"

"Huh? Yeah." Tara was baffled by the non-sequitur, but Buffy was clearly enjoying herself, and lord and lady knew that happened seldom enough. Tara's half-smile began to show. "What do you need?"

Buffy put her hand behind her back, rummaging beneath her jean jacket, and with a flourish, pulled out a machete-sized blade. "Nifty, isn't it? The First Slayer's Scythe is detachable from its handle, but a bra strap is no sheath. I want something I can wear under my coat like those TV detectives do, so I can carry this on patrol."

Tara gingerly lifted the back of the jean jacket, and sure enough, Spike was right. Buffy's blouse was in shreds and she'd cut herself. Tara winced in sympathy. "What happened?"

"Our... intelligence told me where to hang out, see if I couldn't pick up some info on this Caleb guy." Buffy glanced at Spike, who was still in the dark about their plans. "Let's take this to the kitchen. You can mop me up. Plus, I'm starving."

Spike gave his tied hands a perfunctory tug and stared after them as they left the room.

Once safe behind closed doors, Buffy whispered, "Tara, it turns out that mind-clouding spell of yours did the trick. Caleb didn't know me, and picked me up, instead of Shannon. That little—"

Buffy made a thrust with her blade, "—'message' he had for me—" she executed a graceful spin and lunge. "I delivered to him instead." A savage stab punctuated her words.

"Yesss!" Xander's fist pumped the air. Dawn squealed and hugged her sister, and Tara, with a chuckling, "Hold still," dabbed the wound already knitting on Buffy's back.

"Listen, guys," Buffy spoke in an urgent undertone. "That 'no band at the Bronze' got me thinking. How soon until there's no power? Who's minding the store, er, the power station? I don't want to sit in the dark waiting for the First Evil to get any stronger. William's poop about where to find the Scythe was right-on, and now Caleb's out of the picture — I say: 'why wait?' We've got the wagons in a circle, we've got the potentials, we've got the blade. I'll get the Liz Taylor gem, you do the 'empower the potentials' spell, we go for the big finish. What do you say?" Her question was clearly rhetorical, and her green eyes shone like a cat's.

"Yeah. I say 'yeah'!" "Yes!" "Let's do it!" Tara, Dawn, and Xander spoke at once.

"Tara, summon Giles and Birdie—no, you're saving up for the big spell. Get Giles on the phone. We need that pro-care-whatchamacallit—"

"Prokaryote stone," Tara put in.

Buffy went on, "—and Spike's trigger out, like five minutes ago. I'll try to reach Riley again, get his mad scientists on Spike's chip. Those prophetic dreams worked too well—the town's dead. Spike's chip should have been out weeks ago." A worry line creased her forehead.

"Um, I a-already—"

"Huh?" Buffy's eyes went round.
Tara was chagrined to hear her old stammer resurface. She chose her words and spoke with deliberation. "H-he'd get these whanging headaches. No criticism meant—you were so busy, with this houseful and, well, *apocalypse* pressing. I, uh, teleported it, like I did Warren's bullet. You didn't say not to, and we all know William's not a liability without *his*. I meant to tell you." She pulled from her pocket a little black plastic square threaded with gold circuitry, and dropped it into Buffy's palm. "One less thing to worry about." She gave Buffy a guilty smile.

Buffy's eyes grew rounder, if that were possible. "Wow! Good—that's good! Does he know?"

"No, it was a bad bout—he had passed out from the pain. I thought you could tell him."

"I will. I need to see Angel, though, as soon as I can."

"How're you gonna get there?" Xander asked. "Bus? Empty town—no buses, remember?"

"I can drive." Buffy's voice was aggrieved. "Empty roads, hey."

Xander looked doubtful. "Until you get to L.A. Take Faith. She can drive."

"As if! I'm going alone. There's a place in the middle we met—"

"No 'perfect happiness,' now—"

Buffy snapped, "Not likely, Xander. This is war, and he's got the big gun, er, key piece of... munition, so why don't you just... watch Dawn for me, OK?" Her face went crimson with annoyance.

Xander subsided with a sour expression, which softened as he glanced at Dawn. "Okay."

Buffy took a deep breath. "Maybe Faith and the potentials have the right idea."

"What?"

"A day off tomorrow, rest up for the big finish? I go to L.A, and you," Buffy gave Tara a look of commendable delicacy, "maybe you have some unfinished business?"

Tara looked away.

"Let's get Spike detriggered then." Buffy picked up the phone and called Westbury. "Giles? You're what? Your voice is breaking up. You're under attack by *what?* Get over here!"

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A huge portal opened, twice as wide as any Tara had seen.

Like a Teutonic war god, Birdie's Friedrich led the way, impressive with blond hair and gleaming white teeth, dueling scars acquired in his university years, flashing drawn blade at the fore. Birdie, huge of belly and wild-eyed with worry, brought up the rear, a grimoire in her arms. She chanted Latin protection charms in a breathless voice. Giles walked between them, pushing Olivia in a wheelchair.

The Prokaryote spell was accomplished quickly, Spike roaring in pain and unconsciously flinging a cot at Dawn. Tara ducked and ran. When she got up the courage to go back to the basement, Spike was gone, off to work out his karma with Robin, she feared. That they disliked each other was abundantly clear, but Tara wondered how different this universe was from William's first go-around, as he had described it. Spike was in danger from Robin, but Tara knew that he would not listen to
her warning.

Tara showed everyone to their rooms, and hurried away. She had work to do.

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Whenever she wasn't playing den mother to potential slayers, Tara studied magick. Her months at the coven were barely sufficient preparation, the potential-to-slayer spell tricky. Willow's channeling of the Goddess's power had been augmented with the corrupting influence of the Hellmouth. There could be no taint of that in her own spell. Tara was sensitive to unwholesome influences and wanted her spell to be pure and powerful. Giles felt the strength of Willow's being "on the wagon," beforehand, enhanced the strength of the spell, so Tara mostly abstained, too. But she had never been one for frivolous spell-casting.

She had done all she could to prepare. The omnipresent ache of William's absence gnawed at her, so she looked for other work. She wrote up a rotation of housekeeping duties and hung it on the refrigerator door. Not that it mattered. Day after tomorrow, Sunnydale would be at the bottom of a crater. Still, there was a rightness to her list, and she hung it with a slight smirk. She wondered how the girls would cope without their pancakes tomorrow. She should have done this months ago.

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There was no time for traveling, even if airport and bus station weren't deserted. Tara's energies were carefully husbanded against her coming exertions, so opening a portal to Cleveland was out, too. She didn't know where William was staying, and if he were undercover she might endanger him. But she had his San Francisco address and a short hop there wouldn't take too much magickal moxie.

She prepared to open a portal on the lawn. Preoccupied with William's defection, she'd set a fire once—just a small one—and so now she mostly preferred to cast spells out-of-doors. She sat on the bottom step of the porch, assembled her tools, and spoke the words.

Spike stood in the shadows, smoking in silence.

Tara had noticed him, but concentrated on opening her portal. After, she looked up and gave him a half-smile.

He exhaled a lung-filling drag. "Sorry you're grievin', pet."

"You have no idea." Again came the temptation to tell him, but it was easily resisted.

"Where ya goin'?" His voice rumbled.

He didn't sound really interested, only idly curious, but she answered steadily, "San Francisco."

"Got some bird there? Never mind—one o' my business." He made an apologetic little shrug.

She wanted William so bad she could taste it. Her own William was so unlike this. He was still Spike, her lover, her husband, and they had been as close as lovers could be. She refused to think of the possibility that he might be lost to her altogether. This man standing in front of her was almost William, and yet light years away.

Give Spike three more years, two more apocalypses, one annihilation, ha! Pat him, shape him, mark him, put him in the oven, and he'd be about right. Was it just that he and she had been thrown
together by Willow's meddling with time? That would not happen again. This Spike would do, or not do, Buffy's bidding. He'd burn up on the Hellmouth. They hoped! Tara wanted to weep with the irony of it.

Tara gave Spike a quick hug, laying her cheek against his chest, and then kissed his cheek. She stepped through the shimmering doorway without a backward look.

After she had gone, Spike sniffed. "Some lesbian!"

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She went to San Francisco to see William's house. It was most unlikely that she would catch him there—Cleveland and its plethora of garden-variety evil keeping him out of the way—but she wanted something of him. Wanted to sleep in his bed.

As luck—or her preoccupation—would have it, her portal to San Francisco opened near the bus station in the seedy part of town, but a short cab ride to Russian Hill brought her to a tall Queen Anne house on a winding hilly side street. She knocked at the door.

"It's you!" Dan was a darling, blond and blue-eyed.

"Huh? Um, does Spike live here?" Tara felt absurdly shy.

"It's you," he repeated. "The girl from my dream!"

"Hey!" An older man, with a balding shaved head, gave the younger man a playful scowl.

The young blond man threw him a pout. To Tara, he said, "Bruce Willis over there is just jealous because he doesn't see things."

"I see dead people," the older man squeaked, but his smile was teasing. He winked at Tara.

Tara was beginning to feel at ease with the kidding couple, but had to confirm that this was Spike's home. "This is 52 Barbary Lane?" She leaned back, double-checking the number above the door.

"Right you are, and come right in. I'm Dan. He's Gary. You must be Mrs. Southwood."

Tara blinked. She had not been called that since 1881. "Um, yeah. This is Spike's house?"

"Actually, it's yours—lock, stock and Baccarat. We just live here." Dan's voice held no rancor, and he held the door open wide.

"My house?" Tara was confused. "You're Spike's...?"

Gary said, "His Baker Street Irregulars, his—"

"Cannon fodder?" Dan put in.

The older man said, "Don't call yourself that—you're awesome with the Jeet Kun Do. I'm only a crossbow man."

Dan chided, "Well, you're no slouch with the broadsword or holy water-filled Super Soaker." In an undertone, he added, "And that ain't all." He turned to Tara and said, "I meant to call—we're joining you for the showdown tomorrow. We're missing Rain—he's keeping Shasta safe from Sasquatch, or something. Wouldn't take us this time, the meanie. But lucky us—we get to meet you at last!"
"We expect him back this afternoon," Gary added. "Have a seat. No, take the comfy chair."

Tara sat down, looking around the parlor. It was quaintly furnished with Victorian antiques, a central library table dominating the room. The wall space not taken up with bookshelves was hung with an array of armaments: swords, axes, and crossbows.

Gary explained, "We've got our own little Hellmouth, well, more like a pore, here in San Francisco."

"Hey!" Dan said, rubbing a bandaged arm. "That bugger that took a bite out of me last month didn't come out of any pore. It's more like a—"

"Nostril?" Tara deadpanned. "Bigger than a pore but smaller than an actual Hellmouth?"

"Right—a nostril." Dan nodded emphatically.

"And can we pick 'em!" added Gary.

"Down at Hunter's Point. Keeps us busy. But tell us about you, pretty blonde California girl."

"I'm not a California girl, really. Well, Petaluma... by way of Alabama." Her southern accent, usually unnoticeable, briefly resurfaced at her last word. "We moved to northern California when I was eight. My dad got work in a poultry plant. I've been vegetarian ever since." She gave a lopsided smile. "What about you?"

"I'm that rarity: a Bay Area native." Dan pointed a thumb at his chest. "People's Republic of Berkeley, here, but Gare there is a Sunnydale boy originally."

Gary said, "Not really. Spike kept my grandma and her kids from starving during the Depression. She moved the family away from Sunnydale about 70 years ago. I heard about it from my dad when he gave me 'the facts of life' talk."

"Huh? What does that have to do with sex?" Dan frowned.

"The facts, the facts! You know: 'Evil is real, my son'."

"Oh, that talk. I didn't get that one." Dan's habitually benign expression looked briefly sad.

"It's kind of a funny story, how I hooked up with Spike—" Gary began.

Doing the 'getting to know you' was good and well, but Tara just had to ask: "Where is Spike?"

Gary looked at her with surprise. "In Cleveland, closing in on the latest Big Bad. I thought you knew. He's almost never home."

Dan's face registered sympathy.

"Oh. Right. Yes, I knew." She fought down a lump in her throat and kept her voice even.

Gary said, "Dan, you want to show her the house? I'll put away the research, make coffee, or... you want wine? It's early, but we have a playful Pouilly—"

"No, coffee's fine." Tara smiled and turned to the young blond man. "I'd love to see the house."

The front door opened and a tall Native American youth came in, dropping a lumpy rucksack in the entry, and shrugging off a jean jacket. Dan went to him, tsk-tsking, picking up the fallen jacket and smoothing it before hanging it on the coat tree by the door. "That's no way to treat this pretty thing,
pretty thing." Tara could see a soaring eagle embroidered on the jacket's back.

"Hello," Tara said. She had met Rain at the coven the previous summer. This time, she was not put off by his bare acknowledgment of her. Birdie had explained that it was the Indian way—Rain's way of showing respect to Spike by not paying unseemly attention to Spike's woman. He had been friendly enough to the younger unattached coven members, though, and to one in particular.

His dark eyes lit upon her and he gave her an infinitesimal nod. He glanced at Dan, and instead of responding to Tara's greeting, asked Dan, "Did you offer her anything?" To Tara, he said, "I was about to make a sandwich. You hungry?"

Dan started to say that Gary was making coffee, but Tara cut in quickly, "I'd love some water, please." From staying with Birdie, she knew enough about Indian customs to know that she'd better accept his hospitality or the offers of food and drink would never stop.

Rain was gone five minutes while Dan talked about their current research, and then Rain returned, bringing Tara a Calistoga in one hand, and a huge cut-up hero sandwich in the other. He offered her both, but she demurred, taking only the bottle of water. With a shrug, Rain fell avidly upon the sandwich.

Meanwhile, Dan unpacked Rain's rucksack. Tara was glad she wasn't hungry, because she would have lost her appetite. Dan removed an axe sticky with greenish ichor.

He sniffed experimentally, and held it away from his nose. "Qojreji demons?"

Chewing, Rain grunted, swallowed, and answered, "Trolls." He swallowed again. "In La Honda."

"Ah. Well, I'll leave the goo to you." With a grimace, Dan set the axe on a newspaper and turned to Tara. "I was going to give you the tour."

"Yes, please."

Dan showed her the upstairs rooms, and Tara was appropriately admiring, at the round bed in his and Gary's turret bedroom in particular. She then followed him downstairs through the main floor rooms, a butler's pantry, and down carpeted back stairs, past a small garage with a smaller silver sports car.

"Don't know if you watch cult TV," Dan said, "but that's the car Roger Moore drove in The Saint."

"Huh?" She knew next to nothing about cult TV and less about sports cars.

"Volvo 1800—they're hard to come by nowadays. But I suppose he can have what he wants."

"It's pretty," Tara admitted.

Dan flung open the door to Spike's apartment.

Tara hesitated at the threshold. "Won't he mind?" she said shyly.

Dan shook his head. "It's your house. He had it put in your name when you were born."

Speechless, Tara followed him inside. Though beautiful, dotted with antiques and objets d'art, the apartment had a half-finished, un-lived-in quality, more hotel room than home. It seemed to cry out for her touch to make it a home.

The kitchen opened into the living room, making the space seem larger. Three walls were windowless but the fourth side was a wall of windows and French doors facing north, filling the
room with indirect light. On one wall, flanked by a loveseat and a few comfortable chairs, a
magisterial stove crouched like a benevolent dragon, its isinglass windows twinkling in the cool grey
light. Tara recognized it from Westcott front parlor.

Dan said, "A gift from the coven to Spike a few months back. Eliza was a tough old bird but she
finally succumbed to the lure of central heating." Then he blushed bright red. "I meant, I'm terribly
sorry for your loss." He looked mortified.

Tara's smile was forgiving. "She was tough. She'd have taken it as a compliment."

Ducking his head, Dan smiled back.

Tara went to the kitchen nook. It was small but completely outfitted, like a sailboat's galley. The
utensils and dishes looked unused. She ran an appreciative finger over an electric waffle iron. The
kitchen counter was lined with liquor bottles. Mildly alarmed, she asked, "Does Spike drink a lot?"

"Well, yeah. He misses the hell out of you. And we party when he comes home."

She peeked in the small refrigerator, which was empty, and then in the dishwasher. Its top rack held
crystal lowballs and the kind of mugs she knew Spike liked to heat blood in.

Dan explained, "He's never home, well, almost never. When he eats, it's upstairs with us. I buy him
biroldo—blood sausage. It's Italian—I get it in North Beach. I'm adventurous in my eating, but ish."
He shivered delicately. "But there's blood!" he said brightly. He opened the freezer. "AB Negative.
His fave."

Tara looked at the bags of frozen blood, tucked among frozen bottles of Stolichnaya and
Rumplemintz, and said wonderingly, "That's my blood type." She felt a sudden stab of
embarrassment, but realized—or hoped—that this man could not know about her sharing her blood
with William.

Tara turned to the big room once more. At its rear, a four-poster bed stood in an alcove whose
trompe l'oeil three sides were painted with scenes of the country surrounding Westbury—
Stonehenge, the coven's beech copse, ground strewn with silvery mast, and a sacred oak grove, its
low-lying hollows filled with the azure shadows of bluebell pools.

The big bed held a single occupant. A flame-colored cat lay curled in a comma, and Tara recognized
the characteristic round head of the British cats she'd seen in Westbury. With a flourish of his arm,
Dan said, "Meet Willow."

"W -Willow? Who named her?" It unnerved her that anyone would name a cat after her erstwhile
lover.

"Spike. She followed him through a portal, and she didn't want to go home, did she?" he cooed to it,
sitting down and stroking the cat's shining flank. "Though what's willowy about her, I can't see.
Except her eyes, maybe."

The cat obliged by opening leaf-green eyes, which narrowed in pleasure as he scratched her head.
Her loud purring filled the alcove.

Tara sat down, too, and the tears that had threatened to spill all morning, finally did. Her voice was a
thin little thread. "All my lovers leave me." Two silent tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Oh, honey, you're missing him, aren't you?" Dan stopped petting the cat and put a brotherly arm
around Tara's shoulders.
"Not just him... Willow."

"Oh. Oh! A girl? And she left you? I'm so sorry." The young man's psychic ability filled in the blanks of what Tara was not saying.

It was hard to talk. The cat, empathic as cats can be, stood, stretched, then did a shoulder dive against Tara's thigh. She rolled over and gave Tara a babyish "pet me" look that was not unlike her namesake. "No, I left her..." She raised her head, and repeated, "I left her." She took a deeper breath and felt a knot of tension that she was usually unaware of, loosen. "But I guess you could say she left me first, emotionally." She fondled the cat's belly, and the cat rubbed her gums against Tara's fingers. "I can't resent her any more—Spike and I wouldn't be together if it weren't for her. Not that we are together..." Her voice trailed off.

"Now I get it." Dan's voice swelled with illumination. "Spike loves Willow, this Willow," he stroked the cat's belly, "but he talked of another Willow once, when he was drunk—called her 'his benefactress.' I wasn't sure what he meant by that—I'm usually pretty good at catching vibes, but he can be hard to read."

Tara wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "She left me too, by dying, but she couldn't help it. I-I was there when it happened."

"I'm sorry, sweetie. Us evil-fighting types need a support group: 'PTSD 101 for Demon Hunters'." Dan gave Tara's shoulder a comforting squeeze.

Tara nodded. "It's true. The world thinks all these neck traumas and gangs with deformed faces are just a coincidence. Willow was killed by a bullet, though. By a human." She reached for a tissue on a side table, and blew her nose.

Dan kept his arm around Tara's shoulders while she petted the cat, until her tears slowed and dried. She finally stood up. "Show me the rest of the house?"

Dan said, "There is a bedroom, well, another room, but he doesn't use it. He thought you might want a room of your own."

"'A Room Of One's Own'—I like that." Her eye fell upon a large oak chest at the foot of the bed. She reached out her hand but pulled back.

Dan said, "Go on. It's your chest—hell, it's your house."

She opened the lid and saw a jumble of sex toys, most of which she could not identify, topped with a padded velvet swing. That explained the rings cemented into the ceiling. Blushing, she closed the lid.

"They haven't been used, if that's what you were wondering." Dan's face flushed again, but he seemed anxious to reassure her.

"I -I wasn't," she said briefly, but it was a lie. Tara wondered how William had survived so long without feminine companionship. She looked away, and then remembered that Dan was clairvoyant. It was getting embarrassing.

"He doesn't bring home girls, or boys, damn him." Dan's grin grew a tiny pout. "Just kidding—I had a lil crush on him in my teens. He saved me, back in my runaway days. I was hustling, but never got that talk Gary mentioned—that there's more to worry about than STDs and getting beat up. A vamp gang had me and was dithering, I guess, trying to decide whether to eat me or... um, eat me, when Spike waded in and squished 'em. I followed him like a puppy after that. He had to put me to work to get me off his back, I guess. And I met Gary." Dan lifted his eyes to the ceiling with a beatific
expression. "Happily ever after, except for, you know, the demon hunting and stuff. Not 'ever after' either, I guess. Who knows how long you get to live?" He gave her another bright smile. "But happy... very. You and Spike will be, too."

Tara didn't answer.

The bedroom, or spare room, was large enough to divide into a second bedroom. She and William had talked of children, back in their day. Before he abandoned her. This room, too, was largely unfurnished, except for a couple of antiques: an eighteenth-century cheval glass, which Tara privately though belonged over the bed, a petit point fainting couch, a glass-fronted case, and an ancient tansu chest. With a mischievous smile, Dan opened a door to a closet. It went back a good twelve feet, and ended in a heavy door, laden with locks and magickal runes. "This place is secure, but every bolt hole needs a back door. This is part of the tunnel we dug. This, and the back of the other room."

After a quick glance at the back door, Tara just looked, openmouthed, at the contents of the closet. From padded satin hangers hung an array of lingerie, the tags still on them. Camisoles and peignoirs, bras and boy shorts, slippery silks and gossamer batistes in snowy whites, creams, and beiges, candlelight yellow, and further back, blues in all shades, lipstick reds and inky blacks. Some of the latter styles were a bit, um, exotic. Tara fell solidly in the comfy cotton underpants set, but had a secret and largely unindulged passion for filmy underwear. Only once, when Willow gifted her with a fancy lingerie set, which Tara in turn had given Deborah as a peace offering, had she owned such lovely underthings.

Tara found her tongue. "Where in the world—" She fingered one creamy peignoir that was missing its top button. Odd. The other pieces were perfect.

"Lili's for the tasteful stuff, but Saint Sabrina's Parlor in Purgatory for the other, funner stuff." Dan's voice was smug. "He has good taste for a straight guy, but I helped pick some of the wilder—"

Utterly embarrassed now, Tara's glance slid away, and she backed out of the closet. Dan shut up and followed her, smirking like a naughty younger brother. Tara returned to the tansu chest and ran her hand over its gleaming surface. She had wanted one in... forever. It would be perfect for her magickal supplies, and the nearby glass case would hold bladed weapons as well as books. She owned exactly one beautiful old athame, inherited from her mother and thus kept secret from her father, but in this empty room she could add other bladed weapons. She could create a sacred circle... right here— In fact... She tilted her head, and looked up to see Dan watching at her with a quizzical expression.

"You feel it, don't you?" he asked. His voice was confident.

"How do you know?"

"You're a touch psychic, too, aren't you? I feel you, wondering—"

"I do!"

Dan nodded gravely, his pretty mouth grim. "We had a witch, Alison. Spike mostly prefers not to have women on the team, due to... attrition. He tries to be in two places at once, protecting them, Gary says—Gare's been around longer'n me—but that's what I hear. Anyway, no women other than her since I've been on board. Rain brought her back from England. Visiting his Aunt B, you know, after settling nixies in the Lake District. Anyway, there she was, and for Rain it was like Dante clapping eyes on Beatrice. He brought Alison here, and by the time Spike got home, which is, like, almost never, she was settled in, and a big asset to the group. This was her workspace." Dan nodded
"What happened to her?"

"Vamp gang got her. She was pregnant." Dan's face shut down. "I liked her, and Rain was... well, don't bring her up to him. He's healing, but he still can't talk about her." He was silent for a moment, and then said, "It's good you're going to be part of the group. We need a witch." He brightened. "Want to see the garden?"

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Her country-bred eyes looked upon a magickal sight.

Dan seemed to enjoy Tara's amazement. "Like it?"

"I love it!"

"We call it 'Oz.' At the back of the deep lot was a shady grove of bamboo, with a tinkling fountain running into a manmade pond. A shadowed path ran along the west wall, a latticed trellis heavily hung with wisteria, and shade-loving lily of the valley edging the path below. Closer in, soulful violet blues—asters, Russian sage, and salvias ringed the lawn, but a surprising amount of sunny open space in the middle lawn. "He thought you might want to change things, put in herbs—"

She nodded, visualizing it. "I'd love an herb garden—ingredients for my spells, and cooking."

"He wanted to give you a canvas to work with." Dan made an expansive gesture.

Tara looked up at an avocado tree, tall enough that you could pick its fruit from the kitchen window above. She laughed with delight.

Dan smiled at her. "You'll have to fight the raccoons for them."

"There are raccoons in the City?"

"You'd be surprised. You hear them, and cats at night. They go after the koi in the pond, too."

She shook her head, amazed, and looked up at the back of the house. "What color do you call that?"

"He calls it baby blue, but it's more of a dusky blue."

Tara turned so Dan would not see the tears that threatened. She got hold of herself, swallowed and struggled to speak normally. "It's a lovely place. I could be happy here, with Spike, and all of you."

She shivered. "Let's go in. I'm cold."

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In the parlor, Gary had brought coffee on a tray, with cream and sugar, a plate of sandwiches, and a big steaming dish of Joe's Special, which only Rain ate. Dan built a fire in the parlor's grate, and they sat at the table and ate and talked strategy. There was so little time.

Rain looked up from his third helping. He was young and his hunger was huge. "Where is Spike? He coming to this shindig?"

Tara told them of the looped time, the secret of the two Spikes, or rather, of Spike and William and why William stayed away. She wished she could believe that the First Evil's threat was the reason William avoided her.
No one questioned her.

Chapter End Notes

A couple of notes:

Lest you think I've Mary-Sued Spike's house and garden, it's a composite of a couple of places I lived in San Francisco.

Saint Sabrina's Parlor in Purgatory is a shop in Minneapolis, not San Francisco, but I like the name so much I stole it.

A final note: Joe's Special, not Rice-a-Roni, is the real San Francisco treat.
Rain said, "Where is Spike? He coming to this shindig?"

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Where was Spike? Spike—or William, as he was now forced to think of himself—sad old duty-struck William was facing up to the inevitable. Every day was a fucking dogfight. Barred from the Sunnydale Hellmouth and the impending apocalypse, he was still on the trail of the latest Cleveland demi-big bad, a creature curiously named Hungerford, a name that afforded William grim amusement and informed his plans for it. He would feed Hungerford to himself, up to the armpit, when he caught up with him. Hungerford would hunger no more.

But until then, Hungerford was eating children: latchkey kids, truants, and teens trysting in darkened parks. Birdie's intuition, that pregnant women and children were especially vulnerable in this apocalypse, had been spot-on. Dogged as a hound homing in on a scent, William was following a lead, but part of his mind, as always, was thinking of Tara and what kind of life he was offering her.

During the days in Westbury just prior to and following Eliza's funeral, he had held himself at arm's length, enjoying Tara with the maddened sense of a starving man scenting dinner cooking. Her hair, her skin, her arousal. He would allow himself to come close, senses alert for the old tingle he remembered, the First Evil's trigger that signaled his old bloodlust. He'd hoped for a few seconds warning to hurl himself away, and then appalled at his selfishness in endangering her, would withdraw, holding himself apart from her.

Tara had seemed to understand, and could communicate her love and longing for him from across a room, without chastising him for his distance.

Some lover—endangering the beloved! He could only give thanks, to Whom he knew not, that he had not hurt her.

Now he was deep in the tunnels beneath Cleveland's Industrial Flats, wading through putrid water sheened with oil and stinking of chemicals. Still trailing the monster, he calculated his age to take his mind off the revolting smell. He groaned soundlessly. In the grand scheme of things, personal fulfillment, romantic love, a few weeks of bliss was inconsequential.

It was not that she was beautiful—frequently she was not. She had jug handle ears. He remembered teasing her, tickling her, her soft torrent of giggles collapsing into a snorty laugh, and the lovemaking, hot and sweaty or tender and slow, that would ensue.

This wouldn't do. He pictured her in middle age, large and soft, her pillowy lips pulling her face down into saggy dumpling cheeks, breasts drooping, her delectable rounded bottom collapsing into a flat middle-aged butt.

It didn't matter. There was nothing in him she did not satisfy. The only thing that would save him, and incidentally her, was his love for her.

He forced himself to remember the last human mistress he'd had, back in the early 80s. Middle-aged, but drop-dead gorgeous. He feared that like her, when Tara felt the first chill breath of old age, she would plead with him to turn her.
What mistress was it? Oh, right. Shawn, the siren secretary. The reason he'd sworn off human mistresses. He had wondered why she was out so late. Her boss should have sent her in the company limo, or at least put her in a cab, but she had been waiting for a passing taxi. A vamp gang had sampled her, passed her around without draining her, and they were about to drag her away, no doubt to abuse her further at their lair, when William had spied them.

"Drunken, jovial tourist" was usually good protective coloration. But no, this time one of them sensed a fellow creature. Not all vampires possessed this ability, but the look of recognition for another vampire was unmistakable. So, "drunken, jovial monster" would have to do. Weaving, he reeled up to them. "Here now! Sharing's fair. You've got the doggie bag. Give me a taste," he coaxed, before exploding in an angry buzz saw of fists and fangs. He'd taken all six out, and then turned to the terrified woman. She had cowered by a street lamp, unable to stand, and flinched away from his approach. She'd all but hissed at him, looking like a lioness brought to bay with bared teeth and 80s big hair. She fumbled one of those newfangled mobiles, big as Maxwell Smart's shoe phone, but her hands shook too badly to hit the numbers. She pitched it at him, raising a welt over one eye.

She had been too traumatized to listen to explanations or reassurance, so he'd simply plucked her up and taken her to hospital, got her seen to, and faded into the distance before he was asked his relationship to her.

She must have figured him out, for she tracked him down later, and begged to be allowed to join his little club. Her boss at Wolfram and Hart, displeased with her squeamish dislike of her more unsavory duties, had set her up.

Funny how evil creatures like himself, or even morally shaded ones like Shawn, could be attracted to the light, just as good ones sometimes go to the dark side. Spike, sad to say, was Shawn's light. She could not fight, but she had a facility for languages, and though on-line research was in its infancy, she knew computers and could track down prophecies and cross-references like the champion she became.

They hadn't been lovers at first. Spike had tried to remain celibate while Tara was on earth, now a toddler in Alabama, and he'd long since forgiven himself—somewhat—for the fact that he hadn't been faithful in his long journey back to her.

Shawn had lasted three years. Oh, he hadn't loved her, any more than he'd loved Dee or the one before her. The bootlegger's mistress with the rumble seat? Or—

It was too much. How could he approach Tara and say, "I could not love thee, dear, so much loved I not comfort more." He guessed he felt guiltiest about Shawn. His other mistresses, as infrequently as he took them, were mostly demons, chosen for their value to him in the mission. Like Lita, the madam of the Tenderloin demon brothel, too fastidious to sample her clients, who would feed him information in exchange for his not-inconsiderable sexual favors. Demon lovers didn't seem to count against him as much as a human mistress did.

You'd think he could have refrained from 1980, Tara's birth year, on. But twenty-two years was a long time to remain celibate.

The lovers weren't the worst of it. He knew the kind of creature he had become. Not because of the soul. He was no Angel, brooding about his sins. He simply knew himself for what he was. Not a boyfriend with cold hands. Not an uxorious husband.
A killer.

Once he and Rain had tracked a Windigo near the Quetico wilderness. William was no outdoorsman, and native cannibal spirits were far outside his experience, so he rode shotgun while trusting Rain to track the creature. (Stout lad to have on board, William had finally realized. How parochial he'd been to think that evil was only urban). It felt good to let someone else be the expert for once, and the Windigo was an interesting departure from his usual sort of monster. One got stale from the day-in, day-out vampires and garden-variety demons.

William had disliked the chill and misty north woods, and a fragment of song flitted through his mind: *I'm sick of the trees... take me to the city*, but he had long since schooled himself to ignore his physical comfort. Comfort, except that which could be found between a woman's legs, was unimportant.

To take their minds off the endless frozen trek, Rain had told William about the legend of the Windigo, except that it was no legend. It was real, and it was eating a path through the Saulteaux and the pulp cutters in the north woods.

They'd trailed the monster to a decimated logging camp, body parts lying in crimson splashes that were visible even in the moonlight. Rain had finished his story in a whisper, "You want to kill the Windigo, you have to become it." It had begun to snow, and heavy wet flakes lay on Rain's black hair before melting from his heat. They stood outside a cabin at the periphery of the camp, a bloodstained trail leading to its only door. A slurping noise, as though marrow were being sucked from bones, had come from within. *Hoka hey, it's a good day to die.* Rain's eyes had held an anticipatory glitter, matched by the blade of his drawn Bowie knife.

"Not yet. Not this time," William said, laying a restraining hand on the boy's arm. "Me, I'm already a monster." He had grinned without humor. "Besides, I don't want your auntie coming after me." He had shaken off an unbidden memory of Ann and Charles' son, young Will. He added, "The thought of her pissed-off at me makes a Windigo look tame."

Rain accepted his elder's decision. William was his leader. He had withdrawn to let William go in and... eat the creature's frozen heart.

To this day, a part of William felt that he'd never become warm again.

William shuddered, shook off his brooding and returned to the present, but could not but feel a stab of anger at the injustice of this. What was the grand plan the First Evil had had for him? Was sorting out this paltry evil in Cleveland all he was good for? He did not count Hungerford as more than middling evil, its baby raping notwithstanding. It didn't represent danger on a global scale. Meanwhile, his beloveds—Tara, Buffy, and the bloody Scoobies—were sitting geese. William thought he detected more of the Divine's hand in this. There was irony in his dogged devotion to this mundane duty, like Sisyphus and his rock, while his beloveds' goose cooked on the real Hellmouth. He'd sort out Hungerford, then see if Giles and the coven hadn't found some foolproof way to defuse his trigger for good, before the imminent Sunnydale blow-off. William might not be able to ride off into the sunset with Tara, but he was damned if he couldn't protect her while she turned the chits into slayers, and his other self brought the house down.

Once this was over, he would explain it to Tara. Let her down easy. No women on the team. He'd learned his lesson—first Shawn, and then Rain's woman, that Allie that the lad had brought over from England. She'd been the picture of her great-great-grandmother Penelope. No more women on
board! It wasn't p.c. of him, but there it was: he wasn't a p.c. bloke. He could hear Tara's objection: "What—I can't join? No girls in your tree fort?" Her imagined voice was warm and indulgent.

He shook it out of his head. He would not lose her in the way Allie and Shawn had been lost.

The lads had each other. Well, Gary and Dan did. Rain would get along. None of them would be on the team if they couldn't fight like demons.

Close, now. According to the tracking amulet he carried, he was nearing Hungerford's lair. William moved through fetid hip-deep water, slowing his steps to minimize the chance of being overheard as he approached. After several abortive tries on Hungerford's life, or unlife, William was too near to miss again.

The tracking amulet was a prize he'd taken from a greater prize still: Hungerford's closest associate, a female vampire named Delilah. William had been in deep cover, and had been mistaken by her as one of the vampiric lowlifes infesting Cleveland's red light district. Cooing like a lovesick dove, Delilah had allowed herself to be picked up, and had confided to William that she was lonely. Her value to Hungerford had been in her ability to attract children for his delectation. She'd been pretty in an obvious way, with huge blue eyes, and she reminded William uncomfortably of Harmony. But Delilah had lacked Harmony's daffy near-innocence, and had no loyalty to her current boss. She had allowed William to sweet-talk her into his bed, where he won her trust with mattress-pounding sex and insincere promises of ensconcing her as his consort when Hungerford had been deposed. Queen of Cleveland—what woman could resist? He snorted soundlessly, remembering. Predictably, she had caved, and coughed up the ensorcelled tracking device.

For her pains, he'd dusted her. He'd wrestled briefly—all of ten seconds—with the thought of her salvation. A soul? He hadn't the time to see about getting her one, and at the thought of her with one, his eyes rolled. She had been petty and vindictive, over and above her acquired demonic cruelty. As a human she had been an au pair with designs on her employer's husband and no regard for her young charges. Indeed, before she'd been killed and turned, they had been her first victims. William couldn't imagine her living with the memory of procuring for Hungerford as she had. Better to send her to the next world, to seek what hope that even such as she might find.

William hadn't wasted much time on remorse. He couldn't afford to be betrayed, and he knew from personal experience with her, Delilah excelled at betrayal.

Wrong turn here. Damned amulet must not be calibrated right. William was thigh-deep in water, and transferred his cigarettes and a small plastic pouch to the breast pocket of his tee-shirt. Neither the broadsword sheathed over his spine, Blade-fashion, nor the stakes in his waistband would be hurt by the water.

He shook the amulet, rinsed it, and consulted it once more. That way. He veered down another tunnel, lower and deeper. Waist-deep now. William remembered when he and his group had gone to the movies a few years back. Some local evil had been quashed, and they were celebrating. It was Dan's turn to choose (Gary leaned toward martial arts movies, but Dan went for those fantastical good vs. evil shoot-'em-ups, and William felt vicarious enjoyment of Dan's innocent bloodthirstiness.) Lad had picked Constantine. They all shared an ironic enjoyment of movie depictions very like their own supernatural adventures, and they had smiled at the audience's thrills and chills. But William had snorted at the main character's efforts to earn Heaven. Not that William believed in a storybook Heaven! Or even if there were one, it was not for the likes of him.

While hunting another exotic monster several years back, Der Golem, his path had intersected
another do-gooder on its trail. Very X-Files, that had been. A mad old rabbi, Benjamin by name - more than little obsessed on the subject of monsters - had been on the case with William that time. (Except for his lads, William still preferred to work alone, and the old git was more hindrance than help, but the man had not been good at taking hints.) Benjamin had later asked him that very thing: What motivated William—reward or absolution? William was usually not introspective, and annoyed with the question coming at the time it did. He had been simultaneously trying to ungoo the soles of his favorite boots, stuck to the pavement as they were, while carrying the wounded man to hospital. He’d finally flagged down a taxi, and had loaded the bleeding Benjamin into it. As he tried to say good-bye, Benjamin had grabbed William's lapels and dragged him into the cab with him.

"I think I have you pegged." As they rode to the hospital, Benjamin had told a parable, which had embarrassed William no end, having been told in the presence of the taxi driver:

"A very good man, a man of God," Benjamin began, losing William already.

"Well, that lets me out—" William had interrupted, thinking to change the subject, but it was not to be.

Benjamin went on as though William had not spoken. "—who'd served God all his life, heaved a rebellious sigh as his wife pressed her starving child to her bosom."

William's stomach had rumbled. He hadn't eaten in a while, and between killing the golem as he had, his blood being a bit 'up,' as it were, and the man bleeding beneath the pressure bandage William had applied, all combined, making him grind his teeth in massive irritation.

Benjamin continued the parable, "A voice thundered in his ear: 'Your portion in the next world is lost!'

'It matters not,' the man said joyfully. 'The thralldom of reward has gone; henceforth I serve God as a freeman."

"Um, right," William had said, rolling his eyes. "You've got me pegged." He had delivered Benjamin to hospital and saw that he was tucked up, and then he had left without saying goodbye. Later, though, he had thought about Benjamin's words.

It wasn't exactly a burning bush (which anyway would have been more William's style to piss the flames out, rather than heed the words). But there was that... doing the right thing because it was right, with no thought of reward... but what was missing was belief.

William had a secret. He'd never told a soul, not even Tara, but he thought God might... give him a break. Not because of any intrinsic worth in William, not even the "dying to save the world," which, although William knew was not without value, was partly motivated by what he'd told Buffy on the Hellmouth—wanting to see how it came out. He'd never been one to walk out of a movie before the end. No, if God existed at all (which William doubted) it might just be that He was that kind of guy. Let him off for the hell of it. Give him a pass.

Once, William had hoped for reward. A happily-ever-after with Tara. Now, (that Pavanne's "hell" that yawned before him in his brief Wolfram & Hart day he recognized as a deception, a ploy to unman him, a key player) the best he hoped for was annihilation.

Rest.
So it was not a reward, but William's integrity that made him continue. Respect, especially self-respect, was huge. Buffy's belief in him was where it had started. He had a wry thought of the line in *Tom Sawyer*, about the women they kidnapped always falling in love with them. But that hadn't happened, no matter what the Slayer had said. He still did not believe her last words to him on the Hellmouth. He wanted her *out*! She had too many responsibilities to indulge in this operatic: "I love you—let's die together." His last words to her were meant to be instructive. A more concise: "No, you don't; now *live*—get the hell out of here and be a mum to your sister."

Angel's decision to leave the Slayer was less plangent. "A normal life"? What was that? Poof had made a bad bet there. A Slayer as a lover made perfect sense. "A consort battleship," as Shaw had said. Her light to his dark. Not that she was all that light! In William's opinion, Buffy had never accepted this. She and Angel would have made a good team, if not for the poof's infernal paternalism and the largish stick up the Slayer's ass on the subject of vampire lovers.

William briefly toyed with the idea of going to Sunnydale and taking the cup from Spike, letting him ride off into the sunset with Buffy... to where? Perhaps to LA, to live with Angel? The thought of the three of them, together, had certain symmetry, and would suit her inflamed Slayer libido.

Naaah.

It was all smoke. He hadn't made her happy, and the "cup" that awaited Spike would be the making of him. He would learn that even though it could not make up for the thousands killed in his first go-round as an evil monster, dying to save the world did count for something. It had to.

Buffy could work out her own destiny. If shoe-shopping in Rome and dating The Immortal suited her, who was he to argue?

Close now. From wading neck-deep in water smelling revoltingly of rot and petrochemicals, pushing himself along with the toes of his boots, the water now grew shallower, his boots made a sucking sound as William slogged through the muck. He was forced to remove them. Bare feet were quieter, if slipperier.

The amulet, laying quivering on the surface of his palm, turned itself like a compass needle, pointing to a side tunnel William had always missed on his previous forays. This time, he would not miss.

The tunnel sloped upward and ended in an arras covering an opening. Scrolly letters spelled

*All Hope Abandon, Ye Who Enter Here.*

Cute.

William paused outside the arras, peering through the moth-holed fabric into a goth lair, festooned with cobwebs, chains, and torches, as unlike William's own cozy hobbit hole as a sump pump from a Marin hot tub.

William scanned the room first for signs of life. Hungerford's most recent victim, splayed upon a table, was clearly not in the "alive" category. William tamped down instant incandescent rage. In a few moments, he would unleash it upon the creature sitting with the back of its orange head to him, sucking its teeth.
Good. No back door, no way out. The monster was his. Quietly, William moved the arras aside and slid in.

William circled slowly, getting the long-awaited good look at... what?

An auguste clown, more John Wayne Gacy than Emmett Kelly. This called for a Buffyesque quip. He'd always admired her style. The creature sat with its eyelids lowered coyly, still sucking its teeth, a small smile half-covering yellow fangs.

William had expected more of a fight. Or any fight. That Teutonic bombshell back in the 30s—the Sunnydale would-be big bad sent by the Austrian Sunday painter—now there had been a fight. Made the long wait tracking her worthwhile. A consummation.


William raised his stake.

Hungerford was still sitting, picking its teeth with a small bone. It gave an inane giggle as William slammed the stake home. It didn't exactly dust, as a proper vampire should. (Small wonder—it probably wasn't all vampire, given its limited ability to go about in the daytime, all the better to prey upon children. William had theorized that it was some daylight-tolerant demon that had been killed and turned, but that was all moot now.) William watched with fascinated revulsion as it liquefied, melting into a gluey black goo that somehow suited its Rust Belt chemical stew surroundings.

Then, the tarry ooze trembled, Jello-like, reassembling itself Claymation-fashion into the appearance of Hungerford, complete with red striped clown suit. William's stomach lurch as it turned to him, giving the ludicrous ruffled suit a final prissy smoothing. It adjusted the rubber flower at its lapel and gave another fey giggle. "Whee! I thought you'd be forever about it! Don't you know there's an apocalypse going on?"

"The First Evil, I presume?" The lurch in William's stomach gave way to a sickish sinking sensation.

That daffy voice: "You've got me pegged!" and the steam-whistle wheee! again.

"Thought it was a little too easy." William felt an unpleasant sense of what he thought of as vujà dé, or "I have fucked this up before." This sensation was thankfully less frequent as the years went by, since he had (or thought he had) learned to think things through. "Thought you had places to be, since as you say, there's an apocalypse goin' on." With real curiosity he asked (although he didn't expect an answer), "Does it tax you to be in two places at once?"

Sure enough, The First Evil sidestepped the question, saying, "Thought you were a key player?" The girlish giggle grew into a sputtering laugh that sounded like a fruity Bronx cheer. The foolish clown figure morphed into the austere image of Eliza, saying, "You have proved yourself an admirable person. I'm very pleased...proud, really proud—to be allied with you."

William shook his head, as though to shake away his confusion. He'd been had again. Backpedal—need to salvage this. Eliza's image morphed into that of wild-eyed, about-to-be-dead Warren, saying, "You want to be the boss? You can lead it. I had my turn, and it didn't go that well. I don't mind. You can do it."

William's jaw jumped and he said, "I don't want to lead. I'll leave that up to the Slayer, who incidentally is about to fry your baby-rapin' ass. Her and my other self—"
The First Evil pulled a shocked face. "But they're delicious!" he protested in a scandalized tone, before morphing into the dark beauty that had been Drusilla, saying, "As well you know, my darling!" Her preternaturally long tongue described a complete circle, removing the vampiric equivalent of a milk mustache, in this case, baby blood smeared on her scarlet lips.

William's stomach lurched again, but he fought to keep his voice level. "Since it's clear that this was all a smokescreen, why don't you just bugger off to Sunnydale? I'll be joining you soon."

"You wish," the First Evil snorted. "You're not young enough or tasty enough." It morphed into William's bad old self, back when he first came to Sunnydale, saying, "I'm a veal kind of guy; you're too old to eat... but not to kill," before morphing back to the goofy clown persona.

"'Joining you' in the 'sorting your sporty striped ass' sense—" William began, but the clown barged on as thought William hadn't spoken.

"Places to be, children to eat. Your 'friends'—delicious, most of 'em. All those young girls, mmm, mmm—your witch isn't up to that 'empower-the-potentials' spell, by the way—but I plan on having her for dessert. You can help me... if you don't mind 'sloppy seconds'." Warren's smug mug resurfaced, leering, and he gave William a wink of complicity. "There's a veritable maternity ward there—the squaw and the Watcher's wench are both bigging."

Before he could stop himself, William had launched himself at the First Evil, sailing harmlessly through it, of course. He landed and rolled, springing to his feet and whirling to face it.

"Fooled you." The First Evil reappeared behind William, saying with relish, "Children to eat..." It sucked its teeth and added meditatively, "Of course they're all 'His children'," it said, lifting its eyes ceilingward in a mockery of reverence. It gave another titter. "I'll enjoy them all, and thank you for helping me."

"I'm all done helping," William said tiredly. "Why don't you toddle off? You're beginning to bore me. 'Course, that may be your evil plan, in which case, it's working brilliantly."

"Better hurry," the First Evil advised. "I'd help with travel arrangements, if I actually wanted to, you know, help. But it's a long way. How to get there?" The question was rhetorical, but it morphed briefly into a Latino dwarf, exclaiming, "De plane, boss, de plane!" and then into a lanky, coonskin capped American frontiersman, drawling, "Keep your powder dry, pilgrim." For a final touch of the surreal, Daniel Boone melted into a pudgy cartoon Charlie Brown, saying plaintively, "How can we lose when we're so sincere?"

It vanished like an old telly that had been switched off, its picture narrowing to a line, then a dot, then disappearing with an absurd pop!
With curled lip, William looked down at the damp spot that was all that remained of Hungerford. Disgusting though it was, its brief reappearance as the First Evil was disconcerting, but not overly upsetting. William knew the First Evil excelled at psychological warfare, but the real war was about to begin in Sunnydale. Its brilliant plan to tie him up here, settling these "lesser" evils in Cleveland, was at an end. Now there was no time to lose, but William allowed himself one long look at Hungerford's last victim, the dead child.

She was female, barely pubescent. Consumed and then discarded like a crisps packet. Due to the inroads made by Hungerford's yellow teeth, her gender hadn't been immediately evident to William during his altercation with her killer, but now, looking at her, he could see she was female, a little younger than Dawn. He felt an overpowering burst of sorrow. No, it was nothing he and Dru hadn't done. Hell, he himself! Another face arose in his mind's eye: a different little girl, eyes wide with terror, tears etching clean white lines down cheeks dusky with coal dust. No. He had no right to be squeamish.

He needed to bring the body out of the tunnels and see that the parents were informed. William could not imagine the parents' pain. His human self had gone to his death a virgin and thus childless, but—Stop it! No time to dither over one dead child, when they were all going to die if he didn't get to Sunnydale posthaste. He cast a wholly unnecessary glance at the ceiling. He knew it was now morning, and though Cleveland enjoyed more than its share of overcast days due to pollution and proximity to the lake, there was no guarantee William could travel with safety. Even if it were night, getting to the airport and booking a flight, or even flying himself, would be problematical. Westcott monies had paid for a little Piper, which he'd learned to fly with the help of a private tutor who understood William's flammable nature. He'd flown himself a few times—night flights—but it was properly his time to work, not indulge in a rich man's pastime. Even if he felt calm enough to fly himself, which he did not, he was sure that in post-9/11 America, Homeland Security would take a dim view of his tearing to the airport and taking off without a flight plan. He didn't fancy getting shot out of the sky.

No. There was only one solution.

With a shudder like a feather along his spine, William remembered the First Evil's final taunt: "Keep your powder dry." (How much did it really know? It knew about the plan to empower the potentials!) As ever, William was not a fan of magick, but this was an emergency. With rising urgency, he unpocketed a waterproof pouch Birdie had given him a couple of years back. (She had reassured him that it wasn't really magick, just a prepackaged travel spell she'd whomped up for him, in case he ever needed to beat feet home in a hurry.)

He shook out the spell-casting sparkly stuff in a one-meter circle and laid a grid like a star chart in its center. He remembered Birdie's instructions: "Use the compass, dummy. Line the grid up north to north, and the pointed end of the stone should face 374757 and 1222450, otherwise you'll wind up in Oregon or Mexico. I'll put it on a sticky note. And set something from home on top, to 'tie' you to San Francisco, so you don't wind up in the ocean! Think of home."

"Like Dorothy?" he'd teased, but privately ended up picking a button from one of the peignoirs bought for Tara, the pale yellow one. It didn't matter. She'd never see it. With resolution, he shook Tara and his distaste for magick out of his mind, and focused on the spell.
Pity he didn't know the latitude and longitude of Sunnydale, but getting to San Francisco would be progress. He took a compass reading, positioned the stone, and laid the candlelight satin button atop it. A portal opened.

He stepped into the shimmering circle.

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The day of the apocalypse dawned fair and warm.

Tara felt a brief moment's disorientation, waking in William's bed. The little flame-colored cat, Willow, snuggled between Tara's breasts and the toasty electric blanket made the bed alcove a haven of heat. Tara nestled deeper, thinking about the previous day.

She had eaten dinner with William's gang (dimpling secretly at the thought of such an agreeable trio of young men being called a "gang"). She knew Rain from the summer before, when he visited his aunt Birdie at the coven, and though Dan and Gary were new to her, their gayness felt familiar and somehow comforting. Already Dan felt like a little brother. Gary was more reserved, but she liked him too. He reminded her of herself, not one to shove his oar in.

Was she really their landlady? That wasn't right—she hadn't earned it. She must make that right, as soon as this apocalypse business was settled. Ha! Perhaps there would be no need, if things went against them. Stop! No negativity. She needed to keep her focus on positive thoughts. She remembered Buffy's speechifying, and a pithy phrase came back to Tara: "In war, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Otherwise you're dead." Tara shuddered, remembering.

She'd pleaded a headache and retired early to William's garden apartment. The door was unlocked, and the little flame-colored cat twisted between Tara's ankles, begging admission.

Almost upon entering, Tara wished once more for the gang's company. As she wandered through the beautiful home William had made for her she shivered. The fog had rolled in, and the big room was chilly. Tara cast a longing look at the huge parlor stove, but it took coal and she wasn't sure how to manage it. In London and on their road trip, William done this for her, and stove riddling hadn't been one of her duties at the coven. In fact, her only duty been to study magick. They all knew she wasn't up to the task. Will you stop? She shook her head to banish negativity from her thoughts.

The apartment was still and grey, and the foggy night air damp and depressing. She had just eaten, but felt a longing for... well, if not for William and a roaring fire, then something hot to drink. The galley kitchen was full of liquor. She spent a full minute trying to pronounce "Laphroaig," then rummaged through the rest of the kitchen. Nothing. Other than some luxury foodstuffs she couldn't identify (except for a bag from Harrod's, containing Belgian chocolate, and inexplicably, a package of tiny marshmallows) there was nothing she wanted. She finally settled upon tea.

The First Evil gets up pret-ty early in the morning, she'd thought, taking the steaming cup to the big bed and turning back the covers. She might as well get a jump on it and go to bed early herself. With creeping dread, she wondered if, in her low spirits, she weren't in for another visit from the First Evil. Now would be the perfect time, damn it.

She thought of Gary and Dan upstairs in their round bed in the tower room. Perhaps she'd left too soon. There had been a "last night on earth" feeling abroad, and if she weren't mistaken, there would be a lot of last-minute sexual activity in Sunnydale. Buffy and Spike had had a definite look about
them, as well as Faith and the high school principal, and Xander and Anya sure needed a bang-up closure to their relationship, if their junior-high level squabbling were any indication. And Kennedy, thwarted of her hopes of seducing Tara, had locked her lasers on one of the Potentials, a Russian girl named Jasminka.

Tara wasn't polyamorous, she only wanted company. Had a puppyish need for it right then, in fact, if she weren't to start yipping with loneliness. She remembered thinking she'd better watch what she was broadcasting, what with that pesky clairvoyance of Dan's. Sure enough, he and Gary came tapping at her door about ten minutes later, calling her name softly.

When are you going to grow up? she remembered thinking with impatience. Well, how about right now? With set jaw, she'd ignored their quiet knock and gone back to bed.

All last summer, and in fact the better part of the entire year had been taken up with studying magick. William provided what information he could, based upon his experiences during the previous apocalypse, and more recently, Xander helped, too, with the second-hand memories of Spike's he possessed, but with Xander's own peculiar “take” on it.

They all agreed: what it boiled down to is that it was different. Would be different. There was no way of telling if they would succeed or fail, and Tara knew—they all knew—that she was not up to it. Her knowledge of the complicated spell was letter-perfect, and though Birdie reassured her that the coven would help channel power, that and Tara's own power would be enough, Tara doubted it.

Birdie had told Tara a parable: The Creator gathered all of Creation and said, "I want to hide something from the humans until they are ready for it. It is the realization that they have the power to do anything."

The eagle said, "Give it to me, I will take it to the moon."

The Creator said, "No. One day they will go there and find it."

The salmon said, "I will bury it on the bottom of the ocean."

"No. They will go there too."

The buffalo said, "I will bury it on the Great Plains."

The Creator said, "They will cut into the skin of the Earth and find it even there."

Grandmother Mole, who lives in the breast of Mother Earth, and who has no physical eyes but sees with spiritual eyes, said, "Put it inside of them."

And the Creator said, "It is done."

Tara disliked Birdie's parables only a little less than Buffy's stirring speeches. She had been dubious, but listened politely. What was she supposed to believe? She'd been warned by everyone that part of Willow's power was derived from the Hellmouth itself, and was terrified that by opening herself up in this fashion, she'd become similarly corrupted. Birdie reassured her that the cases weren't parallel; that she and Willow were different witches altogether, not subject to the same temptations, and that it wouldn't happen, but how could Birdie be sure? Remembering too, the enervation following the Impero Igneus spell she'd used on Angelus, Tara was afraid that casting a spell of this magnitude would be the end of her, but she was young enough that she really couldn't envision her own
Besides, there was Miss Harkness's promise.

On a conscious level, Tara didn't think of the elder witch that often, but felt tonight that Miss Harkness was close. In their last telepathic linkage, Eliza spilled a lot of information, some of it comprehensible, some... not so much. Tara preferred to remember the warmth hidden behind Miss Harkness's austerity, and the love the old woman had shown her. Tara felt for Miss Harkness the same love she felt for her own much-missed mother. As for Eliza's incredible predictions, well, the part Tara gleaned was that Eliza believed that good would prevail. Or she may have wanted to comfort Tara with false hopes, but Tara felt that a woman of Miss Harkness's blunt honesty would not give her soft soap.

As for as that other stuff, those fantastic predictions, well, the old woman was dying. Wandering in her mind. Wasn't she?

In the end, Tara had finished her tea and her musings, and gone to bed. The cat seemed to think it was coming too, and with a cat's large sense of entitlement, was not one to brook "no" for an answer. Tara warmed the bed with the electric blanket, but wasn't sure about sleeping under it. Weren't fields supposed to be toxic? But if it were to be her last night on earth, she might as well be comfortable, so she switched it back on. She pitied William his cold bed. He needed her and she needed him. With a stab of anguish, she pushed down her longing. This was no way to win a war.

The little red cat did a shoulder dive against Tara, turning itself upside down and exposing its creamy belly. It regarded Tara with an "if this doesn't get you, nothing will" look that begged to be petted. Tara crooked a hand under its furry midsection and scooped it up, pulling it close to her. "Kitty, kitty, kitty," she'd whispered over and over. "Kitty, kitty, kitty." The words had an oddly calming effect on her. She sucked in a huge breath and blew out tension. "Are you my familiar?" she crooned to the little cat. "Do you want to be?"

The little cat turned around in a circle and flopped sideways against Tara's arm, massaging Tara's left breast, its clawsvelveted, green eyes narrowed in bliss. In spite of Tara's tension, she was lulled by the cat's kneading paws and hypnotic purr. Her worries slipped away, and she fell asleep.

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Tara awoke early. The day was warm and the fog had already burned off. It would be hellishly hot in Sunnydale.

She could hear two sets of footsteps in the kitchen above her, and dressed quickly. She hooked herself into the corset one last time. She'd either be dead before the end of the day, or she and her allies would get away safely, and like a shed chrysalis she'd toss the hated corset away forever.

Tara thought of the loaded school buses in Sunnydale, parked in front of Slayerette Central—formerly Xander's apartment building. They'd make their final trip to the high school, and if they were lucky, the buses would be their getaway vehicles. With the looped time and their foreknowledge of the imminent destruction of Sunnydale, Tara knew that Buffy saved precious pictures from her mother's home. Tara had her valuables—the jewelry William had given her—under her skirt. She remembered William's words to her in London: "You can walk, but can you run?"

So she put on a sensible knee-length denim dress (this was no time for tangle-foot trailing skirts) and
running shoes she'd brought with her, and trotted upstairs. Gary dished up a breakfast fit for a longshoreman: "Frittata Fredda alla Rustica," he called it, "and dig in!" but Tara could barely eat. The boys ate enough for all of them, and as they were clearing the table Tara confessed, shamefaced, "I'm sorry—that portal I was going to open to Sunnydale...? Would anyone mind if we drove instead?" She managed to end the sentence without a quaver.

Gary's brow furrowed. "What's wrong?" With a look of concern, Dan petted her back, and Rain's dark eyes, usually averted from her, focused on her face with disconcerting directness.

Tara felt herself blushing. "Well, this spell I told you about...?" Chagrined, she felt her face turn even hotter. "I, um, I've never tried it. Tested it, I mean. No-one has, unless you count the other timeline, and no-one here can coach me." She thought of Willow and a tiny stab of resentment, which occurred with less and less frequency, had to be quashed. A stronger urge arose—to confront William—why had he abandoned her? She shoved it down, too. There was no answer to that anyway, so she continued in as steady a voice as she could, "The best we know is that things heat up in Sunnydale around noon, and I thought we could drive. It's early—there's plenty of time. Well, time enough, I guess," she trailed off.

"Sure!" Dan's tone was staunch. "Alison, our other witch—" his eyes darted to Rain's face, and gave him a tiny wince of apology, "—sorry, man—before she died, she saved up her mojo for the big blow-off, too, the last time we had a mini-apocalypse of our own, down on our own lil hellmouth. But that's another story."

"Okay. Good." Tara huffed out a tiny breath of relief, and even laughed a little. "I know the spell, inside and out. I'm just nervous."

"We'll have to double up," Gary pointed out. "The 1800 only seats two."

"Let's take my pickup, too." Rain frowned. "I'd say, 'I'll drive us all,' but I don't want to get stopped with passengers in the truck bed, get a ticket or wind us up in the hoosegow."

"Good point." Dan nodded. "So Gare an' me in the 1800, and you and Tara in the truck. What are we waiting for?—it's four hours to Sunnydale." He grabbed William's car keys from a pegboard on the kitchen wall.

Rain was already at the door, holding it open. Tara led the way. They were off to Sunnydale, to defeat the First Evil or die trying.

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From the magickal portal, William debarked in the spare room of his apartment. It was their erstwhile witch Allie's spell-casting circle, now Tara's room. Would have been her room, he corrected himself, if he planned on any kind of a future with her. Well, yes, her room! It was all hers now, wasn't it? He'd just grab his car and go. He looked around and snorted with bitterness. Good thing he wasn't much attached to possessions. This great wedding cake of a house. He'd made this home for her, and knew he had no part in her life. She could kick the lads out and turn this into a rich girl's playhouse, or keep them, as she liked. She might keep them, though. They were good company.

So what are you waiting for? Grab your car and go! Hellmouth's a-waiting. He closed the door to Tara's room with unaccustomed gentleness and lifted his head. Sucked in a resolved breath. He crossed his living room and opened the door to the tuck-under garage.
His car was gone! The *fuck!* The lads never touched it, well, unless he loaned it to them, as he sometimes did. He'd have a few tart words for the wankers, if he were coming back, which he wasn't. No matter. Only temporarily stymied, he slammed the door and recrossed the apartment. He flung open Tara's closet door and and at its far end, undogged the back door leading to the city's tunnels and plunged into darkness.

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Tara and William's gang made good time. By hugging the coast, they avoided the worst of the Tuesday morning San Francisco-to-Silicon Valley rush, then cut over to 101 at Castroville and really picked up speed. Tara was glad Rain didn't require small talk, and other than one "Huh?" after her faint comment, "This tumbril goes so fast!" they drove most of the way in silence.

They reached Sunnydale at 11:30, to a violent scene of... what? Clearly, chaos, but what it really looked like was a primitive fertility dance. Brandishing weapons, most of the women were shrieking, swaying, whirling, slapping themselves. Dan and Gary exchanged amazed looks, Dan murmuring, "Shades of The Seventh Seal!" and Gary whispering back, "Self-flagellation, anyone?" Tara had a pungent early childhood memory, of being lost in a swamp down south. The mosquitoes had nearly eaten her alive. That was it. The girls—Dawn, Faith, and the Potentials—were beset by some nearly-invisible attackers.

Giles was fanning his knife-wielding hands around Olivia's legs. His voice wild with distraction, he told Tara, "They're elementals, inter-dimensional beings plaguing the women. The pregnant women and the Potentials are getting the... brunt of this. We can't even see them!" He slashed at something on his periphery, getting between it and his hugely pregnant wife.

Over the sounds of shouting Potentials, Tara heard Spike's: "Got one! You little bugger," as he stabbed a sword beside Olivia's wheelchair. He looked up at Tara, nostrils flaring, and said, "Glinda. Not after you, yeah? That's good—grab a pig-sticker and get busy. You can sorta see 'em out of the corners of your eyes—" His attention shifted to Faith. "Southie! Behind you!" Faith whirled and stabbed a foe Tara could not see.

Kennedy shouted, "Tara! Catch!" Hilt-first, she tossed the extra sword she carried toward Tara, who flinched and ducked. The sword hit the floor, clattering past her.

The air was punctuated by the Potentials' squeals. Gary said, "Weapons in the trunk. Be right back." Dan nodding, holding Tara's shoulder.

Giles continued, voice taut, "We seem to have picked them up in transit from Westbury. They're small and don't do that much damage—"

Olivia snapped, "The hell you say!" bending and trying to clutch her bleeding ankles, but she was too gravid.

Giles speared one, and went on, "They're not manlike, or even demonic. They're vermin. They're more like, like—"

"Like bunnies, with big teeth." Anya's voice was tense with revulsion. With a muffled shriek, she smacked her left ankle with one hand and slashed with a machete in her other. She did not connect. Her cry was matched by a higher-pitched squeal from Dawn. Xander looked half-mad, unable to be
in two places at once, but trying to protect both women.

Birdie sat in the center of a circle drawn in the apartment house's big meeting room, surrounded by a handful of the coven members. Her Friedrich stalked about them, his drawn sword sweeping and stabbing, and Rain hurried to join the circle of protection around his aunt, flanking Friedrich on the opposite side. The vermin got into the circle nonetheless. Birdie's voice was high with poorly-suppressed hysteria. "Tara! You drove, right? Good. It's the portal that let them in, somehow. I'm borrowing your circle, trying to find a way to send them back to whatever pestiferous hell they came from, but I can't think straight!" She smacked her thigh. "Missed!" she moaned. A blood-stained patch bloomed through a fresh tear in her skirt. She ruffled the pages of a grimoire she held, lowering her voice and speaking more calmly. "They're interdimensional, and seem only to go after young menstruating women, and well, Livvie and me!"

Tara was was stuck on a word Giles said. Vermin. During their stay in Westbury, William told Tara of Charles' fond boast of the coven's power—something about their repelling an attack by pan-dimensional forces, and winning. She was baffled. Why now could the coven not fend off vermin? True, their forces were split between Sunnydale and the Westbury and Devon covens, but was that all it was? Was it that the powerhouse Miss Harkness was gone? Suddenly Tara understood. Birdie, their new leader, was pregnant and vulnerable, and most of the women, who, like women the world over, when housed together found that their menses had became synchronized. It was that time of month, and this demoralizing attack, minor though it might be, was the last thing they needed before their showdown with the First Evil.

Birdie hugged the grimoire to her pregnant belly protectively. "How the Potentials can fight with these, these... Well, they'll have to!"

Buffy had just come in, catching the tail end of this. She crouched and stabbed, with a stake which appeared from nowhere. "Gotcha, you little devil." She straightened, a grey glob hanging from her stake, shimmering in and out of visibility. With a grimace, she flung it against the wall, where it smacked with a wet sound, sliding down the wall and disappearing. She shouted, "Potentials, listen up! We'll have to fight in spite of these... distractions. That's all they are—they're nothing, compared to the übervamps!" In an undertone she said, "Tara, you ready for the big spell? You'd better be."

"I am." Tara lifted her chin, and spoke with a confident calmness she did not feel. She changed the subject. "These interdimensional critters—I think it's a reproduction thing. It's why they're not bothering me, since I can't have children."

Buffy nodded slowly. "That makes sense: young, fertile women, and pregnant women. It's the First Evil, going after children—"

Giles put in: "—and those that give birth. But we knew that—" His helpless look at his wife's bitten legs was tormented.

Spike interrupted, his voice flat, "It's about the blood."

His eyes met Buffy's, and he and she exchanged a look and a faint smile.

For Dan's benefit, Tara whispered, "There was this other apocalypse— with this hellgod—" She shivered, remembering.

He whispered back, "A god? Like The Iliad? Pretty unfair with gods intervening like that. Hey, I thought this was your first apocalypse!"
"The first in my right mind." Tara set her jaw.

Dan squeezed her shoulder, as Gary returned carrying weapons and two black flak jackets from the trunk of the 1800. He gave one to Dan and zipped his own up. Dan put his on.

"Don we now our gay apparel," scoffed Spike, eyeing them.

Dan lifted one eyebrow, but did not rise to the bait. Tara had wondered what William's gang would make of Spike. She'd coached them not to show surprise, warning him that this was not their Spike, but she could see their fascination with him. He was their boss, their friend. Or would be. He'd saved their lives, and yet he didn't know them.

Andrew, who had just sidled up, said in a lofty tone, "They're dressed in the height of fashion. See?" He nodded toward a black Humvee pulling up behind the last of the three parked Sunnydale school buses. Two military types, a man and an Amazon-like woman, climbed out. They were in black-ops combat gear.

Xander grinned, calling to Buffy, "You wanted 'more muscle.' Well, here it is. Riley! Hey, man." He gave the latter a friendly punch to the shoulder. "Sam! How was Tibet?"

Sam spoke first: "Xander! It was busy, but I wouldn't miss this for all the—" as Riley added, "Hey, Xander. Good to see you!" Riley looked past Xander's shoulder. "Spike," he said with icy politeness.

"If it isn't the enormous blood sachet," was Spike's equally pleasant rejoinder. "No holes, I see. Yet."

Riley and Spike exchanged cool stares, while Sam gave Spike a puzzled look, and an inquiring one to her husband, as Buffy came over to greet them. "Guys! Thank you so much for coming, we need all the help we can—"

Andrew's eyes grew round. A little VW Bug arrived, and its littler driver emerged. "Jonathan!" Andrew squealed, launching himself at his former partner in crime. They nearly hugged, but stopped and stood about two inches apart, shaking hands and slapping each other on the back.

A third car, affixed with an LA-based auto rental sticker, pulled up behind the Bug. Squinting in the California sunshine, a buttoned-down type, the formality of whose tailored suit all but screamed "British," approached the front of the apartment building. Tara showed him in.

Giles looked up, amazed. "Cedric! I haven't seen you since the Watcher's Academy!"

"The oddest thing, Rupert. You'd think prophetic dreams would be something we study, not experience! I felt I had to be here, somehow..." The man shook his head.

Jonathan stopped pumping Andrew's hand and looked up. "I know. Me, too. I risked, well, a lot, coming here—" he gave Andrew a shamefaced look "—but I couldn't stay away."

"It's okay. It's okay," Andrew reassured Jonathan. "I mean, I don't think all of us are going to make it, so it's good to have your friends—"

"With you while you die? Cheery little bugger," Spike snorted. He turned to Buffy, growling, "Time's a-wasting. Can't you feel it?" The ground had begun to tremble. He shoved out his hand to
Buffy, palm up. "Now you're back from LA, whiffin' of hair gel, think you got somethin' for me."

Buffy looked taken aback, and then withdrew a necklace from her jeans pocket. A heavy glittering gem hung from its center. She started to say, "This is meant to be worn by a champion—"

Spike interrupted her roughly. "Yeah, yeah. Think I know what's required of me. You didn't think enough of me to let me in on your plans, but you underestimated this." He tapped his ear. "Vampire hearin'." His lip curled and he gave Buffy a look that made her drop her eyes and redden. "Didn't have to tell me. I heard enough whisperin' in corners. The closest anyone came to telling me was Glinda, with that 'bedtime story' of hers, but she counted on me not believing her. Didn't you?" He gave Tara one long, level glance, but it gave her no comfort. "I pieced the rest together. It's a good thing the Hellmouth's as weird as it is—no theory's too wild to try on for size, and this one fits best: Time looped, innit, and that's why Glinda is in love with me. Or the other me! There's another me, isn't there?" He looked around at them, from Birdie to Dan to Rain to Gary. "You know me, or the other me, don't you? I can scent friendship as well as fear, and you, and you, and you—you all know him, don't you?"

No-one spoke, but Buffy opened and closed her mouth several times, appearing to have trouble choosing her words. "Spike—"

Spike went on, not letting her speak, "This happened before. You expect me to wear this—" he shook the amulet, "—an' burn up like a cat in a microwave, but I'm not let into your little circle." He lowered his voice and spoke with quiet bitterness. "You let me into your body but not into your confidence." In a normal tone he continued, "Don't worry. I'll do it. Just want you to know I'm on to you all. How could I not know? This git—" he hooked a savage thumb at Xander, "followin' me around for the better part of the year, tried to hug me this morning, all moist an' gooey-eyed." His voice dripped sarcasm. "What could I possibly have done to merit hero worship from Demon Magnet? Bugger used to cordially despise me." With a theatrical shudder, mouth twisted, he finished, "Oh, it's a new world, all right, with no place for me. And you know what?" He gave Buffy and Tara both an elaborate sneer. "When I'm resurrected, if I'm resurrected, I'm not at all sure which of you bints I'm going to hook up with. Or whether!" He spared Xander a scalding look. "Or which boy!"

With a flourish that would have been comical had not his look been so fierce, he snapped the gaudy necklace on, removed his coat, and holding it aloft to shield himself from the sun, stalked out to the last bus and climbed aboard.

Buffy looked after him, her mouth still opening and closing. She started to run after him, but Faith grabbed her by the belt, holding her back. "B! Let him go."

Buffy twisted free and cried, "What happened? What happened?" her voice a piteous wail. She turned to Xander with open mouth and wild eyes. "You know how it's supposed to go. Tell me! What went wrong?" For the benefit of those in the dark, who were practically everyone in the big room, goggling at her, she said, "No time to explain. No time! It's... it's a loop in time, and Xander's got key information about Spike." She turned to Xander, begging, "Tell me!"

Xander spoke slowly, "I think he was chained up too long, his chip wasn't removed soon enough—"

Riley burst out, "His chip is gone?"

"Shut up!" Buffy and Xander spoke as one.
Xander went on, "It's... different. You knew it would be. This time, we had all these Potentials who didn't buy the farm like last time, and moving here, to my apartment house—Spike was de-chipped and detriggered pretty late, you know, and all year we... kind of kept him on the shelf. Didn't let him in—"

"There was a reason! I wanted him to be free to choose—" Buffy cried.

Xander said quietly, his voice was filled with shame, "He's hurt, Buffy. But he's willing to do a 'Samson in the temple'..." Xander looked out at the dark figure hunched on the shady side of the bus. "It's what we wanted, isn't it?" He rubbed his eyes. "I owe him, we owe him, so much," he muttered.

The trembling ground shook harder. Buffy's voice was grim as she addressed the crowd at large. "We gotta go. Now. We're driving. No portals—those interdimensional thingies got in—" she nodded to Birdie, who said, "Amen to 'no portals'!"

Faith, who had been stalking the crowd, picking off vermin, sang out, "I think this is the last of them anyway," spearing an amorphous grey glob, then said, "Wups! No, stick that critter, Robin! Behind you!"

Her lover whirled and struck, another shimmering near-nothing was impaled. Faith hooted in approbation and Robin grinned.

Faith added, "But if you don't mind a piece of advice, B, I wouldn't let any more in. We're got bigger fish to fry on the Hellmouth."

Buffy nodded. "My thoughts exactly. So we're driving. There are three times as many potential slayers as in the looped time previous to this, and you Johnny-come-lately guys, thanks—" she gave Sam, Riley, Jonathan, and the erstwhile Watcher Cedric a grateful look, "—so we have three buses. Giles, you're driving the first, Robin, the second, and Faith, the third. My God, where did the time go? We still need to open the Seal." She raked her fingers through her hair.

Olivia spoke quietly, "Sorry, Rupert. I need to go to hospital." Beneath the wheelchair pooled her broken waters.

Giles whispered, "Oh God." He looked at Buffy. "How far is it to hospital? I know Sunnydale General is deserted, but perhaps if I take the highway to—"

Buffy interrupted, "Giles, we need you. This is an apocalypse, remember? We're all in danger, not just—" she shot Olivia a look of apology, but her tone was crisp.

"Buffy, I'm sorry, but I can't—" Giles' voice was torn, wild fear in his eyes.

Olivia leaned back, sucking in rhythmic breaths, and muttering between them, "Bugger, bugger." Giles made an adjustment to her chair so that she could recline.

Anya spoke up. "Rupert, get her on the bus. I didn't just rain death and destruction in my 1100 years—I know a thing or two about midwifery. Now, let's go!"

"She's right." Buffy turned to Dan and Gary. "You're William's crew, aren't you? Hi. Make yourselves useful—carry Mrs Giles onto the first bus. Jonathan? Grab that sunbathing pallet from the pool out back, to lay her on. Andrew, set up a delivery room in the front of the bus. There's a first aid kit in the hall closet." She looked over the crowd of women. "Potentials, get on the second and third
buses. Now." The milling crowd moved out.

Holding the handles of Olivia's chair, Gary whispered to Dan, "Westward The Women much? Shouldn't we get the wagons in a circle?" Tara hissed, "Hush!" and Dan, holding the chair's small front wheels, gave Tara an apologetic smirk and Olivia a friendly wink. The pregnant woman, sucking in pained breaths between her teeth, did not open her eyes.

In a furious whisper, loud enough for Dan and Gary to hear but inaudible to the laboring woman, Tara said, "When Buffy speaks you jump. You don't understand—if you knew her like we do, you'd be on your desk yelling 'O Captain my Captain' with the rest of us. Just... do it!"

Andrew returned with the requested items, muttering, "Shouldn't somebody boil water?" Giles glared at the three men, as he and Tara strained to hold the bus door wider. He cradled his wife's head as they rounded the corner, passing her and the chair up onto the bus. Jonathan brought the pallet and Olivia was settled upon it, panting and blowing. Andrew gave Anya the first aid kit, a pile of towels, and a questioning look. Anya took the kit and towels, ignored the look, and got busy.

Buffy turned to Tara. "Tara! We're leaving here. Your 'circle' can be in the back of the bus. You and Birdie and the coven, do that voodoo that you do so well. Like five minutes ago! I need to turn these Potentials into the real thing." Buffy handed Tara the Scythe, and turning on her heel, strode away like the general she was and climbed aboard the last bus.

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William pounded through the tunnels, closing the distance from Russian Hill to Lower Nob Hill in scant seconds. He emerged through a manhole cover in an alley near the Stockton-Sutter Garage, and thence to a private machine shop owned by a closed-mouthed Q'iirnor demon skilled in metalwork and magick. "To the Spike-mobile, away!" He kicked the side door open.

There she was, his old love. Privately dubbed his Dark Princess (a name unknown to Drusilla, who, faithless though she may have been, brooked no rivals) William's recovered Fireflite stood somewhat less than resplendent in the dusty filtered sunlight. She was no longer Starlight Black, but now mostly Bondo grey. The Q'iirnor told him that her super-charged V8 motor been repaired and tuned, and William could see the glass been replaced with necromanced windows. (William possessed a flexible morality concerning workaday spells like necromancing windows, enabling him to go about in the daylight as they did). The DeSoto's body, though, was mottled and ugly. No matter, as long as it got him to Sunnydale and his beloveds.

William opened the garage door, avoiding the intruding flood of sunlight, and climbed into the front seat. He started the engine, which turned over with a powerful thrummmm. "Our Lady of Blessed Acceleration, don't fail me now." He shifted into gear and peeled out.

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Though the bus was air-conditioned, Tara felt rivulets of cold sweat run down her back, seeping below the corset, setting up intolerable itching. She ignored it.

She and Birdie exchanged one look, tremulous on Tara's part and reassuring on Birdie's. As they had previously agreed, Birdie and the handful of coven members on board sank into deep meditation, and made a psychic connection with the rest of the coven members in Westbury and Devon. The witches on the bus—Birdie, Althenea, and the rest—sat ringed about Tara, with her in the center, feeling
their energy channeled to her... and a new entity. Tara knew about the secret history of the Slayers, and the origin of their power—as much as anyone could know!—but now she felt the presence of the Guardians. Her palms caressing the Scythe, Tara felt its power, and their power, flow into her. The women, the Guardians. The Shadowmen sought to control this, but they might as well try to control the surging ocean! Taking a deep breath, Tara began to chant in the ancient tongue, her soft voice drowning out, to her own ears at least, the moans of the woman in labor.

The buses pulled up to Sunnydale High School. Tara kept chanting, feeling the power pulling her, as she was borne along like a leaf in a current. Her knowledge of the spell was impeccable, learned by rote, and allowed a part of her mind to hear Buffy rounding up the troops. The newcomers Riley and Sam, William's gang, Birdie's Friedrich, the erstwhile Watcher Cedric, Robin, Andrew, Xander and Dawn were dispatched by Buffy to defend the beleaguered high school from Bringers. Faith and the Potentials followed Buffy inside, Tara knew, to open the Seal and enter the mouth of Hell.

She could hear Giles' whispering to his wife in a urgent undertone, and Anya's tart, "Rupert, get out of here! I've got it under control. Now go!" He left with one frantic backward look, Tara could see. She controlled her breathing, closed her eyes and went on with the complicated spell.

The power lifted Tara, filled her. It was like an orgasm, drawn out for many long seconds. Was this what hooked Willow?—it was compelling! Not since Willow's slim fist filling her, or William's lovemaking, even more powerful, had she felt so full. Full of power, full of grace. Her two lovers, Willow and William, loving her, giving her power. The Guardians, the coven, the Lord and the Lady. With crackling energy like electricity, Tara's hair lifted on either side of her face, like a bird taking flight, kundalini energy traveled up her spine and exploded in a wicked head rush. She finished chanting and collapsed, panting, in the center of the circle.

Kennedy stood at the door of the bus, her eyes glowing with reborn love for Tara.

Tara looked up, sat up with difficulty. "Here!" Tara tossed the Scythe to Kennedy, "Get this to Buffy." Kennedy blinked several times, and closed her open mouth. She took the Scythe and hurried away.

The enervation that followed spellcasting was coming—Tara could feel it, and it would be a mother. But she also remembered a few moment's grace before it would happen, so she made her painful way to the front of the bus.

Olivia was in trouble. Anya's hands were flying, and her prayers frantic as she worked over the laboring woman, muttering, "Locheia, goddess of childbirth and midwives, hear me! Cynthia! Amarynthia! Help me. Help her!"

"What is it? What can I do?" But Tara knew next to nothing about midwifery.

"How the hell should I know? Breech birth, transverse position, placenta previa, placental abruption...? Any of them would be too much for a midwife outside of a hospital setting. I'm not a doctor, I'm an ex-vengeance demon! I don't really think it's any of that, anyway—she's under mystical attack. Can you help?"

Tara thought of her own healing last winter, and the coven's part in it. She looked to the back of the bus, but Birdie and the coven were gone! Tara gasped, "What the—I thought they said 'no portals'!"

"Must be an energy backwash—they're probably back in England with the rest of the coven. Where's a portal when you need one? Oh, crap!" Anya's eyes bugged out and she uttered the last
word on a squeaking note of hysteria.

With one whistling breath, Olivia's head sagged back and she stopped breathing. Tara bowed her head, her eyes filling, but looked up in amazement, to see rock-steady Anya burst into angry tears.

"Oh, I'm stupid. I'm so stupid!" Anya's fist beat on her jeaned thigh. "Damn, damn, damn!"

In hopes of saving the child, Tara sent out her feelers of direct perception, those outside her normal senses, trying to get a "fix" on the baby. Perhaps she could teleport it as she had Warren's bullet or Spike's chip, but she was too late. The child, a little boy, has passed away even before his mother. There was nothing to be done. Both were in the next world. Tara put a tentative comforting hand on Anya's shoulder, but Anya shook her off.

"I'm so sorry, Anya. It's terrible to lose anyone, especially this way. I didn't know you and she were close."

"Oh, we weren't." Anya went on wringing her hands.

Tara was chilled to hear her casual tone of voice, before Anya said with real grief, her voice breaking, "It's Rupert," beating her fists once more. "He'll be devastated, and he'll never never never believe I didn't do all I could to save her."

"Of course he will." Tara tried to lay a hand on Anya once more, but Anya turned away and covered Olivia's swollen body with a blanket. Her movements were jerky, but her hands on Olivia were gentle.

"And I did! I really did." Anya's lower lip trembled and two fat tears rolled down her cheeks. She scrubbed them away angrily.

Tara was confused, the spellcasting lassitude fast catching up with her. She tried to keep fuzziness out of her voice as she asked, "You love Mr. Giles? I thought that you and Xander—"

"Xander?" Her voice was scornful. "Not since last spring. He's got that 'go away, little girl, before I beg you to stay' for Dawn. It's all over them. No, I love Rupert. I've loved him ever since— Say, you don't look so hot yourself. With the big spellcasting, shouldn't you sit down or something?"

Anya was right. Tara felt the wobbling weakness that she had after she set her hand on fire to drive off Angelus. Steam-rollered, she sagged to the floor of the bus. With her last bit of consciousness, she sent out her ka, to see how the battle went. She had to find out how the new Slayers fared... whether or not the empower-the-potentials spell worked.

If they would win.

Tara looked, and in fact was unconscious, but her spirit body flew from her, into the high school, then down to the cavern below. She alit in the only living thing not embroiled in battle: a little brown bat, lost and terrified.

She spent one moment calming the frightened creature, soothing its spirit, and it obliged her by landing upside down on the ceiling of the cavern, hanging by its feet, swinging gently. Through it, Tara watched the churning battle below with sympathy but curious detachment.

In a deafening din, the newly-empowered Slayers fought übervamps with righteous fury. The air
crackled with the sound of slashing weapons and fists pounding against beast, explosions of vampire dust and inhuman growling matched by treble shrieks of rage. Buffy was wounded! ...and arose stronger than ever, but Amanda, courageous, resourceful Amanda was killed, along with half a dozen of the other new Slayers. Through the slashing blades and swirling vamp dust, Tara couldn't make out who they were.

Then.

The amulet Spike wore began to blaze. Amidst the roaring, Tara caught one quip of Spike's: "Holy hot flash, Batman! I mean, Buffy." His eyes shone with manic excitement, and the gem around his neck emitted blindingly bright rays, a light show laserlike in its intensity. By its beams the Turok-Han were cut down like wheat before a reaper, and the cavern began to quake. Buffy shouted to the slayers to evacuate. She and Spike exchanged one last look, their entwined hands alight with a fire no less bright than their love, and finally... Buffy heeded his final instruction to her: to live.

Tara was spared the sight of Spike's second death. Her last fragment of awareness was spent in getting the little bat out before the cavern collapsed. It fluttered into the light, quite literally a bat out of hell.

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The cavern imploded like a house of cards, the crater it made filling and widening. Tara drifted in and out of consciousness, as the bus was boarded by the pounding feet of the empowered Slayers. Over the rumbling of the imploding Hellmouth, fragments of conversation came to her: "I could get used to that!"... "It's the most amazing feeling!"... "Tara... Tara, you okay?"... "Tara, wake up"... "Leave her; it's normal..." "The hell you say!"... "Oh God, Olivia!"... "Rupert, I'm so sorry!"... "Buffy! Where's Buffy?"... "She get out okay?..." "I see her!..." "Drive, drive!..." "She's catching up!..." "So is the crater!—hurry!" More pounding feet, and the bus accelerating over the bumpy, cracking roadway. More voices, notably Anya's acidic: "Rupert, fast is good, but you can be just as dead from a bus accident!"... then, "We're clear! Slow down, we're clear!"

She felt her head pulled into someone's lap and pillowed there. She heard Buffy's voice: "Kennedy, where's Jasminka?" Good, Buffy made it. In her exhaustion, Tara felt a tension that she had not even been aware of, lessen.

Kennedy's answering voice was hard with control, "Minka didn't make it."

All those dead girls. With a spasm of sorrow that she did not have energy for feeling, Tara fainted.

They stopped about a mile outside the Sunnydale crater to count their dead and bury Olivia.

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William hated being stuck in traffic worse than anything. Fighting vamps, Bringers, übervamps, you name it—it was all good fun, but rush hour traffic? An itching and burning in his undead, presumably insensitive, eyes and nose, and to his ADD nature: a Sysiphean torment summoned from the depths of deepest coruscating hell. It took a full four hours to escape the Bay Area.

He finally made it to the outskirts of Sunnydale, and immediately headed for Revello Drive. Buffy's house was deserted—looked as though it hadn't been lived in in months. Like the scene of a vast
slumber party, it was filled with the detritus of teen-aged girls. He gave the Slayer full marks—it made sense to relocate them when there were so many of them. His foreknowledge of the apocalypse and the help he’d afforded the Slayer, made the potentials far more numerous this time around. But where were they?

He hadn't the foggiest, but the high school was a safe... well, unsafe, bet. They'd all wind up there sooner or later. The rumbling ground made him uneasy. William was not a lifelong Californian like Buffy, or even a long-time resident like Tara, and inured to earthquakes as they must be. In fact, he disliked them in the extreme. It was no fun waking up on fire when your bloody window treatments came tumbling down.

Knowing he was late, he circled the DeSoto round, taking it on two wheels, and peeled out to the high school, tires squealing. All along the drive here, and in fact, most of the time stuck in traffic with no air-conditioning, he'd brooded about his reasons for coming. The Slayer had never failed to come through before, not up to and including her own death. Deaths. Not to mention his previous self's not-inconsequential contribution. Perhaps that was it—a conceit? A desire to see himself immolate himself?

No. It was Tara. In spite of his resolve to give her up, he felt a connection to her. He was sure she was in trouble, as were they all. He stepped harder upon the accelerator.

The rumbling grew to a full-fledged earthquake, cracks spidering across the roadway. Reaching the high school, three school buses had just pulled out. The building roof fell in, and the ground opened up. William followed the buses, and could see that Buffy got away to safety. He wanted to cheer. He tried to follow them, but a crack in the road widened into a canyon. He wheeled the DeSoto around and took a side street, parallel to but flanking the speeding buses. So this is what his former self's contribution to the war effort looked like! he thought with pardonable pride. No time to rubberneck, though, or he'd wind up in the crater.

In a line, they sped out of Sunnydale, William's car scant feet ahead of the spreading circle of destruction. With a sudden chill, he remembered Eliza's dire warnings that he was not to be a part of this particular apocalypse. He slowed, but followed still in the buses' dusty wake. What if... what if he were the First Evil's second front? Perhaps that had been its plan all along! God knew it made enough lurid warnings to him. Maybe he'd be the death of them all. Or perhaps it was all smoke? Who knew?

The earth finally stopped rumbling and they were out of the circle of destruction. The buses slowed, too, and stopped within sight of the crater. William pulled off the road a little to the north of the buses, and shut off the engine. He was a couple hundred meters away from them, and the air was thick with dust which had not settled yet. That, the DeSoto's mottled Bondo grey coated with ocher dust, and the patchy sage and chaparral gave him cover from prying eyes. But he didn't give a shit if they found him out anyway.

He watched them troop off the buses, Riley sans Sam. Girl must not have made it. As much as William resented Major Payne's part in this most important of days, he had to pity the man's bereavement. But where was Tara? With horror, William watched the Watcher lost his wife, too. He could hear the man's low cries. Several of the Potentials (or Slayers, he corrected himself) got busy digging. No-one had a shovel, but they used weapons—pikestaffs and axes—and their new Slayer strength to move sand and boulders from the rocky earth.

Where was Tara? Buffy was there, and the Bit, and Xander and Anya. He could see the tiny one
from the nerd trio, but not Andrew. Of his gang, Gary and Rain had made it but Dan was no-where to be seen. No, there he was, helping carry someone.

Where was Tara? William's eyes bugged out to see one other body carried out. He bit off a shout, clamping his jaw to keep from calling out, and Kennedy finally moved aside so that William could see that it was Tara who Kennedy and Dan carried. They laid her gently on the ground. William nearly leaped from the car, desert sunshine be damned, but then saw Tara feebly wave Kennedy away. She was fanning Tara and chafing her hands, but his girl was having none of it. Quit hovering over her, you annoying gnat! he wanted to shout at Kennedy.

Twenty feet away, the body of Giles' wife was laid to rest, rocks piled over the body in a cairn, the wheelchair her marker. After several minutes of respectful silence, they turned to go. William watched his gang, who appeared to have made Tara one of their own, come over to help Tara stand. Kennedy's body language was possessive; Tara's was feebly shoo-ing. As they argued over how best to help Tara—William could hear their squabbling even at this distance—Tara swayed to her feet unaided. She stood, straightened, and a puff of desert wind caught her dress and fanned out her hair. Again she waved off helping hands, but allowed Rain to drape his eagle jacket over her shoulders in a ceremonial gesture, as he and Kennedy stared daggers at one another. Tara was last on the bus, but turned to give one last look at the enormous hole in the earth. As she turned to climb the bus steps her gaze shifted, and William could have sworn she looked right at him.

The last thing he saw as the third bus drove out of sight was Kennedy putting her arm around Tara in the bus's back seat.

The "Welcome To Sunnydale sign" fell over.
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

This chapter is NC-17. Find something else to read if you're not of age.

After the destruction of Sunnydale, William spent most of the summer awash in a sea of alcohol. He emerged in the autumn, subdued but with renewed resolve to fight evil. Determined not to have another *annus horribilis* as he'd had in 1881 when he first lost Tara, he avoided Westbury and the inevitable mention of her by Birdie. Before cutting off all contact with the coven, he was gratified to learn, however, that his other self's immolation on the Hellmouth seemed to have done the trick. Sunnydale was wiped off the face of the earth, and evil, at least evil as it was to be found *there*, was no longer a problem.

There were other fronts, though. In his long unlife, he'd arrived at the opinion that evil was like an unspayed cat, and the ensuing apocalypses its inevitable litters of kittens. You could count on them.

Or in the words of his old compadre Eliza, evil never sleeps.

Except on infrequent business, he seldom went home. He knew Gary and Dan had expected him to pair off with Tara, but he couldn't talk about her. He'd never been one to confide, and rarely discussed personal things, let alone anything as important as the reasons for their breakup. With unusual delicacy, the boys gave him to understand that Tara hadn't taken up permanent residence there, even if it was her home now. On her rare visits to them, they said, she didn't sleep in William's apartment; she stayed in the guest room they'd fashioned from Rain's old room. (Lad had relocated to Westbury, on an extended visit to his aunt Birdie, who, devastated at Fritz's loss last spring, needed family around her in her bereavement). Gary and Dan, taken up with each other though they were, rattled around the big old house like a couple of empty nesters. They urged William to come home.

But he didn't trust them not to wank some "chance" meeting with Tara, so he mostly stayed away. He had a crypt in Colma, not far from Wyatt Earp's, and an old bricked-over fallout shelter three levels below the Russian embassy on Green Street he'd broken into from the San Francisco tunnels. They suited a creature of the night like him well enough.

There was the job, and it provided workaday satisfaction, and he felt a grim, growing excitement in what he thought of as "covert ops" in LA—laying the groundwork to pluck the Black Thorn from humanity's ass once and for all.

It hadn't been as hard hiding his involvement from Angel and Spike as he'd feared. The astute Fred had nearly stumbled upon the secret, but dissembling came easily to William, and it was a mercy that his earlier self appeared in what was virtually a uniform for him: jeans and the inevitable leather coat. With a little peroxide, it was easy for William to "pass" as Spike. Although William's memories of the Black Thorn affair were 120 years old, the buildup to the LA apocalypse progressed without a hitch, or perhaps it was more accurate to say, any hitches encountered were planned by *him*.
He managed to avoid being seen with Spike, and the few times their paths nearly crossed, he hastily decamped. He had a real reluctance of getting in proximity to Spike, and not only for fear of discovery. Who was it that said that it'd cause space and time to implode—Eliza? Perhaps it had only been Marty McFly. No matter.

His thoughts returned to Fred. Back then, with Buffy out of the picture he'd been secretly a little sweet on Fred, as dear and unattainable as Harmony had been... the reverse. With regret, he thought of all he'd done and not done. Back then it'd been his seduction of Harm the moment he'd regained corporeality. The bitterest pill to swallow was his more recent failure to stop Fred's infection by the spores that made her, or her "shell," Illyria's new home. What stayed William's hand was the belief that the white hats needed Illyria's strength in that last fight.

To his shame, Fred's death fell into the "acceptable loss" category.

Originally, William had a horror of manipulating the timeline, but by now, any damage was done. He had no trouble risking himself and there was real ground to be gained. The fiddling, fascinating problems did make him wish for someone skilled in magickal machinations on a world-wide scale, and he found himself missing Eliza. Yes, there was plenty to occupy his mind these days.

It nearly took his mind off Tara.

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In the spring, he got a call from one of his sources, Mickey, his contact in the Chinese community. A pack of Qwieng demons had teamed up with B'tai lowlifes and it'd be a hot time in the old town tonight. Not world domination, true, but ugly, and no place for it in his city.

To learn more, he decided to swing by Mickey's restaurant near SFSU. It was raining like billy-o, the sky the color of slate. No fear of sunlight that morning. He would have driven, but parking there was impossible, so he took the the M train, eying some of the more fantastical get-ups—tats and piercings—worn by commuting students. Kids these days.

The squally weather brought back memories of the day he put Tara away for good. He wished he could forget! The previous winter, remnants of the K'osq cult who'd escaped his mopping-up efforts last apocalypse, had got hold of Alison. Her lover Rain had gone black as iron and torn out searching for her, only to return two days later... no Allie. But by then, William himself had found her and had to break the news ...

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William bent over the dead girl, so like her darling grandmother, Penelope. He'd find them. Make them pay... hurt them like they had Alison. The slash at her throat nearly parted her head from her body. His filling eyes widened as her injuries, too many to count, faded. The gash in her neck healed, and the Technicolor bruising, red and black and blue, melted into the perfect alabaster skin of a vampire.

Stomach turning, he found himself wishing her head had been cut off.

The thing that had been Alison rose, daintily brushing dust off her long skirts. Allie had known she resembled her ancestress and dressed to play it up, a tiny forgivable vanity. God knew William had told her often enough, and there had been was Penny's portrait, Lovejoy's engagement gift to her, still hanging in the great hall of the Grange.
It approached, gait slinky. Where did they learn that? he thought irrelevantly. His Drusilla catwalked like a model, ankle over ankle, and would mesmerize her marks with it, before pouncing.

"Uncle William, why didn't you tell me? You were holding out on me!" She'd stretched like a cat, then rose en pointe, spinning into the alley, a giddy swirl of skirts. "Wait'll I tell Rain!" Her light laughter chimed.

"No you don't." He didn't intend to debate the advantages of being undead with this horror. Pulling his stake, he went after her, a black wind. Unlike Hungerford, she put up a fight, but fledges were easy enough to catch and dust. But then, like Hungerford, she reassembled, the whirling dust reforming itself into the image of Drusilla. "That wasn't nice," it scolded, crooning, shaking a slim finger. "She wanted to share it with her boy, as I did you, my darling. Merry as grigs, we were."

So... the First Evil. He forced himself to stay calm and pricked up his ears. Never knew what it'd drop. Perhaps he'd pick up some new bit of intelligence to pass along to the Slayer.

But the thing wearing Drusilla's face just sang to him, a rhyme remembered from childhood, "Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clements." It danced around him, graceful hands waving, white fingers fluttering, making playful feints toward him with her sharp nails.

William tuned it out, knowing it couldn't touch him. Terror and demoralization were its specialties, but what was its point? He nearly missed the twist on the final lines of the rhyme: "Here comes a copper to put her to bed, here comes a chopper to chop off her head!"

"Whose head?" he roared.

Drusilla's dark beauty morphed into a figure as familiar as his own skin. A taller, fuller figure, with hair the color of ripe wheat. Tara. She gave him a sly half-smile.

The image of his beloved melted into that of an earlier love: Buffy. She wore her Slayer face, stating with grimness, "In war, you have to decide what are acceptable losses."

It was then he understood the First Evil's meaning. Not just its threat to the world, but to him personally. He'd go home, break the news about Allie to the boy, but for himself, he understood that the threat to him would be an attack on Tara, unless he stayed away.

He never told Rain how he'd found Allie. What they'd done to her, to pay him out for the thwarting of their hopes of—what else?—world domination.

Whoever said evil was banal was right.

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William shook himself, bringing himself back to reality. The job, yeah? Back to business.

He got off at West Portal, and followed his nose toward Mickey's restaurant, which bore the improbable name of "Kweichow Koffee Kup," and then a whiff of something else, from a remembered dream—

Tara.
He could scent her on the air, in spite of the rain, food aromas, and the restaurant sign’s animatronic dragon belching realistic-looking smoke. Attar of roses, combined with the smell of her skin and damp hair. His nostrils flared and he changed course, veering toward campus.

He hugged the low wall of the student center, an ugly Mayan temple of a building, and stayed out of sight. There she was! Tara, passing the library, almost unrecognizable in a plastic rain cape over jeans and boots, the hood hiding her face, but her walk was unmistakable. She reached the administration building and entered.

William waited in the shadows. Why was he doing this? This stalkerish behavior? He’d done the right thing by giving her up, hadn’t he? Why the curiosity, or obsession? He’d just give into the craziness a moment longer, no more than a half hour or so, catch one more glimpse, then move along. This was madness, wasn’t it?

With a sense of outrage all out of proportion to the situation, he saw Kennedy pull up outside the administration building’s front entrance. Must have driven up from Hillsborough or whatever rich enclave she’d crawled out from.

Straddling a fancy little red Vespa (which didn't seem nearly macha enough for her) she shrugged out of a raincoat, pulling it up and over her head in a tent-like arrangement. She'd cut her hair and looked like a beautiful boy, all slayerish business. No fluffy Buffy beauty for her. (How he'd admired that lovely/lethal combination in one petite package!) After shaking droplets of water from her sleek dark head, Kennedy pulled a cell phone from an inner pocket and dialed. William hunkered beside a hydrangea bush about thirty feet away, but could hear plainly: "Tara babe? I'm outside."

"Babe"! Bloody bint had a lot of nerve addressing his wife—He stopped, reminding himself that Tara wasn't his wife, and could never be. His bile rose. It had been—he calculated rapidly—about one hundred and twenty years since he'd fought a slayer, but it'd be a real pleasure right about now to rip one's throat out. Especially one particular slayer on a red scooter. He had a sudden image of hefting the thing, its weight as nothing to him in his rage, and smashing it down on—

Tara reappeared, blinking up at the rainy sky, and looked around. William crouched lower to avoid being seen. She paused, shook her head, and hopped on the back of the scooter, pulling the cape's hood over her head and wrapping its sides—and her arms—around Kennedy's waist. They putted away.

To avoid discovery William waited a moment, to give them a head start, then sprinted after them.

They were headed for his destination, Mickey's! He paused in the alley, stalling to give them time to park beside a bike rack. He watched them go inside. A perfect gentleman, Kennedy held the door for Tara.

Though still foggy, the rain died down to a drizzle as William approached the restaurant, and he knew that he might be seen from inside. He stood to one side of the tinted plate glass window, the red neon writing making the mechanical dragon's smoke go red, then white, then red again. He saw Mickey usher them into the dining room, and after a pause William slipped into the vestibule, lurking between a plastic bamboo tree and a coat rack. Tara and Kennedy were seated in an alcove in the rear, though the restaurant was otherwise empty in the post-lunch lull. Even so, William could hear them. They refused menus but accepted tea, saying they wanted to talk for a while.

Teeth grinding, William let most of their conversation pass over him while he drank in Tara's appearance with hungry eyes. What was it about her? She was a pretty enough girl—not outstandingly so—yet she drew him like a lodestone. The wet rain cape she'd left in the vestibule hung beside him, the competing aromas of plastic and warm wet girl filling his nostrils. Now he
watched her take off a jean jacket—not what he thought of as the ubiquitous dyke uniform—no, this
was the jean jacket with the soaring eagle that Rain had put on her after the apocalypse. As she
turned to hang it on the back of her chair, the fabric of her sweater tightened over her breasts,
showing off cleavage... and his mother's rubies! Kennedy watched with appreciative eyes, and
William had all he could do not to leap forward and throttle her.

Tara turned back to Kennedy and began talking, her soft voice indistinct to William despite his
vampiric hearing. His mind churned, his rage at Kennedy turning to illogical anger at Tara's clothing.
Why was she in hand-me-downs? Charles had made her—made them all—as rich as Croesus. It
wasn't the jacket—he knew that that was a gift, hell, an award—based upon the store Rain had set
by that jacket. But the jeans were Gary's, and boots weren't hers. Though to the eye the were
perfectly clean, he could smell residual demon goo on them, even at this distance. Must be the
castoffs of one of the slayers. They looked fetching on her, though: distractingly pretty red cowboy
boots that set off the worn jeans and white top. That at least was new. It was one of those "Marilyn"
tops, worn off the shoulder, that girls who lacked Tara's endowment wore in imitation of that other
bombshell. Few could pull the look off. And speaking of pulling it off—

He got hold of himself. Back on campus, hadn't he promised himself that he'd bring this to a quick
end? He was missing most of their conversation, though, and leaning closer, caught Kennedy's sulky
voice, "I don't see why not. We'd be perfect together."

William's urge to bite the bitch rose stronger than ever, and then he was stunned to hear Tara say:
"No. No! I'm sorry. I've never deliberately hurt anyone before but you're not listening to me. It can't
work, and you know why."

"Fine." Kennedy stood, her chair's legs making a growling sound as she shoved her chair back.
Throwing her napkin down, she stalked out. There was no help for it; she would see him in a
moment. William tensed for battle as Kennedy reached the vestibule, her dark eyes meeting his in
shock. Her reach for the stake in her waistband was reflexive, then she pulled her hand back.
"Spike!"

"Nixon," he replied with a curled lip.

She tensed as though to strike him, then softened, but only slightly. "Or 'William'! Whatever you're
calling yourself. I'd stake you... but I guess I owe you. World-saver." She made it sound like an
insult. "You get a pass this time. The next time I see you, though!" Her voice broke. "Go on then.
She's in there." Her head jerked back towards the alcove at the rear of the restaurant, then she let fly
one parting shot, "If you're not good to her, I will hunt you down like a dog," each word bitten off.
She shoved the door open. The fog had broken and a flood of weak sunlight poured over William.
He jumped back as Kennedy strode out.

He paused in the vestibule, safe from sunlight as the tinted door swung shut. Standing behind
the bamboo, he wondered what—or if—Tara had heard. It was entirely possible to get away, but then he
saw her lift her head. Not just a listening pose; it was as though she were sensing him, a banded wolf
on her radar.

Better get this over with, then. He approached the alcove. "Hello, Tara."

Her eyes grew huge. "William. What are you doing here?" A fuzzy soft focus she'd had was gone.
She looked as keen as a honed blade.

Tara leapt to her feet and hugged him, her arms surprisingly strong. It was eviscerating.

He bore it for a moment, hugging back, then held her away from himself. Her eyes widened and
filled. He gave a tiny shrug, his face hard, and answered lightly, "Doin' good, thanks for asking. But not bein' Keith Richards, I can't pop off to a Swiss clinic every time I need blood. Hi, Mickey." With relief, he gave a cordial nod to the muscular young man approaching with another teacup and place setting.

"Good to see you," Mickey was friendly enough, but he glanced toward Tara, and William understood that the man was constrained in the subject of William's visit.

William waved off the teacup and said, "I wouldn't say 'no' to a mug of AB Neg, or that black beer I had last time...?"

"Xinjiang Heipi?"

"Like I'd know," William snorted. "Still don't speak Chinese, mate."

Mickey grinned. "Coming up."

"Sounds good. Tara?" She had resumed her seat and he'd been avoiding looking at her but now gave her his attention. What could it hurt? A drink for old time's sake, maybe a meal... if the set-to with Kennedy hadn't ruined her appetite.

Her look was cautious. "Tea's good." She refilled her cup with the last of her pot.

Mickey nodded. "Blood and beer. And another pot of tea." For Tara's benefit, he added, "My wife works in the blood bank at Kaiser—sneaks out bags for William. We owe him, big time," as William's waving hand failed to hush him.

Tara nodded, and then her eyes shifted to William's and hardened. Mickey left with one uneasy, sympathetic backward look at William.

Here it comes, William thought. Before Tara could light into him, he said, "What about lunch? I know you're vegetarian, but Mickey makes Mongolian Beef that'd make a believer out of Linda McCartney."

Tara admitted, "I haven't eaten today," then her voice hardened and she asked, "Why did you leave me?"

With an evasive sigh, William said, "Here's Mickey with our drinks."

Mickey set the teapot down and flicked Tara a glance out of the corner of his eyes. To William, he said, his voice offhand, "That 'hunting party' I mentioned? Doesn't get off the ground until the next full moon, so we've got a couple of weeks. If that's why you stopped by."

William wanted to tell him that it was okay to talk business in front of Tara, but he wasn't sure where he stood with her. He didn't want to presume a familiarity that almost certainly didn't exist anymore. For all he knew, she'd left the world-saving to Buffy and the chits, and gone back to uni like a good girl... if today were any indication. Which was a good thing.

On second thought, best leave her in the dark. That was the plan, right? Keep her safe and out of it altogether. Without missing a beat, he replied to Mickey, "That's fine—I'll see you then. But I don't need an excuse to come in for the best cooking in the city, do I?"

Mickey grinned. "You know it! I thought you might stop by so I whipped up your usual. Or there's hyut tong... blood soup?"
"Load me up. That, an' the pork stew, and more of that fine AB Negative." He drained the mug and handed it back.

Mickey nodded. "Blood, beer, soup, and one order dinuguan... and for the lady?"

Tara had unclasped her damp hair and shaken it around her shoulders. She piled it up once more and secured the loose chignon with plastic butterfly clips, skewering the whole thing with a pair of red lacquered chopsticks. Mickey noticed and laughed. "I won't ask if you want chopsticks."

Tara smiled back with less than her usual shyness. "Spicy mock duck, medium-hot. Thanks."

Mickey nodded and left.

Tara's eyes shifted to William's and she stopped smiling.

To forestall an explosion, William asked her, "You come here a lot?" then rolled his eyes at himself. Idiot.

She sighed, but answered patiently, "Everybody comes to Mickey's Quick Chow. He's a SFSU institution. Don't change the subject. Now... about you leaving me?" Her eyes were hard but a vulnerable quaver crept into her voice.

William reached for her hand, and she let him take it. "Tara—"

"Don't!" She pulled back her hand.

Though he hated to, he let her hand go. "Don't what?"

"If you're going to give me some crap about 'the problems of two little people amounting to a hill of beans in this crazy, mixed-up world,' I will scream." Her voice was tense.

"You're not a screamer," he said, then shifted gears, thinking it sounded like a sexual double entendre. "I mean, I know you can listen and accept what I have to say— I hate to hurt you."

"You sound like me." Her full mouth drooped.

"Huh?"

"Letting Kennedy down. 'Letting her down easy'—it's never easy! I hurt her. Just like you're hurting me."

"I don't care about Kennedy—" he began.

"Well, I do! She's a good person. She can't help her feelings. I'm just sorry I can't return them, but... I can't. I love you." Tara's voice was level but her eyes were pleading.

William braced himself. "Tara, if you'll listen, you'll see that I want only your happiness. Your safety." Tara, weeping and unreasonable, he expected. This Tara had an uncharacteristic mulish expression on her lovely face, and while it was one he'd never seen it was still somehow familiar. With relief, he saw Mickey approaching with their food.

Tara said darkly, "This isn't over."

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Mickey served Tara first, heaping her plate with rice and spicy mock duck. William had finished the
blood soup, tipping the cup and slurping the dregs before Mickey was done serving her. Then he set out the dinuguan, a heady stew of cubed pork meat, intestines, and pig ears in inky blood sauce. William's stomach rumbled.

They ate, mostly in silence. That is, William ate; Tara nibbled and pushed her food around. She would glare at him, seeming about to burst out with something, then close her mouth and tighten her lips.

He was in for it. This last supper probably wasn't a good idea.

William offered her a taste of his dinuguan. From the coagulated black blood sauce, he speared a chunk of golden brown meat and wiggled it at her. She leaned forward, mouth opened, then pulled back warily. "No."

"No?" He popped the morsel in his mouth, enjoying the crunch.

"How does it taste?" she asked.

The look on her face reminded him of the cat Willow's, when offered a tidbit not up to her standards of acceptable catfood, reprehensibly high even for a cat. "Like blood and chocolate," he said. "Almost as good as—" He stopped. This wasn't going to happen. How did he wind up here, sitting across the table from her, with Mickey shooting them sympathetic looks from the kitchen? Tara was as far away... as, as Buffy in Rome. Farther! No. It was not going to happen.

Tara laid her fork down. "I want to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

She sat up very straight. "I want you to take me home. Take me to bed."

His jaw dropped. "I think that we've established that we're not going to—"

"I think you owe me that. At least that much." Her look was hooded and her voice resentful.

"You claimin' your 'marital rights'?" William tried for a jokey tone and failed abjectly. "You know, we weren't really married, only handfasted." He knew that to her, subjectively, 1880 felt like two years ago. To him it was half a dozen of her lifetimes ago. Double what had been his own already long unlifetime. It wasn't fair to expect her to understand how much he'd changed, but he tried.

Choosing his words with care, to cause her the least pain, he said, "As much as I love you, I've learned that in the hundred and twenty-two years apart from you... that the mission comes first. Before me, before my love for you, even before you. It's that... it's become my calling." He used his best Battle of Britain brook-no-nonsense voice, so she wouldn't know that this was killing him, too.

She leaned closer, her faint perfume wafting toward him. "But why? If it's not the 'Angel telling Buffy he wants her to have a normal life' kiss-off, what is it? Oh, I heard about that!" A brief look of indignation flickered across her face, then she leaned toward him. "Is it for redemption? Let me help. I can help."

He thought of bloody Benjamin's parable: "'The thralldom of reward is gone—I serve God as a freedman,'" and winced. He no longer felt the compulsion to verbalize every stray thought, and decided to spare himself the embarrassment of that little anecdote. "No, it's not reward or for any kind of belief, it's just... because. Because it's the right thing to do. It's not just what I do. It's who I am now, really."
Tara changed the subject, her eyes narrowed. "Do you still love her?"

Huh? Women sure were changeable. "The Slayer?" He mulled for a moment. How much of that truth did he want to share with her? A little couldn't hurt, could it? Very well. "Back when the Hellmouth was caving in, we had this perfect moment, Buffy and I. It could never be better, and that instant... the moment's frozen in amber for me. At the time I thought I was done for—didn't have any reason to believe otherwise. Afterward, goin' to see her in Rome—and I did try, though we never connected—it seemed to be a sort of... desecration of that perfect moment. But I do have that... the one time I lived up to her expectations, perfectly.

"I wasn't a joiner to begin with. I was a poet... well, a middle-class, wanna-be Bohemian." He tried to keep self-scorn out of his voice. "I was in love with a girl right out of the top drawer—said I didn't fit in with the society she moved in. After Dru turned me, I embraced evil." What had the poet said? _Rage against the dying of the light?_ But he hadn't raged. He embraced it.

"I wanted to be the _best_ vampire, tear a hole in the society that'd turned its back—" William was quiet for a moment, shook his head. "When I fell in love with Buffy, it was all about her at first. Soon I could see the circle she'd surrounded herself with, and I wanted to be a part of it. I already loved her mum, and the Niblet of course, but I could see adding my strong right arm to the Slayer's cause. Some vampire, eh? That was the first time I wanted to be part of the good, even before I got the soul. Now, well, you know... it's what I do.

"So. Do I love her? Romantic love?" He'd been looking past Tara's shoulder as he spoke, and now looked at her for a long moment, entirely forgetting the point he was making. Oh, right. Buffy. Dear girl. He shrugged. "I've always loved what she stood for."

Tara gave him the gentlest of smiles, piercing him. Women were hard to figure, he thought, astounded he'd said the right thing. Still, he was grateful, if only not to have grieved her more.

He finished. "Full circle. Still not a joiner, but it was she who set my feet on the path. I work alone now." He decided to wrap this up, send Tara packing. "And _you_, no matter how much I love you, have no place in what I do. I don't mess with magicks—much, anyway," he amended, "—and the last few women who associated with me—hell, women or _men!_ Charles' and Ann's boy Will..."

"I didn't know." Tara's eyes filled. "I mean, I knew she was pregnant, but he... came to you? Worked for you?""

"And died for his pains! They all died... ugly, painful deaths. Rain's woman Allie—Penelope's grandkid—was the latest. I'm not going through it again. Not seein' you go that way. And that's it."

Tara's eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry, but... for a guy who 'works alone,' you sure get a lot of help. Why not me?"

He shook his head. "That's different."

"Different how?" she persisted.

"Yeah, I had help. I'm not a researcher, or a wizard, God help me. I've had a priest, a minister, and a rabbi, which sounds like the beginning of a bad joke. I've even had a whore with a heart of gold. Several of them! With the women it's different. Not a weak sister in the bunch, but _how_ they died... Not goin' through it again. Not with you."

Tara folded her napkin with careful precision. "Well, that's quite the pastel existence you've envisioned for me. Thanks."
Perhaps he could insult her? Drive her away that way? He started to say, "I didn't think that you'd
ask for a pityfu—" but before the last word was out of his mouth, she interrupted.

"I don't come to you—what's the word?—undowered." Her look was stubborn. Uncompromising.

"Tara—" It was becoming difficult to say no, when he wanted to bring her home as badly as she
wanted to come.

"I'd rather show you. You'll just have to trust me."

He blurted, "What—you get a tattoo?" It was unforgivable. His head rocked back a fraction of an
inch. With a tightening of her full lower lip, a tiny movement of her forearm, she "telegraphed" that
she had nearly slapped him. He sat back in his seat, watching her warily.

A moment later, Mickey brought them quartered oranges and fortune cookies. William and Tara both
leaned back, breathing deeply and trying to look nonchalant.

William snapped his open first, and read silently. He muttered, "No, it won't."

Tara looked alert. "Won't what? Read it to me."

With reluctance, he read, "'What you decide today will be your good fortune'."

"'In b- bed'," Tara said. Her face pinkened but her voice was positive.

William's eyes went round. "Eh?"

Mickey chuckled and said, "It's true. You're supposed to append it." He strolled away, smirking.

"'In bed'," Tara repeated, once Mickey was out of earshot. "'What you decide today will be your
good fortune... in bed.'" She gave him that sly sidelong glance that used to devastate him.

"What's yours say?" He felt a slow hot smile begin, then remembered to stop. Breaking up with her,
remember?

She snapped it, peeled the wrapper, and read, "'Diplomacy is the art of letting someone have your
way'... in bed."

"Guess that's right enough." William twisted round in his seat. "Hey, Mickey! Where's the check?"

Mickey had been hovering nearby. He approached saying, mock-aggrieved, "Your money's no good
here—you know that."

William slipped him a folded bill. "Well, I get to tip you anyway. Do me one favor? Bring us more
fortune cookies. Lots more." He winked at Tara, then thought, Stop it! Why are you flirting?

Mickey unfolded the bill and grinned. "For fifty, you can have a bucketful of cookies." He hurried
back to the kitchen.

William eyed Tara. "You sure you didn't witch that fortune?"

She made a "cross my heart and hope to die" gesture, while he admired the play of candlelight on the
rubies above her breasts.

"I like that you're wearing those. I'd completely forgot I'd given you them, but they suit you." He
reached out to finger one warm blood-red stone over her heart, then pulled back. He could hear her
heart beat faster at his hand's approach. For a break-up, this wasn't going very well.

He looked down at her left hand. She still wore his mother's ring.

She caught him looking at it. "No-one believes it—not that I've told them much. Our marriage was kept secret from most of them. Anya asked me if I found it in a Crackerjack box."

Tactless bint. "She would."

Mickey brought more drinks, and a wine bucket heaped with fortune cookies. "Have fun, kids."

William eyed Mickey as he walked away. "He's, what, all of thirty? Young whelp." He snapped a second cookie and read aloud, "'You're the greatest in the world'," then added with reluctance, "in bed." The next cookie read, "'You are sociable and can get along with anyone'...in bed," and the next, "'People find it difficult to resist your persuasive manner'," he finished sourly, "in bed." Here was a way out. They'd never discussed it, but now was as good a time as— especially if he were leaving her! A final cookie read, "A half-truth is a whole lie."

Say it! "I wasn't faithful to you." He looked at the candle between them.

That should put paid to it. Sort of good to hear it said, like his girl Shawn's "go ahead and amputate." (Not that it'd saved her). He drained the mug of blood and looked down and away... only to feel Tara's light touch on her betrothal gift to him, her class ring that he still wore on a chain round his neck.

Her fingertip hooked and gently tweaked the ring. "This isn't a ring in your nose. Did you think I thought you were faithful for a hundred and twenty-two years?" Her voice was quietly scoffing and her eyes held no condemnation. "You're a passionate man. No reasonable person would expect you'd be celibate that long." Her eyes shone. "You must have been so lonely. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? What you are is too good to be true," he muttered.

"No, I'm not! I- I wasn't faithful myself." In spite of her assertion, it was plain she was lying.

He took her hand again and this time she let him. He squeezed gently, stroking her palm with the pad of his thumb. "Bollocks. I could smell it on you if you were, and you're not. Haven't been, that is. You and Kennedy?... hugging-close. No more. Same as the lads, although you could make them rethink their sexual orientation if you'd a mind to."

Tara rolled her eyes, but blushed.

William leaned back in his seat and smiled in lascivious remembrance, rubbing her hand. "Now you and the other witch, that's another matter. You and she smelled like a Sapphic garden of delights, which old Kennedy could only dream of." It was petty of him, but a large part of him enjoyed Kennedy's thwarted hopes.

Tara's tone became tart. "Yeah, we did it a lot... when she wasn't pulling mind games on me. I'm over her, thanks to you. It's you I want." She seemed to catch herself, and lowered her voice. "If I wasn't unfaithful, it's because I had a lot on my plate. That last apocalypse kind of took all my attention."

William knew he owed her, if not an apology, at least, an explanation. He had left her holding the bag in Sunnydale, even though the second front in Cleveland, minor as it had been in the grand scheme of things, did need settling. Try telling the families of Hungerford's victims that their losses were minor.
While he was choosing his words, Tara said, "You never did say what you were doing."

He shrugged. "Doin' good. As opposed to doin' well. I'm not, very. But I kept Yoko Ono out of the neighborhood." He hooked his thumb toward Russian Hill. At her blank look, he added, "Back in the 80s." He cringed inwardly, humbled to learn he was still capable of sounding like a complete idiot. Now for a nice save. "Oh, recently, of course. I sorted out Cleveland twice. I guess Faith's got a couple of her girls on it now. Good to be home, but not for long. I keep busy. Got to."

"I'm sorry you're not happy. I am. Very. I'm not a gaping hole of need. I miss you, though." She selected another cookie, broke it apart and read aloud: "'Pleasure awaits your company'... in bed." She picked another, reading, "'You will have success as you desire'... in bed," then, "'Others admire your flexibility.'" She gave him another look from under her eyelashes. "In bed."

"That's true," William admitted. "That 'ankles over the shoulders' bit always impressed me." He compressed his lips. This break-up could be going better. It wasn't only himself he was teasing—this was making her girly parts swirl, too. Time to put a sock in this.

Tara seemed to feel his stiffening resolve, or stiffening something. She picked three more cookies and snapped them. "'Be prepared to modify your plan',," then, "'Forget yesterday: tomorrow will be a golden day for you',," and finally, "'Your dearest wish will come true'...in bed."

He shook his head. "You're witching these, I swear."

Her eyes were huge and innocent. "No, I swear. It's meant to be. I'll show you." She spoke to Mickey, who had just sidled up, "Here. Try a couple."

Mickey broke open five cookies and in quick succession read them to William: "'Everyone around you is rooting for you. Don't give up',," here he shot William an earnest look, "'You'll accomplish more later if you have a little fun this weekend',," this accompanied with a wink, "'Things are often the opposite of what they seem'," a sage nod, then, "'Go ahead with confidence'," and finally, "'Romance is about to blossom'.""
and struck an unconvincing slayerish pose.

"Yeah, right." He called out, "Mickey, will you ring up a taxicab?"

When the taxi arrived, William entered quickly, coat pulled up around his ears, and sat on the shady side, hooded back to the window. He directed the driver to his Russian Hill home.

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They entered the apartment. A fire burned in the huge old stove, its isinglass windows twinkling, champagne was chilling in a bucket by the bed, and Frank Sinatra's Songs For Lovers on the record player.

William groaned. Removing one boot, he pitched it at the stereo, nailing it. Frank was abruptly silenced mid-do-be-do-be-do.

"Only one Chairman of the Headboard in here tonight." William kicked off his other boot, while Tara stood hugging herself, watching him dismantle the romantic scene laid for them.

William shut off the skipping stereo, then stalked to the foot of the bed. "What—no chocolate on the pillow?" He picked up a note and read aloud:

_Eeee! I'm so happy for you!!! I love you both, and so does Gare. We'll be at the Russian River over the long weekend. No crises a-brewing, phone calls going straight to voicemail, and no-one home to overhear you —make as much noise as you want!_  

_Hugs, Dan_

William lifted his eyes heavenward. "Psychics." He crumpled the note, tossing it toward the dustbin. He missed.

Tara didn't answer, her palms cupping her opposite elbows.

He waved a hand at the champagne. "You want any of this? I want a real drink."

She still didn't answer.

He lugged the champagne bucket into the kitchen, then dropped his coat and sweatshirt on a chair. Pouring himself a crystal lowball full of Glenfiddich, he sipped and promised himself a pub-crawl soon, perhaps ending in that nasty little demon bar in Oakland, just outside Emptyville. He figured by this time tomorrow, he'd be boiled as an owl, his foot up some deserving demon's ass.

William knew he couldn't let himself go with Tara. Part of the pleasure of making love to her had paradoxically been the holding back. It had been like the teasing, doling-out pleasure of bondage. This time, he would let himself cross the line. Just enough to show her she had no business with a demon.

He returned to the bedroom. She balanced on the edge of the love seat, like a bird about to take flight, her stretchy little sweater like sexual gift wrapping. Made him half-hard just looking at her. Make it nice, he thought. No! Make it nasty. Make her afraid.

He downed his drink. "Want me to build up the fire?" She had to be cold. Her nipples were
prominent in the thin spandex sweater.

She shook her head, still hugging herself. Her silence was beginning to unnerve him.

He nodded. "I didn't use to like the cold, but I do now. I got a glimpse of Hell, back in LA about a century ago. I figure I'll spend eternity toasting, so I might as well enjoy the cool while I can."

Still she didn't speak.

"Want to change?" He jerked his head toward her room and its closetful of lingerie. "There's a little pink frilly—"

She spoke at last. "No little pink frilly."

"Well, then. Why don't you show me your tits?" The sound of his voice grated in his ears.

She stood fast at his approach, his old sex-on-a-stick jungle cat walk. She muttered, "The only reason I don't—"

"Don't what?" Maybe he could get her to walk out. That would solve his problem, wouldn't it?

"I'll make you eat your words. Every last crummy word." She jerked her top down, and her breasts popped out with a sumptuous jiggle. He grabbed her and captured her mouth with his. It was wide and soft and opened to his questing tongue. Her breasts crushed against his chest, and he wanted to hold her away from him, and look at and play with them, but he didn't want to let go of her. Kissing her should not be rushed. He remembered their first time, kissing.

Moaning and groping each other, they sank to the loveseat, and he knelt before her. Make it nice. He unbuckled her belt, red like her little shit-kicker boots, and pulled her jeans and knickers down to her ankles, pinioning her. She wriggled forward so he could pull them all of the way off, but he kept them on, and held her feet apart so she couldn't toe them off herself. Her knees sagged apart.

He sat back on his heels, surveying her and enjoying tantalizing her with a few moments' frustration. He'd see to her, oh yes he would.

The sweater pinned her arms at the elbow and hugged her ribcage like the corset she used to wear. She was naked from her waist to her ankles, and he ran his hands from her silky calves, up her trembling thighs, their fine blond hairs soft to his touch, and up to the neatly trimmed and waxed mound. "This is new," he said, stroking it. "One of the girlies must have taken you in hand. The Slayer?"

"Anya. We... went to a day spa in Bath."

"For that git Xander?" William kept caressing Tara's legs, feeling them tremble, enjoying her arousal, knowing her frustration would be brief.

"No, for Mr. Giles. It's been almost a year, and she has hopes—" She could barely speak above a whisper.

"Of seducing Rupert?" William hooted. His voice softened. "He's a lucky bloke." The conversation was fast becoming irrelevant, and he wanted to bring her off soon, take off the edge. "So am I." He stroked the smooth sides of her mons, his voice was as silky as her skin. "For me? You shouldn't have. I miss my natural girl, but discovering this smooth new you is just as—"

"Oh, shut up! Just— please." Tara's voice was ragged.
He crouched down and ran his tongue up her left leg from ankle to groin, circling her clit, tantalizingly close, and ran his tongue down her other leg. She wore the mark of his bite on her right upper thigh. He licked and blew on it softly, and watched goose flesh rise. And speaking of rising, his jeans were uncomfortably tight. He rose to his knees, unbuckled his belt and lowered his jeans. That was better.

He could last all night, and before he was through, she'd know it couldn't be. Wasn't meant to be. Maybe he had only to make it nice, over and over and over, until she was worn out and sleeping. He could slip out in the night, go somewhere and—

"Please!"

"You have only to ask." He lowered his mouth to her. Her nether lips were as swollen as her beautiful mouth, and her pussy was wet, so wet. It was a good thing, as he was big and penetration had always been a problem, at least at first. He inserted one finger in her, then two. Still licking and sucking her, she began to peak, crying _Ah, ah, ah_ softly. She was so tight. He pulled his finger out, twisting two together and pushed them in, twisting and bumping her G-spot. He bent his fingers, pressing up, hard, and with a shout she came again with a spurt of fresh wetness. He let her float back to earth, licking her slowly.

That'd do for starters. William waited until her eyes opened and she looked up at him, half-resentful. Her temples and hair were wet. He remembered she sometimes leaked tears when she came. He could see the old look of trust she had for him was gone, but he could see the love in her eyes. Now it was his job to kill that love and send her on her way.

"Why I don't burn you down where you stand—" she muttered. Her eyes started to fill again, and she looked away from him with her jaw clenched.

"Hush. Put your mouth to good use." He raised up and finished working his jeans off, standing naked before her.

"Of all the sexist—" she began, but then breathed, "Oh my."

He sucked in a breath in anticipation.

Tara's eyes had gone round at the sight of him, and she sank to her knees and took him in her mouth. "I hope I remember..." she mumbled around his thickness, before slowly sucking him a third of the way in.

"'S'like riding a bicycle... Oh, Tara." He closed his eyes and was lost in incredible sensation: warmth, suction, and the feel of her teeth scraping the underside of his cock. He was too long for her to take him all of the way in, but she held the base, squeezing hard, like he'd shown her during their time together. He nearly came from the feel of her, the delicious slippery friction, and steadied himself with his hands upon her shoulders.

"Tara... stop." Was he insane? No, but he had a conceit about not coming right away, and not only that, he didn't want to shoot in her mouth. He also knew if she kept it up, he'd be only so much putty in her hands. Hers to command. "Tara. Puppy. Please stop."

She slowed but did not stop, sucking harder.

William was close. He began to babble, "I don't want— I don't want to—" and with a superhuman effort, pulled himself out. He started to spurt, ropes of white come shooting toward her face. She took it on the chin, eyes closed, breathing hard, and licking the underside of his cock, sucked his still-
hard member into her mouth once more.

"No, precious. This is supposed to be for you, not me." With aching regret he pulled himself away from her, and took her in his arms. "I'm sorry, my girl. Tara, I know you'll wind up regretting this, but the way I feel right now, there's about an even chance you can talk me into anything. So let go and let me do this for you."

Her moist eyes filled and she hugged him hard, leaking tears against his neck. He held her with as much gentleness as he could muster, wanting to bite and plunder her as he did. He pulled away and finished undressing her. With real regret he unclasped the ruby necklace, admiring the contrast of blood red stones against pearly skin, the gold borrowing warmth from her body. She unhooked the earrings and they clattered to the table alongside the necklace. William sat her down on the loveseat, pulling her jeans and boots off.

He pulled her to the edge of the loveseat, her bottom half-hanging off its edge, her back almost flat along its seat. Her head propped against its back, she watched him, legs spread, as he ran the head of his cock over her pussy lips, up and down and around the clit. She licked her lips as he watched; it took all his self control not to plunge into her. As he teased her stiffened clit, she began to pant, feeling her own breasts. He knew that when aroused, she liked them handled roughly, with deep kneading, so he did, first squeezing the nipples into hard nubs. She gasped with pleasure.

He just had to taste them. Still teasing her opening, he lay along her, kissing her throat and gently biting it, then squeezing and suckling her breasts. He badly wanted to bite her, but this was going to be for her alone. He licked the scar he'd made from his first bite. She moaned, her hips nudging him into her slick opening. He pushed the tip of his cock into her tightness, and she gasped the first time it went in. He eased in and out several times, Tara panting and moving against him. He thought it must be uncomfortable for her, but she had told him once that his size and the pain it caused was a big part of her pleasure.

She dug her nails into his buttocks and urged him deeper, but he held back; grabbing her wrists and holding them above her, stretching along her upper body, joined at the hips only by the big cock head pushing in and out of her opening. She writhed underneath him, one leg snaking around his and trying to pull him in deeper, and he finally gave in. He rose to his knees, kneeling in front of her splayed out on the loveseat, and let her wrap her legs around him, pulling him in deeper.

William gritted his teeth and tried to simply enjoy the view. He wasn't used to dissociating himself from his sex partners, not that there had been many in recent years. Tara had said she'd forgiven him for the few lovers he'd taken, but he hadn't forgiven himself. He looked down at her, watching the play of expression on her face, trying to ignore the sensations of his beautiful girl working herself on his cock. He could see her eyes narrowed in bliss, then wincing in pain—no doubt the pain of his rejection of her. Then an expression of hope his words had given her—you can talk me into anything, and her trying to lose herself in her own sensations. He slowed the movement of his caressing hands, trying to communicate to her the love he didn't want to put into words. No use leading the poor girl on, but if this was to be their goodbye, he would make it a memorable one.

Gasping and groaning, Tara was working her way through one minor climax after another, building up to thermonuclear meltdown, but it eluded her. She was coming, but whimpering with frustration at the same time. It was near impossible to continue holding back as half his cock was squeezed by her clenching inner muscles; he was panting too, and didn't know how much longer he could hold out.

Tara rose up from the loveseat, half-impaled upon him, and toppled him backwards. She worked her way down upon him, rising and sinking slowly, as he watched her, enchanted.
William could hold out forever at this change, content to watch her ride him deliciously. His hands roamed over her, stroking her back, kneading her beautiful breasts, fingerling her as she rose and fell on his slick length. His own orgasm waited like a coiled snake, but it could be delayed as long as she needed him.

She bounced on him, harder and harder. He was buried nearly all of the way in her, and it had to hurt her. He tried to hold her hips and slow her down, thinking to bring her off with the pad of his thumb, but she was having none of it. He rolled them over and worked them toward the bed. She wrestled with him but moved with him, too. At the bottom of the bed, he pulled out, making them both groan, and set her on its edge. Again he rose to his knees and buried himself in her.

Tara lay back and looked at him with the old look of love, and damaged trust. There was something more there, something William didn't stop to analyze. Some lovely gift—a surprise for him? He couldn't bear disappointing her, and realized that the time had come to lose himself in the moment, and her. He fucked her across the bed to the headboard. Still, her huge orgasm eluded her. The loss of trust was a joykiller in more ways than one. At this rate he'd open his box of sex toys soon. He redoubled his efforts to please her. He'd meant what he said—he'd do anything, even let her stay, but he couldn't tell her that.

He slowed down, moving against her and grinding his pubic bone into hers. With a sharp cry of frustration, Tara reached up and grabbed the twisted metal bars of the wrought-iron headboard. She pushed back against the headboard, to have him more deeply.

With a clanging crack, the headboard broke.

William stilled all movement. A thousand ideas were at war within him, all clamoring to break loose, but all he could think to say was, "When were you plannin' on telling me you'd become a Slayer?"
William stilled all movement while a thousand warring thoughts collided in his brain and his world view rearranged itself.

The broken wrought-iron piece from his headboard fell to the floor with a metallic *bong-g-g* when Tara dropped it. Her ragged, pre-orgasmic breathing slowed a little... perhaps in apprehension that he'd learned her secret? The tension in her body eased only slightly and her other hand let go of the headboard she'd been bracing against while trying to achieve the release that had eluded her. She slid her arms around his back, whispering, "Please."

He repeated, "When were you gonna tell me you'd become a Slayer?"

She shifted beneath him. "Um..." She wriggled her hips.

"Spill."

"That's the idea." Her breathy voice tickled his ear and she undulated against him.

He held still, obdurate.

"Well, I *was* going to tell you, but I'd rather you just finish me off," she evaded.

"'Finish you off,' eh?"

He could feel a dark chuckle wanting to bubble up from somewhere deep in him. He brought forth his demon and ran the tip of one fang up her throat, raising a needle-thin welt that brought tiny beads of blood to the surface.

She shivered exquisitely.

"Don't you know that slayers an' vampires are natural enemies?" He suppressed the chuckle; he wanted to throw a scare into her, pay her out for her keeping him in the dark.

"Oh, shut up." She shuddered, arching her back and lifting her chin to give him better access. "Just do it."

He ran his tongue up her throat, licking away the traces of blood. The taste was still his girl, but richer, more powerful. Intoxicating. His voice rumbled against her neck. "I should make you pay."

He licked her again, feeling his demon's textured tongue scrape roughly against her skin.

She shivered again, then threatened in a deadpan voice, "I'd like to see you try." She held her ground only a moment, and then collapsed into snorting giggles.
"Regular tough tootsie, eh? Always did like a woman who could kick my ass."

He reared up, flipping her over, and she landed like a cat on her hands and knees, the bed swaying. He smacked her on the arse—the promised "payment"—then plunged into her from behind. Her answering shriek was not of pain, but of surprise and joy. She braced herself against the broken headboard and pushed back against him, hard.

Desperate for more contact, he grabbed her torso, jerking her away from the broken headboard to press her back up against his chest and belly as he writhed over her back, grinding into her. She reared up, unbalancing him and they crashed to the mattress in a heap.

She wriggled away, only to twist round to face him and yank him on top of her. Their movements stilled, both stunned with the power of their joining. He lifted his face to look into her eyes. She nodded wordlessly, and their lips met in a long kiss.

The Tara-shaped hole in him was now filled. There was only one thing left for him to: he surged forward and filled her.

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Much later, licking the salty sudor up her spine, feeling her shivering response, William muttered, "Can't believe you forgive me. I don't forgive myself." His last words were almost inaudible.

Tara sighed and shook her head. She rolled over and caught his eye, her out-flung wrist over her spread hair, and giving him her gentlest smile said,

"Soldier, in a curious land
All across a swaying sea,
Take her smile and lift her hand —
Have no guilt of me.

Soldier, when were soldiers true?
If she's kind and sweet and gay,
Use the wish I send to you —
Lie not lone til day!

Only, for the nights that were,
Soldier, and the dawns that came,
When in sleep you turn to her
Call her by my name."

Her tone sweetly mocked his guilt and her slight smile broadened. Her eyes held no rancor.

"Oh, I did." He couldn't meet her eye. "Not exactly fair to them—" He caught himself. "Very nice. Where'd you get that?"

She shrugged, saying airily, "Oh, you know, college girl. Ex-college girl. I was withdrawing from school today, on my way to find you." She put her hand on his cheek, turning his face to hers.

"Not saying I don't want you," he admitted. "Or couldn't use you. Your slayerishness could come in handy, too, and I'm less afraid of losing you now. Although—" He clamped his jaw. Slayer or not, he could still lose her. Hadn't he killed two slayers himself? Unbidden, he felt the dreadful responsibility a Watcher must feel, the terrible inevitability of their loss.
"You're worried about me." It was a statement, not a question. "Look at me."

He turned unwilling eyes to meet hers. He had a momentary flash on the dead girl in the alley, and his resolution never to find Tara that way... to never involve her in this bloody business.

"The reason you went to see Mickey today? The Qwieng gang?"

He narrowed his eyes. "What...?" he said, on a lowering note.

"They're settled. A non-issue."

He remembered to shut his mouth, but didn't answer her.

"You want details?"

Still speechless, he nodded.

Tara told him. The arts of war were familiar to him, but they were a revelation to her... the realization that she was set apart, her need for secrecy. In a rare instance of pillow talk, Buffy had once told him that it was like waking up to discover that she could skate like Surya Bonaly, but couldn't tell anyone.

He missed some of what she was telling him, as he mused upon his old love, Tara, who had set her hand on fire to drive off Darla and Angelus, who collapsed in shock from the effort, the fragile human girl who—

Animated as a child with a new toy, she was explaining, "—you don't want to give them everything you have, but on the other hand, you don't want to... just tickle 'em, either, or you get your ass kicked. Well, you do until you, you know, wade in. I remember the first time I really let go, my fist went through this thing's face, at least I think it was its face, with a crunch like a box of strawberries. Really disgusting." She looked to him for comprehension.

He nodded, still distracted.

She shook imaginary demon goo off one hand, saying excitedly, "What I really like are blades—always have, ever since my mother gave me her athame. I've got a collection started, even before I suspected that I'd—"

"Become a slayer." William wished he could get the dirge-like tone out of his voice. And why?—this was a good thing. His girl had just become one of the most powerful creatures on the planet.

"I know. I first suspected, when the Sunnydale spell didn't put me in bed for a week."

"I saw you."

"You were there? Again, I mean?" Her eyes went round.

He shrugged. "Yes, I thought I'd join the fun, but held back, thinking the First Evil might have a thought about pullin' me out of its hat, like a rabbit." He wasn't fully with her yet, still trying to sort out her new status and his old fear for her safety, weighing the risk of letting her stay.

"An evil rabbit—don't tell Anya!" Tara giggled, then sobered. "Well, it didn't," she said in her practical voice. "You're fine. We're fine. Don't worry, I can handle myself."

She rubbed her knuckles, upon which he could detect traces of bruises fading. Slayer healing. William had not noticed the bruises before, looking at her in the restaurant, at the huge ring she wore.
She changed the subject. "The upcoming L.A. apocalypse you're working toward—you lived through it before, right? Tell me about it." Her eyes gleamed.

He raked his fingers roughly through his hair. "Right debacle it was. Not much to say. 'Exit, pursued by a bear.' Or dragon, in this case. Most of us died. Well, 'died' is the wrong word where vampires are concerned. Me, it knocked arse over tit, rattling my brains." A muscle in his jaw worked. "Angel..." He was silent for a moment. "You weren't around when the dark slayer, Faith—she was evil back then—shot Angel with an arrow dipped in venom years back. I wasn't there myself, but he told me about it later."

"I heard about it." Her eyes were compassionate.

He spoke slowly. "Causes a long, painful... again 'death' is the wrong word. Point is, dragon's tail got venom, too. Has a stinger like that alien queen in *Aliens*. Got Angel through the heart. It... it wasn't a quick death."

She put her arms around him and pressed her face against his neck.

He muttered into her hair. "When I came to, I took off like a scalded ape, Angel thrown over one shoulder." He winced at the memory of his failure.

Her arms tightened around him. "You survived. You're going back, and I'll be with you."

After a long moment, he added, "You didn't know him. You only saw the *grr argh* part. Don't get me wrong—he was a pain in the arse, always!—but he was family. He died a hero."

"You're a hero, too."
He sputtered, but she persisted, "You're not bad for surviving."

"No, I got over that. Stayed drunk for the better part of a year, same's I did when the coven sent you back—"

"I didn't know that."

"Point is, this time, it could be different. I could make a difference. Charlie—Charlie Gunn, human member of Angel's team, he bled to death. Blue—" he broke off.

Tara's brow furrowed. "Blue?"

William lifted one shoulder. "One of Angel's gang. A god-king."

"A god-king... like the Dalai Lama?"

"Scrappier... and bluer." He started to smile, then went on, "Last I saw of her, she was high-tailing it after a pack of P'qour hired guns back into the portal that shat them out. Gave me an idea." Abruptly, he changed the subject. "I'm broke—your husband is broke, Mrs Southwood. I put a wodge of money hirin' an army of Fyarl mercenaries—"

"Who cares? I've got money. Cinco funnels most of my money into Bay Area charities, but I can tell him to—"

"'Cinco'?"

"Charles Moneybags Maxwell Fitzhugh the fifth. Your employer and mine." Her grin was lopsided, but her eyes crinkled with affection.

William sniffed. "Oh, him. The gravy train—"

"It's hardly a gravy train! You earn every penny—"

He waved off her interruption, continuing, "I've got no employer. Chuckie's money's useful; that's all. Haven't seen him since he was a baby. I don't visit much since Penny died." He grinned as a memory came to him. "Little bastard bit me when first we met. Think he was paying me out for the trouble I cause his family."

"They love you. We all do."

His half-grin faded. "Last apocalypse—this one, I mean. Upcoming one..." He shook his head with impatience. "It's not as though I've never lost a team mate. Closer friends, too. Why this is so important—I realized this is my opportunity for a do-over." He felt the muscle in his jaw jump. "I could have a medic there, attend to Gunn, hell, I could take out each target between now an' the upcoming showdown! Make it come to nothing. Unnecessary."

"Great! I can help. And I don't have to remind you, they're all still alive, this go-round. Right now."

"All but one." He closed his eyes briefly, thinking of Fred. "I am working it, behind the scenes."

"Hence the blond hair!" She fingered a stray platinum curl.

He nodded. "Right. Deep cover. Very cloak-and-daggerish. I've got it nearly all worked out—"

"Then I can stay?"
"Stay with me—I'm leaving. But I want you with me." He lay back, regarding her with appraising eyes. This could work. "I need a Slayer at my back. Combat ready." He squeezed her firm bicep.

Her old fearful expression flitted across her face. "Do you think Angel'll hold it against me that I wanted to set him on fire?" She gulped. "I shot him—I blinded him! Will he remember me?"

William hastened to soothe her. "No, no—he got over that. Buffy sent him to hell for a hundred years... well, she was his girlfriend. But he didn't hold it against her. He'll understand. It's all good fun to us vampires."

She blew out a relieved exhalation before saying, "Anyway, I was planning on asking you—"

"What—you got a job for me?" From long ago, his words to Eliza came back to him: I don't take orders from a lady, leastways not one I'm not in love with.

This time it would be different.

Tara didn't answer, only drew him into a long kiss, and then climbed on top of him.

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One broken headboard, a two cracked lamps, and three shredded, frilly little outfits later, they took it outside, to save the structure of the building. They ended up in a semi-demented coupling in the koi pond, with Tara's hair floating behind her like a moon-drenched mermaid. William surfaced to survey his handiwork. "Birdie once told me I was a heyoka... a contrary."

Tara only smiled blissfully. "Hmm?"

"Speak, woman!"

When she could catch her breath, she said, "Nothing wrong with that—Buffy never went along with the Slayer handbook, either. And me, I'm so far beneath the radar, it's not funny. I can be your secret weapon."

"Who knows you're a slayer?"

"No-one besides you. Well, I think Kennedy suspects. She thinks it's simply amazing how fast I pick up moves she teaches me!" She rolled her eyes, and then softened her words with a smile. "I don't use it often—I'm a witch, primarily. Not that it hasn't come in handy."

"No, I suppose not. Girl who looks like you... no right-thinking demon would suspect you of bein' able to lay 'em out in lavender." He snorted, thinking of the Qwieng and B'tai gang's surprise.

She nodded. "The few times I've slain, I don't leave witnesses. I don't want it to get around that I can clean their clocks. I keep it in reserve... I was sort of hoping you'd take it as my wedding gift to you."

She lowered her eyelashes.

He gave her a long, slow kiss. "I thought you'd never ask."

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Tara's beringed hand toyed with William's nipples as they lay in languorous afterglow.

He took her hand, kissing her knuckles. "You want a wedding ring? A different one... a bigger one?"
"Oh, no! Smaller, if anything. This one is too big. It gets in my way." Her eyes widened. "But I love it. I usually wear it around my neck, like you do yours." She nodded toward the ring William wore on a chain, her handfasting token she’d given him. "I wanted to wear my rubies today. I’m glad I had them on when you found me."

She stroked them, while William watched, mesmerized. She was naked but had put the necklace on, her nibbled-upon nipples nearly as red as the rubies. She held the earrings up to her breasts, as though to hang them there.

To distract himself from her, he muttered, "About a ceremony?"

She pulled half the blanket over her. He was a little annoyed at how breathless he sounded. Some bad ass vampire! He didn't care if they ever tied the knot—not that he'd ever leave her!—but he wanted to please her. He was hard again, and though her slayer stamina could match his, he did not yet grasp it emotionally, so he banked his lust for the moment.

"Oh, I don't know. My mother was always in favor of long engagements. She said—not that I'm comparing us to them! She wished she and my dad—"

"Understood. When the time is right, we'll slip off to Gretna Green."

"What exactly are you hiding under that blanket?" She pulled the covers back. "Oh, my."


They spoke together, "Army of Slayers," then began to laugh.

"We always did think alike," William said, wondering when he'd been so calm and happy.

"This is gonna be fun!" she chortled. She gave him a quick grin and then her smile faded. "This Slayer calling... you know, it's rooted in darkness—there's a real temptation to misuse it. You mentioned Faith—she gave in to it once. I nearly did myself."

"Tell me."

"I let it go to my head a little. I got to thinking about my dad, and took a trip back home. Back in time, that is—1989. Slayer strength is so compelling... I, I got to thinking about administering a little 'country justice,' as we say down south."

William's features were hard. "Wouldn't blame you one bit. Thought of it myself."

"And held back!" Her eyes shone. "I'm so proud of you. Well, what I did—or didn't do—I thought of doing." She shook her head. "I ended up giving him a little forced empathy, like Eliza did to Xander, giving him your memories."

William flung his head up. "Wish she hadn't! Little git followed me around like a puppy for the better part of a year, all hero-worshiping." He snorted his disparagement.

She nodded. "It has that effect. Daddy and I got close, before he died."

"Did you?" William paused delicately.

"No, of course not. Natural causes. But I nearly slapped cousin Beth!" Her eyes sparkled, and then
she grew serious again. "Anyway, here's my point. I told you before, that my father molested me."

"I remember." William's mouth was an ugly line, his knuckles white.

"He did not." Her eyes widened and held reverent amazement. "He did not." She shook her head happily. "Here's the thing about changing the time line: you go back, interfere with the 'normal' course of events—if you can call incest normal! He was so filled with shame at what he'd 'done,' before—they were my memories I gave him, remember?—that he did not do it this time around. As for me, first there's the painful memory, then a memory of a memory, like a remembered bad dream, then... healing. I mean, I know it happened, once, but it... did not happen, this time around. You know?" Her eyes sought his, needing him to understand. "I'm... whole."

William sat up and shook his head, speechless. Not in negation of what she'd said, but in wonder. The implications of time-changing were profound, if one could choose wisely.

She nodded, following his thoughts. "I know. The potential for good is far-reaching, and there's no better time than now."

His voice was grim. "You know it. Wolfram & Hart in the highest office in the land. I'm finishing up in L.A.—going after the low-hanging fruit before plucking the top rotten apple."

She spoke slowly. "Good. But there's more. I've been talking to Miss Harkness—"

He sat back on his heels and eyed her narrowly.

"I'm all right." Her voice was a touch impatient.

"Talking to Eliza.' You want to explain that?"

"I can't. Some things you just can't. It's like when she asked me to print out the Internet for her."

"I see. I think I see. Go on."

"OK, it's like a long-distance phone call—through the veil that separates this temporal plane from the astral." Her eyes searched his, and then she shrugged. "She told me before, too, right before she died, but I didn't believe her then—"

"What."

"Well, the deal she struck with the Powers That Be...?"

"What!"

"She knew that empowering the potentials would bring about an end to the Slayer line, both Buffy's and Faith's. It would mean a temporary quashing of supernatural activity, like releasing a company of crack soldiers into a riot, but once the slayers were gone, it'd resume, worse than before."

"Not good."

"No. They turned down her first plan. So her counteroffer was to pick one of the slayers and give her some added attributes. Luck. Um, longevity." She looked away, diffidence in her eyes.

"You?"

Her eyes slid back to his. She nodded.
"How long 'longevity'?"

"I'm not invincible. I can be hurt." She rubbed her knuckles again. "But I'll live. Her long-term projection includes you and me on a... spaceship... five hundred years in the future." Already blushing, she turned redder.

"You an' me on a Satellite of Love?" William hooted. He composed himself, continuing, "Tara, love, I think she was a powerhouse, but that last year or so? Wandering." He smiled kindly, but shook his head. Queer old bird, that Eliza.

Tara dropped her eyes, and the subject. William had the distinct impression that they were not done discussing it.

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William licked the last drops of Amaretto out of Tara's navel.

She shivered. Their lovemaking, coruscating though it had been, was momentarily in a lull. Tara was cold, hungry, sated, and sore, but in a good way. She rubbed her wrists, blowing softly on rope burns already healing.

William heard her stomach growl, and carried her to a large sheepskin throw in front of the stove. He built up the fire until it warmed the whole apartment, and then loaded a tray with munchables and wine.

When the bed alcove warmed, too, he carried the food and drink to the bed.

As they ate and drank, he said, "Anything else?" He speared a chunk of blood sausage and wolfed it.

"Hmm?" She washed down a dab of creamy Brie on French bread with wine.

"Up your sleeve. Any more tricks you're hiding from me."

"Nothing up my sleeve. Sleeveless, in fact." She waved her bare arm as evidence.

"Are you sure? Seems you've pulled two whammies on me in the last twenty-four hours—three, if you include your slayerishness. Not that I'm complaining."

"Well..." She looked abashed.

"What! I was only kidding. There's more?" William was mildly alarmed.

"'In for a penny, in for a pound,' don't the English say?" She was holding back again, that much he could see.

"Tell me!"

With a thump all out of proportion for the creature's diminutive size and negligible weight, the cat Willow levitated to the bed and put one paw on Tara's leg. "Mrow?"

Like a Ginsu knife commercial, Tara said, "'But wait, there's more.'" She reached down to stroke the little red cat.

"What?" he repeated. She tried to look innocent, but she was really fearful about something, he could tell.
She kept her eyes down, petting the cat. "Um, that's Willow." She nodded toward the creature.

Not understanding, he said with patience, "I know that's Willow. I named it."

"You got it right. That's Willow."

"That's the witch." His voice was flat, disbelieving.

"Yeah. Miss Harkness said she'd been bad, but not too bad, so the Powers That Be were sending her back to help us."

William just goggled at her.

"I said I wouldn't allow it, without first getting your okay. But I know you feel badly about the other women, and maybe this way you could—" Before he could answer, she interrupted herself, "How many women?" Her voice was only a mutter. "About one a decade," he admitted.

"Oh, you're a hound dog," she sniffed, with a wordless "pah" sound. Her brow smoothed out. He interrupted, "Not only women. What would you say if I told you Chuckie's namesake and I...?"

"Charles? You and Charles?" Her eyes were like saucers and she bit off a giggle.

William shrugged. "He felt so bad for me and wanted to comfort me. First time, the night I lost you. I said 'no' then, but about year or so later, when I was drunk, as I was pretty solidly that first year without you, I let him. Lad was a comfort to me, but not as great as he'd hoped. Pretty fellow like he knew the right moves—'twas back in his school days he'd learnt—but I couldn't let him know that it wasn't all he'd hoped it would be." William sighed in rueful remembrance. "So you see what a prize you're getting." His expression said, 'Give it to me.'

Her eyelashes fluttered down to the purring cat, then up to his eyes. "I think you're a prize. I've waited long enough, and you—"

"You got that right!"

"So... what do you say about Willow joining us?" She gave him a shy look from under her lashes, and he momentarily forgot the question.

"Joining us? There she is." He nodded toward the cat, not believing her, but wanting to humor her. The cat gave a half-twist, the better to expose her belly to Tara's caresses, and looked up at William, her mouth curved in a familiar puckish grin. He faltered, and said doubtfully, "That's really Willow?"

The cat only grinned at him, the tip of her pink tongue showing.

William frowned with disbelief, and then said irrelevantly, "Poof'll be glad that destroyin' the world, or tryin' to, isn't such a crime. He's been all broodin' over his sins, it'll be good to get that off his plate." He tried for a light laugh and failed.

Tara scooped up the cat and held her against her cheek. The two of them regarded William. "Would you mind? If the Powers That Be allowed her to be incarnate once more?" Tara's voice held only a hint of nervousness, and no cajoling at all.

William tilted his head, regarding them. "You loved her very much."
Tara nodded, and the little red cat did a head-bump under Tara's chin, purring louder.

"I can't refuse you anything. Can't be possessive. I wasn't faithful to you—randy as Charlie Sheen —"

"I'm happy to say!" Tara interrupted. She held the cat with both hands. "This isn't penance. You can say 'no'." Her voice was level, but her hands curled protectively around Willow.

"You say we need her."

"We could sure use her," Tara admitted. "I don't like to say what I've seen. Eliza showed me The Sight, but I don't like to look that far ahead. This longevity... it's weird. You think you know what's to come, what you are. You haven't even begun. I mean, if I live, we must have won—will win—our battles, but Eliza told me over and over not to get cocksure. Each time, we'll need to fight as though it's life or death. Because it is. Nothing’s guaranteed."

"Some Big Bad redux down the pike, and we'll need the double-witch whammy?"

Tara nodded again. "She'll be more help to us in human form."

William leered. "Not to mention more fun."

He blinked and for an instant, saw the two witches sitting naked on his bed, leaning against one another, strawberry and cream, Willow deliciously slender, and his own voluptuous darling, both giving him veiled looks, unfathomable. He blinked again, and the vision vanished.

"I wasn't suggesting—" she began.

"No, I was. Always knew I had lesbian tendencies." He grinned. "I know you love me, and with this love-through-many-lifetimes thing Eliza saw for us, I'd be a cad to say 'no' if you wanted the witch back. Just so's you don't give me the heave-ho."

Tara dropped the cat—gently—and flowed up against William. "Never, never." ~~~

"Truth to tell, I often fantasized about you and Red."

Tara chortled. "We did about you, too."

"What!"

"I told her once I was pansexual, and she wanted to try a third person, down the road..."

William lifted one eyebrow.

Tara pinkened. "She thought you, being chipped and all, couldn't hurt us, and she thought me having you would get any bisexual ideas right out of my pretty little head, and leave my feet firmly on Gay Street."

William scoffed, "She wasn't afraid that ol' Spike, being a demon in the sack an' all, wouldn't change your orientation altogether? Confident little bint, wasn't she?"

Tara nestled closer. "I think she wanted to be sure of me. She didn't realize how much—"

"How much you loved her." William pulled the covers over her warmly.
"You, too. There's Buffy. You loved her, so much."

He corrected her, "I idolized Buffy, because she was a hero. Not a good basis for a relationship, though, me being evil an' all back then. Beneath her. But, yeah, I loved her. And Dru. And the others, God help me."

"I love that you loved them, and that you love me now."

Shamefaced, he admitted, "I don't like to say, but I was scared—"

"You're not scared of anything!"

"Oh, yeah. Scared of losing you, the most. Of me killing my whole team. Not only that... Back in L.A... The abyss—" He closed his mouth, certain he wasn't making sense. Anyway, how could he explain the Nietzschean void? The hold evil still had on him?

"Afraid 'the abyss will gaze into thee'? Never happen."

Unused to hearing himself praised, he wanted to argue with her, but it pleased him to hear her defend him. He held his peace, hearing her say, "Afraid you'd become a monster, from fighting them? Never happen."

"It's already happened, Tara love."

She shook her head. "I will just have to love you until you can love yourself." She changed the subject. "What do you think of my wedding gift to you? This longevity?" She gave a nervous laugh. "Save you the trouble of turning me—"

"Hush! That's sacrilege. Never happen indeed!" He seized her and held her for a long time, until he felt her relax against him.

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The following evening, fed and fucked-out—for the nonce—they fired up the redwood hot tub and had a long soak.

"What will we do now?" William asked.

"Whatever we want. The job won't ever end. But we'll have fun in the meantime." Tara climbed out of the tub and dried her body. She shook down her pinned-up hair, which fell in a nimbus around her head.

He climbed out too, and toweled off, regarding her with head tilted. "I'll like seeing you in those fetching short butt-high uniforms, missy. Although those poncy pointed sideburns and high-water bell-bottoms are not my cup of tea. Hey, I'll reinvent myself! I'll need a manly captain's name, though, full of sharp consonants: Kirk, Picard, Riker—" His voice became a sexy growl.

"Spike." Tara smiled, tying his red Chinese dragon robe around her.

"Perfect!"

"I think so. But we have work to do. Dragons to slay." She turned to reach for a hairbrush, giving him a view of the design on the robe's silken back, tightening its belt. The dragon shuddered.

"I will never let you go again," he promised, pulling her into his arms.
They stood on the threshold, the open French doors on either side, and looked out into the twilit garden, indigo sky fading to black. Fireflies flickered.

Tara rested her head upon Spike's shoulder. "My place is in the shadows, with you."

THE END

Chapter End Notes

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In earlier chapters, some pagan and Wiccan sources were Googled and not properly credited. I tried to correct this, but in some cases, I could not track down who to credit. My apologies. If they're yours, please let me know and I'll credit you or remove them, at your discretion.

Big thanks due to the talented manippers who created the lovely fanart. This chapter is graced with one by the fabulous Kazzy_Cee.

The poem in this chapter is by Dorothy Parker.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!