Divided Destiny

by elisi

Summary

Angel, Spike and Illyria go on an epic quest, across untold dimensions, to undo the power of W&H.

Notes

This is the sequel to ‘Maybe Someday’ (or, more accurately, Maybe Someday was the prequel for this), in which Spike, Angel and Illyria turned up in Rome and encountered Buffy (Sept. 2004). During the following week Buffy and Spike started dating (and working through their issues), Illyria picked up some handy portal opening powers and Angel got a lead on someone who used to know the Wolf, Ram and Hart. This fic starts the evening after that fic ended.
Chapter 1

The desert lay silent and still under the vast blackness of the night’s sky. Then the air began to shimmer and tear apart, and a moment later a hollow of nothingness hung above the sand.

Through the rent stepped three figures. Two males clad in leather coats - one tall and dark, one slim and blond; both carrying themselves with the unconscious easy authority and self-assurance of warriors long accustomed to battle.

The third figure was female in shape, but its demeanour spoke of otherness and its eyes were as old as time and chilly blue.

As the rift closed behind them, the figures looked around.

The blond one studied the landscape, identical sand dunes surrounding them on all sides.

“So... any idea where we’re going? Or are we going to blunder about like the lost children of Israel?”

The dark haired one sighed, then turned to the third member of the party.

“Illyria. This sorcerer we’re looking for is said to be very old, very powerful and fairly easy to sense...”

The blue entity closed her eyes and stood immobile for a while. Then her eyes snapped open.

“This way,” she said and set off across the sand.

The other two looked at each other, shrugged, and followed.

“So...” The blond one said lightly, after a few minutes’ silent walk. “Did you have nice time these last few days?”

The dark one studiously kept his eyes fixed on the horizon.

“It was... OK,” he finally answered.

The other cracked a wide grin. “Oh come on Angel - you smell all over like werewolf! Where’d you go?”

“Cabo... in Mexico.” Angel tried to keep a smile out of his voice, but didn’t quite succeed.
“Nice one!” his companion replied, his wide smile deep and genuine. “Gotta say you’re a lot easier to be around when you’re gettin’ some - must remember to get Dog Girl somethin’ nice to show my appreciation.”

Angel’s smile vanished. “Spike! For the last time - don’t call her ‘Dog Girl’ - she has a name.”

After a moment’s silence, wherein Spike frowned and thought hard, a reply was forthcoming. “Can I call her Wolf Girl then?”

Angel opened his mouth and then closed it again firmly.

“Hey,” Spike continued, “Does this mean that she’s finally forgiven you then?”

“Something like...” Angel answered. “Although not having actually seen her since May it was kinda hard to make up before now.”

“S’pose,” Spike shrugged. “Still - can’t help but thinking that coming home from holiday and seeing that half of LA had been turned into a hole in the ground should have made her a little grateful that she was away...”

“She was mostly pissed off that I broke up with her,” Angel cut in.

“Oh...”

There was silence for a while, then Spike frowned again.

“This sand is bloody annoying. Oi - Illyria! Can’t you make a new portal taking us a couple of miles further on?”

Illyria kept walking without a word. Spike grumbled.

“She’ll take you to friggin’ Mexico, but she won’t make life just a little easier... my boots are getting full of sand.”

Finally, without breaking stride, Illyria replied. “My powers are not unlimited. And I will not pander to your lassitude.”

Spike rolled his eyes. “Great. Smack-down from the Blue Bitch.”

They walked on, the surroundings an endless repetition. Then Angel suddenly halted.

“Can you feel that?” he asked, and Spike looked at him sceptically, one eyebrow raised.

“Feel what?”

“Something... powerful.” Angel wore the same slightly paranoid look he’d so often displayed at W&H.

“Sorta....” Spike replied cautiously.

He did feel something - and he didn’t like it. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, pricked under his skin and quite frankly all he wanted to do was to walk away in the opposite direction. Overall the sensation was far too similar to how he’d felt when he’d entered the cave in Africa, seeking out his soul. The sense that there was something old and dangerous that shouldn’t be there.
More than two hours later they finally came to a tall cliff. As they neared it, they could see a perfect semicircle of bleached bones - full skeletons of various desert animals laid out at uneven intervals.

Illyria stopped and smiled disdainfully.

“He hides behind a wall of power. Stay back - it kills any Lower Being.”

She nodded towards the dead animals and then reached out with one of her slim hands. The air began to lurch and wave, and then with a sharp movement she made a large gash in the barrier, motioning the vampires to step through.

Spike followed Angel, and yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that it was some sort of trap… that something bad was going to come of this.

As they neared the cliff face, they saw a cave about halfway up - a narrow, barely visible flight of carved steps leading up towards it at a dizzying angle. Illyria started climbing as though she was walking along a wide path, but Spike and Angel found the exercise somewhat daunting.

“I’m bloody well jumping down when we leave!” Spike thought to himself, as he tried to cling to the rough stone where a couple of steps had nearly vanished.

Finally they reached the cave entrance, and as their eyes tried to penetrate the severe blackness inside, there was a spark in the dark.

Slowly a bright flame started to shine - far brighter than any fire had the right to. A black hand plucked up the flame and placed it on the wall in a small metal holder, and the place was bathed in light - as bright as if the sun had shone down through the roof.

There was a moment where they all assessed each other. The owner of the cave was human in shape, but its skin was sleek and black, its features sharp and canny. As it moved there was a sudden and odd flickering of shadows in the corners - strange shapes stretching and fluttering.

The creature cocked its head, staring at Illyria so intently that the rest of the world could have stopped existing. Then it spoke, its voice strange, hoarse and rasping, and Spike wondered in earnest what the thing was.

“How come an Old One is walking the earth again? Why is Illyria not resting? Why is It here, in such diminished form? I recall beauty and majesty and grace and power beyond any other, and what I see here is but a shell and a shadow. Why?”

Illyria made no movement, but after a while her eyes narrowed a tiny fraction.

“You are The Raven. I thought you would have perished long ago.”

She slowly let her eyes travel around the cavern. “You have fallen out of knowledge, living on nothing but air and darkness. I will not answer your questions - but you will tell me much.”

Then she held out a hand, placing it on the creature’s head. It fluttered momentarily, but didn’t move. After a moment Illyria smiled - that small, cruel smile they knew meant that she had found something.

“You betrayed them - The Wolf, The Ram, The Hart - trickster! They banished you, seized what power you had.” She nodded slowly. “They might yet conquer all.”

The creature hissed and sharply withdrew. “It was not me. It was them. They found a source of
power, deep and dark, but they would not share, would not allow anyone else to know. They asked me to set up The Circle of the Black Thorn - thinking that I would be content to be their puppet. Follow their rules. Their scheme.”

Shiny black unblinking eyes fastened on them each on turn. “It wasn’t betrayal. It was vengeance.”

Illyria had gone utterly still. “They found power pure - how? Where?”

The odd creature made a strange spitting, strangled sound - anger billowing out in large, sharp, inky black shadows. “You think I know? You think I would be here if I knew? They grew. They expanded. They saw the humans take over the world and they saw their chance to fight from below. Hidden. They are wise. The world turns and the darkness grows.”

There was a pause; then The Raven, curtailing its fury, studied the vampires and became puzzled. “Why does Illyria travel with vampires? Surely there must be more worthy servants to be found.”

Spike could feel Angel tense at his side, but Illyria shrugged.

“They are Champions of the people and mortal enemies of The Wolf, Ram and Heart. They destroyed The Circle of the Black Thorn.”

The Raven suddenly inspected them more closely. “Vampire Champions... how much this world has changed.” Its eyes darting between Spike and Angel, it asked, “The whole Circle dead? Every member?”

Angel looked back, impassive. “The Circle is... gone. But you were once close to those we fight. Tell me - how do we kill them?”

The Raven stared at him silently for a long while, then it shook its head. “They are Immortal demons like I, from the edge of time. They cannot be killed. Now they do not even reside on this plane...”

“Yeah - The Home Office. Heard all about that - even stole The Band of Blacknil once. Much good that did.”

A sudden look of what might be respect passed over the black creature’s face. “You had a Band of Blacknil?”

“Didn’t work.”

The Raven blinked rapidly, studying at Angel. “They must have disenchanted it. A Champion coming to The Home Office.... Bad. Bad.”

Angel was staring at the other one as though he’d been smacked hard across the face. “You mean The Home Office is real?”

“Of course it is real. Foolish vampire - so little knowledge and understanding.” The Raven was sneering now.

Spike observed silently. Half the stuff made no sense and the other half was less than useful. And the place seriously freaked him out. No wonder Illyria felt at home.

Illyria, ignoring Angel, spoke again.

“Can their power be undone?”

The Raven looked from one to the other, then after a final penetrating stare at Angel abruptly turned
and swiftly strode to the back of the cave, as large black shadows danced across the cave walls in eerie unnatural skittering.

“There is a tale of a Key…” the voice drifted towards them, rasping against the cold stone and making Spike shiver as he sent Angel a look.

“The Dead Key…” he said, remembering the ancient text in The Council’s library that had sparked their quest in the first place - sent them slowly moving down through Europe, searching for someone who might tell them more.

There came a strange almost-cackle back at them.

“Not so foolish after all maybe. A Key fashioned long, long ago - some say by The Powers themselves. Nobody knows. A Key of Living Energy, built to undo and destroy the Power of the three we hate…”

“What is it? Can we find it?” Angel’s voice almost cracked.

The Raven walked towards them with something clutched to its chest, a dark shadowy wing span suspended above it on the ceiling. Ignoring Angel it fastened its eyes on Illyria.

“But it was never finished. The Wolf, Ram and Hart found it before its completion. They could not undo it, but they killed it and broke it. Scattered it over many worlds, leaving the pieces to be guarded by their most trusted servants.”

It held out its hands, revealing a strange curled-up grey lump inside.

Illyria shrank back, a look of revulsion on her face.

“Dead Energy... How did you get this?”

“There are ways. I am good at... concealing myself. And my thirst for vengeance only grew after they drained me. I do not have the power to undertake to find the other pieces... but if you will swear to do it, to finish it, you can have this.”

Spike felt his bullshit-o-meter ping high and loud.

“But if it was never finished, what’s the bloody point? And if it’s dead - like dead dead - it won’t work whatever we do.” He looked at the horrid lump with distaste. “Seems like a wild goose chase to me.”

The Raven sent him a look that almost made Spike reach for his sword.

“I have told you much, and spoken only truth. Maybe others know how to complete the Key. How to bring it back to life. I have aided you. For the sake of my vengeance and for one who used to give radiance to all the worlds. Now leave.”

It held out its hand, and after after a swift look at the others Spike reached out and took the odd nugget. Immediately the cave was plunged into the same impenetrable darkness that had filled it when they first entered, and swearing loudly Spike took the few necessary steps backwards to stand on the precipice once again. Tucking the Key fragment into a pocket (if that really was what it was, he’d like more proof than the word of some creepy Old Timer), he looked down onto the sand far below. Then he took a deep breath and leapt, body pulsing with adrenaline and ready to absorb the impact. It was somewhat terrifying and absolutely fantastic, and the fresh cool air rushing past him was the most wonderful change from the stifling atmosphere of the cave. His landing was abrupt and
the sand was no softer than a pavement, but not hitting it face first was definitely of the good.

He turned to look back up at the cave opening and saw Illyria slowly and precisely navigate the slender steps, as unruffled and self-composed as ever. Angel stood on the edge still, obviously carefully weighing the options and then - much to Spike’s delight - chose the fast route also.

When Angel was by his side, Spike pulled out the grey lump, handing it over.

“What d’you think? This really what we’re looking for?”

Angel turned it over in his hands. “Illyria seemed convinced. Guess we’ll have to go looking for the other pieces... and more info.”

Spike sighed. “So what - we try the Helldimension Holiday Package?”

Angel shrugged. “Something like. I’m hoping Illyria has an idea where to start looking.”

“Oh this... this is bloody fantastic,” Spike proclaimed, shaking his head. Then with a deep sigh he pulled out his cell phone. It rang a few times before Buffy picked up.

“Hi Love - did I wake you? How’s the big Slayer meet going?” He listened for a while, then tried to cut through her chatter. “Look - you know how we were goin’ to try and have this long distance relationship? Well - the distance just grew...”

Spike turned to Illyria, eyebrow questioningly raised. The place was beyond a joke - it was like some Heavy Metal fan’s trippy fantasy.

Illyria stared back, uncomprehending. “I do not know of any breed of devil that carries pitch forks. Pitch forks are tools for manual labour, not weapons... your query is illogical and strange.”

Spike opened his mouth and then closed it again, knowing a lost cause when he saw one.

“I think Spike might have a point,” Angel said, studying the surroundings. “This is the home dimension of W&H? The place they originally came from?”

“Do you doubt me?” Illyria asked, a note of anger creeping into her voice.

“Well...” Angel grimaced, “It’s all just a bit... cartoony?”

Illyria was obviously not familiar with the term.

Angel tried again. “In our culture, Hell is usually represented looking pretty much exactly as this place. Well except there’s no fire here. But overall - it just seems... weird.”

“That is not my concern,” Illyria replied coldly. She slowly turned around, impassive eyes charting the territory, before choosing a direction and wordlessly walking off. The vampires sighed and followed, trying not to think of how very dependant they were on her... If she left them, they would have no way of getting back home.

After a while Angel suddenly stopped, frowning. “Actually - what if W&H influenced humankind’s myths? They could have fed people’s fears with tales of this place. What if it isn’t some weird coincidence, but a kinda backwards proof of how much sway they hold over our world?”

Spike blinked, tried to absorb what Angel was saying, and then slowly shook his head.

“You think too much, mate. Don’t matter either way, does it? I’m more worried that that Raven fella was lying through his teeth. What the hell was that thing?”
Angel slowly mulled over the question. “Most primitive cultures have myths surrounding a raven - he’s known as a trickster, and in most of them he inadvertently creates the world by stealing the sun and moon…”

He stopped and turned to Spike. “You’ve never heard of any of this? Did you never get any sort of education?”

“I went to public school thank-you-very-much!” Spike retaliated. “But with Queen Victoria on the throne the superstitions of bleedin’ ‘indigenous’ peoples wasn’t exactly part of the curriculum. Mostly it was ‘this third of the world belongs to us! If the black bastards misbehave we chop their heads off.’ And as for the Irish…”

He shot Angel a challenging look, and Angel silently looked back, trying not to raise to the bait. Then he strode off ahead, jaw set.

Spike chuckled to himself, but as his eyes again met with the landscape his face fell. The ground was dry and cracked, and large rocks and stones were scattered over the plain on which he stood. Something that might be a pale sun hovered not far above the distant mountains. And dark clouds were gathering in the red sky.

‘Just two days ago I was in Buffy’s bed...’ he thought, and somehow it might as well have been a millennium ago. He’d told her in no uncertain terms that he didn’t want her to join their fight, and yet he couldn’t help but imagine just how wonderful it would be to have her walking beside him, wrinkling her pretty nose at the smell and hefting that gorgeous Scythe, ready to do some violence.

He sighed. The sulphur would probably kill her and she had work to do herself. He could have gone to join her after he got rid of the ghostliness, but he hadn’t and that was that. Had chosen Angel’s fight instead and here he was, caught up in events and powers far beyond anything he’d ever wanted... who could have foreseen that a simple soul could cause such seismic ripples?

Too lost in thought to notice a vague scraping sound, he didn’t see the big savage brute until it jumped. Sharp yellow teeth snapped millimetres from his face as he automatically swung up his arm to block the attack. Then he brought up his knee, catching the thing solidly in the middle, and as it momentarily folded he pulled a dagger from his boot and slashed its throat. It fell down in a wobbly lump, and brownish, foul-smelling blood oozed out on the ground. Thanking the powers that he didn’t need to breathe, Spike did his best to wipe the dagger’s blade on the creature’s rough, prickly hide - he had a feeling the blood would eat right through his shirt.

“Spike!” Angel looked out from behind a large boulder. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Tryin’ to stay alive!” he replied and walked around the dead body. “Watch out for surprise attacks.”

Angel nodded silently and they set off again, once more side by side. Illyria walked ahead of them, her course as straight as if she were an arrow.

“Where are we going?” Spike asked after a while, and Angel shrugged. “No idea. I tried to ask a minute ago, but she didn’t answer.”

Spike sighed again, and silence fell.

As senses slowly grew more accustomed to the place they began to pick up on scents and sounds, and when four skinny demons brandishing crude weapons fell on them some time later they were ready. The grey indistinct shadows slowly lengthened, and they fought off several more attacks - although oddly Illyria was not bothered in this manner. Whatever vibe she sent out, the creatures did
not touch her.

It was - as far as they could tell - many hours since they had first arrived and darkness was stealing across the sky. They were now amongst what in a normal landscape would be hills, but here was just large naked rocks jutting up. Here and there little withered bush-like shrubs clung to the rock, and they could hear skittering above their heads - even once or twice caught sight of small monkey-like creatures.

The sunset was abrupt and the world was now lit up by nothing more than a scant scattering of faint stars, as smudged and indistinct as the the sun. The darkness, changing the reds and murky greeny-browns of the landscape into familiar grey, didn’t bother them, but after having walked for what seemed to be more than the lenght of two nights and no new daytime apparently being near, they decided to find a cave and get some much needed rest.

Not long after Spike lay with his head on his duster, letting his eyes travel over Angel beside him and then towards Illyria’s immobile form seated at the entrance. Was this what they had to look forward to?

“You know what’s one of the best things about girlfriends?” he asked, and Angel turned his head, obviously unsure where Spike was going with the question.

“Soft, warm beds,” Spike said, and Angel smiled, then asked: “And the worst thing?”

“Nagging!” Spike promptly replied, and Angel chuckled.

After a moment Spike continued, a little unsure. “About me and Buffy seein’ each other... you’re OK with that, right? Since she actually wants to have a go at some sort of long-term thing...”

He swallowed, still overwhelmed at having somehow won in life’s lottery, and then caught Angel’s eyes.

There was a moment, then Angel looked away. “Told you so already,” he replied and Spike nodded a little uncertainly.

“Course,” he answered, but couldn’t help feeling that things had changed a fair bit since their first conversation a week ago. There was a difference between ‘going on a date’ and ‘dating’ - and he and Buffy had moved from one to the other almost without noticing.

The main issue now being his and Angel’s... ‘friendship’. Spike didn’t like that word, since it implied a choice to be in each other’s company, which was very far from the reality of their situation. But they got along, maintaining a careful balance. Like tightrope walkers. Only Buffy was bound to upset things...

Problem was of course that they’d dealt with the ‘Buffy issue’ months ago and ‘moved on’. Not very successfully from her - in Spike’s case at least - but from fighting over her. It was a pattern, Spike realised - bicker, fight, deal, move on. And Buffy had been a closed chapter. But now there was friction where there had been none, and it was bound to be awkward.

Then Angel turned back, a sudden mischievous look in his eyes. “Don’t suppose you told her about the girl in Germany?”

Spike’s nostrils flared. “No... and nothing happened with the girl in Germany.”

“Because I dragged you away!”
Spike scowled. “Wish that black eye I gave you hadn’t faded so quickly... ‘Is your boyfriend always this jealous?’ Coulda bloody well killed you! First chance I’d had in months.”

“We were supposed to keep a low profile, not chat up exchange students and impressing them with tales of our adventures,” Angel’s face still had hints of amusement, but a more serious side shone through.

“I saved her from a demon attack - she was grateful. I’d have been gone before she woke up... I never signed up for the hundred year abstinence.” Spike was feeling petulant, but he couldn’t help it. Not like Illyria was willing to give it up...

Of course in the last week he’d had a feast he could never have foreseen, so maybe Angel had been onto something after all. Deciding that there was no point in dwelling on things he could do nothing about he closed his eyes, calling forth the image of Buffy. Soon he was drifting off, caught in happy memories.

It was a few hours later when Angel suddenly sat bolt upright, crying out as he hit his head on the low sloping roof of the cave.

Spike blinked and rose up on his elbow. “What now?” he asked, and Angel winced in pain and then frowned.

“I-I’m not sure. There was a bright light... and my head hurts...” his voice trailed off, and Spike yawned. “Don’t go into the light mate, no good ever comes of it. Also I don’t feel like waking up next to a small pile of dust. We’ll find a bigger cave next time.”

Angel shook his head. “No - it was...” He rubbed his head, uncertain.

“...a bad dream. Try burning to death and dealing with the nightmares that come from that!” Spike finished. “Go back to sleep.” He lay back down and tried without much success to be comfortable on the hard ground. “I was dreaming of...” he chuckled and didn’t finish the sentence. “Why don’t you try counting werewolves jumping over a fence?”

Angel nodded slowly, and with a puzzled look laid back down.

It was the next evening when Spike went hunting. They were still amongst the hills, the distant mountains having neared a little after two days’ march, and as he heard the now familiar skittering above them he turned to Angel. “I’m hungry. Hold my coat - I’m gonna go get us somethin’ to eat.”

He let his gameface come forth, scanning the air for scents, but Angel hadn’t moved. He was looking at Spike with an odd look on his face, then shook his head. “Spike - we’re not animals.”

Spike stared at him for a long minute, then closed his eyes and shook his head. “I am not having this discussion with you again. Not now, not ever, OK? Just hold the bloody coat!”

Thrusting it into Angel’s hands he then leapt up onto a ledge, before silently creeping further up the jagged rock. Darkness had now fallen everywhere, and with senses keen and alert he stalked towards the place where he could sense a whole colony of the little critters. It was exhilarating - primitive instincts welling up as he moved forwards as careful and precise as a cat.

The animals were gathered together on one of the topmost points, chattering quietly as they moved around, their wide eyes faintly reflecting the light from the dim stars. Spike smiled. In a flash he was by the edge of one of the wide ledges, plucked off an unsuspecting victim before it had time to call
out, and as he moved away again with the same unnatural speed his fangs were already in the creature’s neck. He couldn’t care less about what he was - all he knew was that he was friggin’ built for this. The blood wasn’t anything to write home about, being somewhat inferior to pig, but the feel of hot blood gushing into his mouth straight from the vein, heart still pumping, was pure bliss.

Having swiftly drained the little body, he thought that he’d nab a few more for himself and then make a nice collection for Angel. The easiest thing would be to wring their necks of course, but there was nothing like a live kill - and he knew Angel felt the same even if he’d never admit it... maybe he could knock them out? He tried to study the dead carcass in his hand and figured that a quick blow to the head ought to stun it for a while. The skull was fairly thick.

Making his way back to the group, as silent as a small detached piece of darkness, he began thinking that this hell dimension travelling could have its upsides.

Not long after he was climbing back down to Angel, full and content and with a trio of unconscious creatures in his hand, and he began wondering why he’d so automatically relied on butcher’s blood all these years.

Angel was waiting - with that look on his face that said that the argument hadn’t gone away - but it swiftly gave way to barely concealed hunger.

Spike held out his catch and said, putting as much emphasis on the words as he could: “We are demons. End of story.”

Angel stared at him for the longest time, and Spike couldn’t guess at what thoughts went through his head. But he was obviously not going to share, as he with a curt ‘thanks’ plucked the dinner from Spike’s hand and walked off to eat in private.

***

Oddly - or maybe not so oddly - eating ‘the fruits of the land’ made the place feel more real. As Spike went off on his third hunting expedition on the eve of the fifth day, he realised that he had begun to adjust to the environment in earnest. The eery silence didn't feel oppressive anymore, as his ears were now perfectly attuned to the minute sounds that meant the difference between being prey or predator. The rocks had their own unique faintly shiny texture that he’d never seen elsewhere, with tiny mosses and grasses clinging to any crack or fissure. Apart from the small monkey creatures and the randomly attacking demons, they’d also glimpsed larger beasts, thickly coated and many-horned, in the distance. It was a whole world unto itself, vast and mostly empty, with many-layered scents underneath the sulphur, and the remnants of an ecosystem existing without a care for the plans of evil things.

He stopped for a moment on an apex with a clear view over the plains ahead, and thought to himself that the place wasn’t all that bad, truth be told. Ugly as sin of course, and he was missing TV and Scotch already; but they’d just been through a hot, claustrophobic summer, moving from place to place via the less savoury parts of Europe, always looking over their shoulder and sleeping with one eye open, never trusting anyone - and the quiet of this place was surprisingly soothing. Kill or be killed was a far simpler way of life than the webs W&H tried to spin.

Then he raised his eyes and looked towards the mountains in the distance... a distance that narrowed day by day. He could begin to discern towers and structures clingning to the sides, ugly and dark, and he sighed. There was trouble up there, and Illyria was making a beeline for it... He was beginning to feel increasingly like Frodo and Sam walking towards Mordor, which was not a comforting thought.

***
It was hard to make out how much time passed. The nights seemed longer and the days shorter than on earth, but by how much they couldn't tell. After more than 14 days of travel they finally came to the feet of the mountains, but judging by the distance they had covered it was more like 4 weeks of ordinary time.

Angel looked upwards, taking in the steep and jagged sides towering above them and shook his head. "We gonna climb that? Should have brought rope and special boots... I'm not sure it can be done."

Illyria tilted her head. "We will not climb the mountains - the fortress is on the inside."

Spike stared at her, eyes widening. "We're going inside? Well fuck that!"
Spike had a point, Angel thought. This was happening with increasing frequency, and that in itself might be something to worry about. Listening to the argument between the other two he found himself agreeing with most of what Spike said. Except of course it wasn’t that simple. He sighed.

“Spike - we’re going inside. If you want to sit on a rock out here and wait for us then that’s your choice. Illyria - do you know where there is a door?”

Seeing Spike’s glare, he continued. “I’d like some backup too - and the architect’s plans. But since neither exists we have to go with what we’ve got!”

He held Spike’s eyes, and saw the other reluctantly give in. Although as usual he had to say something:

“Whatsoever - I just think it’s as dumb as painting a target on your chest and jumping into a whole group of Slayers yelling: ‘I’m going to kill you!’”

“Yeah, but we don’t have a choice, do we?” He turned back to Illyria. “Door?”

She looked back as though he were a moron. “Can you not see it?”

“She looked back as though he were a moron. “Can you not see it?”

“She looked back as though he were a moron. “Can you not see it?”

“She looked back as though he were a moron. “Can you not see it?”

“See what?”

He almost expected her to roll her eyes as she sighed. “The mountain is enchanted... The magic must be deceiving your eyes. Do you not see any of the dark signs?”

They both shook their heads, and Illyria - muttering something about the curse of lesser beings - walked over to the mountainside, slowly pressing the palms of both hands against the cold stone. Then she closed her eyes and stood still for so long that they thought she might have fallen asleep - except she didn’t really ‘do’ sleep...

Suddenly her eyes snapped open and she pulled away. The surface of the mountain appeared to shiver and bend, before a wavelike effect sprang forth from where her hands had rested and the vampires gasped.

In front of them was a large, ancient stone door, carved out of the rock-face with great skill, and covered in symbols that had once been inlaid with some dark material, judging by the faint traces in the corners. Above the door was a strange mark, obviously magical since it looked shiny and new,
despite its great age.

“What’s that?” Spike asked, eyeing it warily.

“It was the first symbol of the Wolf, Ram and Hart,” Illyria replied. “It is a warning and an armour - set up when they were still trying to conquer this one world. How small they were...”

Angel frowned. “A warning - what does that mean? Any idea of what’s inside?”

Illyria shrugged, and wrestled the doors open. “This world is abandoned - I have seen nothing but ghosts and vermin so far. If there is still power and secrets left they will be here.”

And she strode into the darkness.

***

There was a lot of darkness. Endless corridors, chambers big and small, and sometimes large halls. All empty.

The air hung dead and still everywhere, the only scent the cold stone. Ears finely tuned to the minutest sound strained vainly - but there was nothing at all. Not even a drip of water or the skitter of a tiny bug...

Angel tried hard not to shudder. The place felt like a tomb, sealed up and left forever... except so far they had not seen anything except dust. But the covering spell had been strong - and W&H never wasted magic. There had to be something in here besides dust - something dangerous or valuable... something powerful.

They’d come to this world, hoping that the original home of W&H could yield some information about what had happened to them - and maybe even find a piece of the Dead Key... It was a long shot, only no one alive now would know of this world, so it would be an ideal hiding place. But as they walked deeper and deeper into the heart of the mountain a conversation echoed in his head:

“Permanent storage. If there's anything Wolfram & Hart excels at, it's keeping their unmentionables unmentioned.”

What was in here? Something they wanted keeping safe? Or something they wanted keeping safe from? And whatever it was, it was likely to be guarded by more than a spell...

The black upon black didn’t help. He had to use all his senses to keep track of the other two and make sure he didn’t walk into any walls. Vampire senses only helped so far, and having to focus so hard just on seeing where he was going was exhausting. Angel knew he was utterly lost, but Illyria claimed to remember every turn they’d taken and he sincerely hoped she was right.

“So - were you ever in here before?” Angel asked after they’d scaled a staircase that seemed to go on forever.

“This place was far too small to hold my splendour,” Illyria replied, disdainfully. “I came here once, when this world was still teeming with life - creatures and growing things of all kinds vying for supremacy. It amused me to see how these trivial beings thought they could fill a mountain with power and rule a world thus.”

She looked around at the dusty desolation, face like flint.

“I should have killed them then.”
“Would have made our lives a lot easier I’ve got to say,” Spike chimed in as he kicked up the dirt. “This place gives me the creep! We sure there’s not a vengeful mummy or a cursed treasure tucked away somewhere?”

“We’re not sure of anything,” Angel said, secretly relieved that Spike had come to the same conclusion as he. “Illyria - should we try the basement?”

Whenever W&H had moved out no one had obviously bothered to take the prisoners with. There were row upon row upon row of cells and torture chambers, bones scattered everywhere - some so fantastical that Angel began to wonder in earnest what this world had been like in its heyday...

Unlike Spike - who had as always been swift to accept the new surroundings - he himself kept being haunted by the thought that this was how Connor had grown up - except worse of course. Far worse. There were days when he still hated Wesley with such intensity that it frightened him. He could forgive - had forgiven Wesley long ago - but he couldn’t forget. And yet... had Wesley been wrong? Should Angel have told him, after he regained his memories, how in the end he had cut his son’s throat?

Suddenly Illyria lifted her face, like a police dog catching a scent. Smiling she set off down a narrow, unassuming tunnel and the vampires followed. It appeared to go on forever and kept going down. They had to be deep, deep underground by now and it was as though the weight of the mountain above them was slowly coming to rest on Angel’s shoulders. This darkness and quiet was strangely reminiscent of his prison at the bottom of the ocean... and The Deeper Well. This was a place of death, fallen off the edge of time, and the coldness and oppressive silence was seeping into him. He fervently wished that someone would speak, and yet he couldn’t seem to make a sound.

He suddenly remembered the Eve-induced nightmare, the hollow emptiness, the terror of - this. This endless darkness. This feeling. He could still clearly picture his friends’ anger; hear Lorne’s words echo in his head:

“Now you’re gettin’ it. Everything hurts, and then we die. Or in your case, everything hurts and... then you go on... and on... and on... and on.”

He ran a hand across his face, trying to rub away the feeling of hopelessness. No good ever came of it. Focus on the goal, focus on the reason for fighting...

And although it felt as though much of that dream had become real, the differences were what he could hold onto. He’d lost his friends and the shanshu, and Buffy had chosen Spike... but...

His friends hadn’t betrayed him or left him behind, and Spike had not stolen the shanshu - that had been Angel’s own sacrifice. And the fight was still his, even if he’d handed the prophecy to Spike.

He wasn’t sure if he felt guilty or robbed over giving Spike his destiny. He’d been so used to carrying the responsibility and hope that he still felt adrift. They hadn’t spoken of the issue since Angel had told Spike about how he’d signed the thing away - what Spike’s thoughts were he couldn’t guess... or maybe he could. Mostly he tried not to dwell on it, since it invariably made him feel feel even more depressed than usual... There was a tiny voice somewhere deep, deep inside that said that it wasn’t fair that Spike got all the breaks and he got - this. And whenever he did get a break - a tiny glimpse of what lay beyond - it was snatched away.

Why did the price for freedom have to be so steep?

And then all of a sudden, interrupting Angel’s glum thoughts, there was in front of them a large door, made out of what appeared to be reinforced stainless steel. Above was the same symbol they had
seen outside.

“So...” Spike said, and although Angel would never have admitted it, it was good to hear his voice.  
“What d’you reckon is behind Door Number 1? Zombie army? Another dragon?”

Angel reached out and found that the handle moved smoothly. Sword hefted in one hand he quickly pushed open the door - and blinked against the sudden bright light and the sight that greeted him.

“On the whole a dragon might have been preferable...” he said grimly.
“Oh come now Boss - you don’t mean that!”

The immaculately dressed woman sitting cross-legged on the desk smiled at him widely.

“Lilah…” he said, eyes narrowing. “What are you doing here? Was there a backlog in the torture chamber?”

She chuckled. “No, Stupid. This-” she spread her arms wide, “-is my little slice of afterlife. Look - they even gave me a desk after I talked you into working for us.”

Angel looked at her in silence for a moment and then let his eyes travel around the room. It was rough, carved out of the rock like all the others. The floor was covered in dirt and illumination came from a single, undoubtedly enchanted, naked light bulb suspended from the ceiling. The only other thing in the room was the large, expensive-looking desk.

He slowly nodded. “They’re good. Sometimes I forget just how good... But I’ve got to hand it to them - this is inspired.”

Catching her eyes he asked, “I don’t suppose you can leave?”

Her smile was slightly forced this time. “Well... the door has no handle on the inside.”

“Of course.” He smiled back at her, beginning to see exactly how to play this.

“Lilah…” Spike said, thinking, eyes narrowing. “That’s it - you were Wesley’s bird!”

His eyes travelled appreciatively from her head to her toes and back up again, raising an eyebrow. “Gotta say the guy had taste.”

Taking in the promise in the blue eyes and the soft lips, the confident stance and the rough, rugged look that came from weeks of living outdoors, she smiled back. “You must be Spike…”

Then she turned back to Angel, lifting an eyebrow. “Hey - you couldn’t have locked me in a cellar with him?”

Spike smiled widely, charm turned up to 110 percent. “Like what you see, eh? Sorry pet, but I’m spoken for.”
He shot Angel a swift look, letting him know that he was ready to go with whatever Angel thought best, but Lilah’s eyes darted from one to the other, mouth falling slightly open, then catching herself.

“Well, I knew Angel had a thing for blondes, but...”

Angel smirked. Slowly he walked up to the desk until he was face to face with her; then leaned in, mouth almost brushing her ear.

“Oh wouldn’t you just love to know?” he purred, voice low and seductive. She looked at him sharply, but he moved away and smiled back, face unreadable.

“You waste time!” Illyria complained, and Lilah stared at her.

“Um... Fred? Did you just have a really bad hair day or...”

Angel tried very hard not to grind his teeth. Trust Her Impatient Highness to trample all over his game... Even Spike was able to judge a situation without difficulty (and unfailingly backed him up when called for, which was something he was still adjusting to, but it sure made life easier), but Illyria...

He looked back at Lilah. “Fred is dead. This is Illyria, an Elder God from before the time of men...” He sighed. “Long story.”

Lilah blinked, but he ignored her.

“Illyria - can you be patient for just a little while? Lilah is a lawyer and she’s dead - facts I’m sure you remember. If I thought I could get any answers out of her by torture, she’d be in several different pieces already. We’ll need to... negotiate.”

Illyria stared back coldly for a moment, then shrugged and began to inspect the walls.

Angel turned back to Lilah.

“Now... negotiation... Simply put, we all want something, Lilah. It's the way of the world. Everybody's got an agenda. Even you.”

“I really don’t Angel - I’m not in the world anymore, am I? There’s nothing you can offer me.” She smiled back, as smooth and confident as ever.

“So... you’re happy here? Spending eternity in a tiny box? Because let me tell you something - there’s nothing out there. This world is used up, dead and forgotten. You won’t even have pleasure of being ripped to shreds because the only demons outside are too dumb to use a door handle. Wouldn’t you like... I dunno? A chair? Some chocolate? Peace?”

“Aw Angel, that’s so sweet!” She clasped her hands together and pressed them to her chest, and if she could have faked a tear he was sure she would have. Then she shook her head lightly, a touch of a smile on her lips.

“But sorry, Wesley already tried that one, bless him. Didn’t work.”

Angel didn’t smile back. “I’m not a gallant ex-lover Lilah, nor an unyielding Champion fighting for people’s souls... or have you forgotten? I’m a man who knows the value of compromise and how to beat the system from inside the belly of the beast.”

He fixed her with a cold stare. “I took the job. As a result all my friends are now dead and I have the
blood of heroes on my hands. I couldn’t give a crap about your fate, but I’m guessing we’ve each got something the other wants.”

“Now now, no need to be so blatant,” she replied, shooting him a coy look from under her eyelashes.

He gave in and chuckled as he shook his head. “Oh Lilah - I never thought it was possible, but I think I’ve actually missed this. If only they’d sent Lindsey here as well it’d have been a proper reunion.”

She looked at him sharply. “Lindsey’s dead?”

Angel’s smile turned frosty. “Ah yes, he came back like a bad penny, full of crazy schemes. Gave me a real headache, even though he came in useful.”

He shrugged, made a face. “I had him killed in the end - too big a liability.”

He could see how his statement affected her far more than any of his previous ones - for the first time she seemed to really take on board just how much he’d changed. She knew that he could be ruthless, knew the lengths he’d go to when he had a personal vendetta. But seeing in him the W&H quality par excellence - the ability to coolly and impersonally use and then discard people with a view only to own advancement - that made an impression.

Studying her, he kept the smile in place - that perfect, ‘friendly’ W&H smile that they both excelled at.

“But - lets talk about you Lilah. What exactly are you guarding?”

“Is that supposed to mean something?”

She could still keep her composure, he had to give her that.

“Stop the games. They’re fun, but take too long. You were one of their top people, head of a department, on the fast track. They didn’t just put you here for punishment, they put you here on the off chance that someone like me ever dropped in, so you could stop them getting at whatever W&H are hiding in this place. And as I said, I’m willing to trade. Because I? Can offer you the most valuable thing in the world - something stronger even than loyalty.”

“And what would that be, Mr Speech giver?” She was curious now he could tell, in spite of herself.

“Hope.”

She turned that over in her head. “Hope... hope... Hmmmm...”

Then with apparent sudden illumination she looked back at him. “Oh yes - I remember that one. Sadly for you that one is filed away beside ‘love’ and ‘peace’. But nice try!”

Condescending didn’t even begin to describe the expression on her face, and Angel decided to just let the thought and the subsequent curiosity brew for a moment before he showed his hand.

“I’ll explain more later - right now I’m wondering what exactly you’ve got hidden and if it’s worth the price. And where...”

He looked around the room again, saw Spike leaning against the wall, observing and a little bored, but keeping quiet. Illyria had stopped walking and was now studying a bit of black wall intently, and if he hadn’t known better he’d have thought she was trying to kiss it.
“Here!” she said, and he could sense the momentary - but quickly calmed - panic in the dead woman beside him.

“Well then Lilah, going to show your boss what you’ve got in there?”

Her smile was forced this time.

“If you’re here, trying to barter with me, that means you’re not the boss anymore - doesn’t it?”

Well at least she wasn’t still trying to deny that she was guarding something. He wondered if Illyria would be able to open the safe and how long it would take... But thinking about it he realised that he wanted to win this battle with Lilah himself - if for no other reason than to prove that he could. That he could beat the Senior Partners at their own game.

“Thank you Illyria,” he said. “Let me handle it from here on - please?”

Illyria turned her head, her eyes moving from him to Lilah and back again, unreadable. Then to his immense relief she inclined her head and stepped back. Maybe she remembered their dealings with Giles? Who knew. She never let on by what bizarre thought processes she operated.

Then he stepped in front of Lilah and slowly studied her face. “The thing is - I know you. They might think you’re loyal, because you always tried to be the best. Always followed the rules. C’mon - the only reason you were there was because they offered you the best deal. I can offer you something better - and you know what? You’re going to take it, because when it comes down to it - you’re always looking out for Number 1.”

There was a long moment’s silence, then her eyes narrowed and he could see that for the first time she let the mask down, if only a fraction.

“What did you mean ‘hope’?”

He didn’t move a muscle. But he could feel a smile spreading inside, a separate thing altogether like a Cheshire Cat’s. He had her. Spike might enjoy primitive killing out in the wild - but this... oh this was his sort of hunt. The slow luring of the prey until it was inside his trap without knowing it. Killing didn’t even enter into it - it was all about the capture.

Keeping his voice perfectly neutral and even, he replied:

“We’re trying to undo the power of W&H. If we succeed I’m expecting a lot of contracts will go off to Never Never Land, no longer worth the blood they were signed in. Don’t know what exactly that’d mean for you, but I’m figuring it’d be better than this.”

“Undo their power? Riiight, that’s going to work!”

If it was possible to pour more scorn into a voice Angel wasn’t sure how it could be done. Didn’t matter - victory was just a question of time now, so he readily elaborated.

“There’s a key, made for that purpose, but W&H broke it. We’re looking for the pieces - and we’re figuring you might have one. Spike?”

“Catch!”

Angel turned and automatically picked the grey lump out of the air, but nevertheless sent Spike an intense scowl. Spike of course only grinned back, utterly unconcerned.
Lilah wrinkled her nose. “That is not helping.”

“Well if you have another piece, that should prove me right.”

She was thinking now, hard. Seeing was believing, and she’d seen plenty to know that he wasn’t bluffing. Then she asked: “So why are you doing it - still hoping for that shanshu?”

He shook his head dismissively. “Signed it away. Spike is the Destiny Boy now. Me? I’m a free Agent. And since you asked - I’m mostly in it for the vengeance.”

He saw how everything clicked into place then. Because Lilah was smart and knew what he was capable of - and what he was ready to sacrifice.

She jumped off the desk with almost a spring in her step, laid her hand on the wall where Illyria was standing, and, focussing hard, recited something long and complex that made Illyria look almost impressed.

With the softest ‘whoosh’ a perfect square of wall evaporated, and Angel could sense Spike at his elbow peering in. There was a low, soft whistle. “What’s that golden thing? Looks very pretty...”

“No!” Angel said, and, ignoring all the shiny objects, the ancient talismans and the feather-light parchments, reached for the small knobbly nugget at the back. Bringing it out he looked at the two pieces, one in each hand, and frowned.

Illyria, gritting her teeth and looking almost green, plucked them out of his hands and held them against each other. And without sound or movement the two pieces were suddenly one.

“Bugger me!” Spike said, impressed. “Maybe old Mr Feathers was right after all...”

Angel looked up at Lilah, and she swallowed. He could see that she had indeed found what he’d promised - the knowledge that maybe one day things would change...

Spike shoved the Key back in his pocket and Illyria drifted over to the door; but Lilah bit her lip, then slowly looked up at Angel.

“What - what happened to Wesley?”

“He was killed by Cyvus Vail.”

He saw the name sink in, knew that she had to have been the one to handle the negotiations. Ah, the inevitable justice of life - the way every single thing would always come back and bite you on the ass, just when you thought there was nothing left.

She nodded slowly, and he continued - wanting to let her know that Wesley had done good. “He died in Illyria’s arms... They had a thing. Well - he and Fred had a thing, but Illyria sort of became attached to him too.”

Lilah looked up in surprise and Illyria met her eyes. “Wesley died an honourable death and my retribution was swift. The bones of Vail now adorn Wesley’s grave.”

After a moment of trying to work all this out, Lilah smiled.

“I like you. Thank you...” she waved a hand in Illyria’s general direction, “...your God-what-ever-ness!”

Illyria briefly inclined her head, then turned on her heel and left the room. Spike, standing by the
door and obviously itching to leave, did a little wave.

“Um - nice meetin’ you and all. Enjoy your desk! I’d help you with that if I could, trust me.”

He winked, and then slipped out.

Slowly Angel walked away, but turned at the door. Lilah was standing silently by the wall, looking oddly helpless and - although she was hiding it well - he knew that the endless loneliness that lay ahead terrified her. He could easily stay longer - tell her about everything that had happened - but she wasn’t going to ask and he wasn’t going to offer. Either scenario would be based on only one thing - pity. And he knew her well enough to understand that it was something she’d never accept.

But he could still offer her a sincere goodbye, with the respect she needed.

In the swiftest of moments he was by her side and she almost jumped. Odd how humans - even the dead ones - never got used to vampire speed.

She was studying him uncertainly, but with utmost gentleness he took hold of her hand and softly kissed it.

“Goodbye Miss Morgan. May we never meet again.”

He sent her a melancholy smile, and she suddenly looked as though she was going to burst into tears.

When he was at the door again he sent her one last look. A single lonely figure in an empty room; empty mountain; empty world. Damn that soul, because he actually felt sorry for her.

“Goodbye Angel,” she said quietly, “and good luck.”

“Thank you,” he replied, and closed the door.
There was a neat list inside Buffy’s head. Except she kept adding extra points in spite of herself.

1. Call Johnson and work out the week’s training and patrolling schedule.
2. Not think about Spike.
3. Talk to Dawn about that Antonio. And those super-short skirts.
4. Not worry about where Spike is.
5. Keep working on the new Slayer program.
6. Not look at all her new photos of Spike yet again.
7. Tackle the washing up.

When she’d got that far she sighed and leaned back in the sofa, her feet resting on the low table in front of her. She liked her sofa table - she should have bought it much sooner, those stupid block things that came with the flat were useless for anything more than a cup of coffee - and it had come in very handy the week before last... She smiled to herself and decided that it was utterly pointless to pretend that she wasn’t going to mostly think about Spike - like she did every other day. And she couldn’t even call him...

Dragging her hands through her hair she wondered at how her world had yet again been turned upside down. Two - no two and a half weeks ago everything had been going more smoothly than she could ever remember. Patrolling, training with the new slayers, spending time with Dawn and trying to stay in contact with her friends. And there had also of course been The Perfect Boyfriend, who had, emotionally, been as uncomplicated to date as a low fat yogurt. A really hot, charming, rich and endlessly reliable yogurt...

And then Spike had crashed back into her life, turning it upside down and inside out. As usual. With his cheekbones and eyes and lips and chest and coat and kisses that just melted her into goo... And love - a love she’d thought buried forever at the bottom of the hellmouth. All that love burning for her, setting her on fire...

Cool pale hands with black chipped nail polish - like a physical sign of the darkness dwelling underneath the beautiful exterior - slowly caressing her burning hot skin... soft, soft lips pressing kisses into her neck, as reverent as though she were holy... arms holding her so tightly that they almost bruised - like they were never going to let go...

And that’s how it should have continued - he should have stayed, and they could have settled down or... something. But no - he had his own life now, complete with world saveage - interdimensional
world saveage no less - and it’d probably be weeks, if not months, before she saw him again.

Playing with the pendant around her neck she cursed prophecies and evil law firms - couldn’t she just once have a simple relationship?

And then there’d been the big Slayer gathering in London.... In the past year-and-a-bit the remnants of The Council had been busy collecting new Slayers, banding them together in small groups, teaching and training them, and now they needed to think bigger - ‘phase 2’ as Andrew grandiously called it. If they could work out how to do this right, they could be truly global with instant response teams and cell groups spread all over. But they were woefully short of Watchers, and they also had to try to make sure that they didn’t end up branded as terrorists or something.

So far Buffy had considered the whole thing a headache - she’d been so exhausted after Sunnydale that she’d pretty much buried herself in her quiet little life in Rome. But now suddenly she realised that she really cared about things - she wanted to be involved. Partly she thought it was that she still felt that the Slayers were hers - since activating them had after all been her idea - but meeting Spike had done more than just make her finally fall head over heels in love. His commitment to his cause, and Angel’s vision, made her want to be back in charge of her own destiny.

Then there was a knock at the door, and she frowned as she got up. Unless the Chinese Take Away had worked out how to do mind reading (and she wouldn’t put it past them, she was sure than some of the employees were demons) she really didn’t know who it could be. Dawn wasn’t due back for at least an hour - presuming of course that she kept to her curfew.

She opened the door and it felt like the weirdest case of deja-vu. She stared at a dirty, filthy Spike, his hair in a mess of brown curls, standing in her doorway, and it felt like all the air in her lungs had decided to take a sudden vacation.

After a moment of speechless surprise, she said the first thing that came into her head: “Did you go crazy again?”

He laughed and shook his head - and it was a proper chuckle, not that horrible unsettling giggle she still remembered - and then she saw Angel behind him, in pretty much the same state.

“Sorry about the great unwashed invasion, pet, but Illyria dumped us here and vanished. Can we come in?”

Wordlessly she moved aside, but as they walked towards the sofa she called out sharply.

“No! Not the sofa - just... I’ll get chairs.”

Spike shot Angel a look, and drolly asked, “You know what’s one of the worst things about girlfriends?”

Angel chuckled, and Buffy shook her head as she put down the chairs, thanking the powers that they were made of plastic. It felt so utterly bizarre to have them just drop in, like it was somehow normal for them to just be alive and come see her. Like they weren’t a miracle.

“Sorry - private joke,” Spike said, slowly sinking into the seat.

Ignoring the joke she focussed on the reason. “It was really expensive,” she said, “Like - really, really expensive. I got a discount of course, because...” she stopped herself, because mentioning The Immortal invariably made them way grouchy. “I’d never be able to afford to replace it.”

Then looking them over she tilted her head, frowning. “Sorry - but what happened to your hair? Did
you try miracle-gro?"

“No...” Spike said, shaking his head with a surprised look on his face, and Angel frowned. “How long has it been since we left?”

“Bout a week and a half... I’ve only been back from London for three days.”

Angel slowly nodded to himself. “Of course - time goes differently. For us it was... oh... a month? More maybe? The days were a lot longer...”

“Where were you? You said you were going to a different dimension...” She studied them more carefully. They looked fine, but she really didn’t know much about different dimensions. Except that there was one without shrimp.

Spike stretched his legs, yawning. “Oh yeah, went to to W&H’s home dimension. Pretty much your standard hell place - red sky and black mountains and all that crap.”

“Oh my god!” She swallowed, wondering what had happened and swiftly went to him. Bending over she tried to look underneath the grime. “You’re not hurt and bleeding to death but being stupid and manly?” She shot Angel a searching look as well, but Spike shook his head, amused.

Feeling mostly reassured, she still couldn’t help asking. “But - what was it like? Was it too awful?”

“Awful?” He looked surprised. “Nah, it was... well nice might not be the right word, but - it was OK. No creature comforts, but quiet. Good place to unwind. Well except for the mountain of course, but before that - yeah, it was OK.”

“OK?” She was staring at him, feeling her jaw drop, but she couldn’t help it. “You thought hell was a good place to unwind?”

Incredulous she turned to Angel, who shrugged noncommittally. “It was mostly dead. Some feral demons, but... hell’s only bad when you’re the one being tortured.”

There came an odd look over his face and he looked away, and she realised that she’d absentmindedly started playing with Spike’s hair.

This was no good. As a matter of fact it was very, very bad. What with the underlying awkwardness and the really disgusting hair (that she absolutely didn’t like, nope) she needed to do something.

“Look - Spike - you smell pretty rank. Would you like to go have a shower - I’ll bring you clean clothes, OK?”

To her great relief he didn’t protest at all, just nodded before yawning again and then making his way to the bathroom. With a swift glance at Angel she ran off, fetched the jeans and T-shirt she’d bought the week before last and handed them over along with the biggest towel she could find. After a kiss that was supposed to be quick, but ended up long and deep and smouldering, she - after a brief pause to make sure her heart had settled down and she didn’t look too blushing - heard the shower turn on and then she retreated to the sitting room once more.

Angel was still where she’d left him. Some things never changed... except of course that he had. More than she could really grasp.

Sitting herself in the sofa opposite she fixed him with a determined look. Time for getting things out into the open... Which they hadn’t tried since - since she couldn’t remember. The break-up? OK, there had been some talking before the apocalypse, but...
“OK Mr Avoidy, we’re going to have a talk!”

“Avoidy? I’m not avoidy.” He looked a little peeved and she smiled.

“Yes you are. This me-dating-Spike thing is obviously bothering you, but you’ve not said a word, just given us looks.”

“I talked to Spike back when we first met you again,” he said, defensively. “It’s OK, really…”

She eyed him sceptically and he suddenly lowered his eyes, studying his hands. There was a moment of silence and when he spoke again his voice was quiet and toneless.

“And I know now that’d you’d never choose me. Not anymore.”

She heard the underlying pain in his voice and reached out and took hold of his hand. She had always loved his hands - so strong and gentle... she’d been sure that as long as they were holding her nothing could go wrong. And she sighed a deep inwardly sigh, for all the things that could never be and for a past where she had seen life through such simple eyes.

“Angel...”

He caught her eyes, shook his head. “I saw the way you looked at me back when... I don’t think you could ever accept who I am now. What I do.”

“You kill people...” she said quietly, remembering the scene far too clearly still.

“That and worse,” he replied. “You don’t know the half.” he stopped and swallowed. “Sometimes it feels like all I do is bring misery and death to all around me - everyone who I’ve ever cared about, my friends... they’d all have been far better off not meeting me. I’m free, but - the price was high.”

She didn’t know what to say, and had a feeling that really there was nothing she could say.

Then he smiled a little, reached out and softly stroked her cheek. “So the fact that you’re still alive is good. OK, I admit it’s not easy seeing you with someone else, but you and Spike obviously have something special...” She lost his eyes again as he looked away, the last sentence clearly having cost him a fair bit. But after a moment he added. “Of course he doesn’t deserve you, but at least he’s smart enough to know it.”

She smiled, surprised and grateful, and he continued. “I guess I just... I just want to know that he makes you happy.”

She could feel herself blush, and couldn’t help a big goofy grin spreading across her face. “Yes. Very. Very very. It’s like... like some sort of miracle. I keep thinking it’s a dream and that I’m going to wake up.”

”Because he died?” Angel asked, and she shook her head. “That too, but mostly we just screwed things up so badly. We weren’t just dysfunctional, we were like... anti-functional. You have no idea... Sometimes... sometimes I understand why he never called. Working things out is a scary thing.”

She took a deep breath, saw the questions in his eyes. “Still - I don’t know if I’d still be alive if it wasn’t for him.” She smiled wryly. “Spike and I are just really, really complicated. But I think we can make it work. And... thank you for not being a jerk.”

Angel nodded. “Thanks for telling me.” Then a small smile stole across his face. “And anyway, I
have a girlfriend.”

Buffy jumped at this information. “Nina, right? What’s she like?”

“Um... she’s lovely,” he said, slightly taken aback. Seeing the look on her face, he pulled out his wallet. “I have some pictures.”

“Pictures are definitely of the good,” Buffy agreed, greedily reaching out.

The photos showed a very attractive young woman on a beach somewhere, in a pretty flowery dress, laughing and smiling. The bright colours of a spectacular sunset were spread across the sky and Buffy felt her chest momentarily constrict as she abruptly recalled a dream she had thought long forgotten. She would never be able to walk along a beach with Angel’s arms around her... And she felt a sudden and rather forceful resentment against this girl who got to live out hers - Buffy’s - fantasies. Which was of course childish and pointless, but she couldn’t help herself.

“She’s an art student, right?” she asked, telling the stupid memories to go away, and Angel nodded. “She was working on a portrait when these pictures were taken, but she wouldn’t let me see it.”

The happy smile on his face made Buffy feel distinctly odd, because Angel looking happy was just... weird. And of course there was still the big question, “Do you...” she bit her lip, and Angel looked up, easily reading her mind. “What? Sleep with her?”

Buffy nodded, although seeing the expression on Angel’s face was all the confirmation she needed. She held up her hands. “OK - got it.”

The smile was still on his face however and she felt like a complete idiot. Maybe being avoidy was a good thing...

*Future note to self: Never ever ask Angel about his sex life! Also - change of subject needed, stat.*

“So... she’s a werewolf, huh?”

“Yes,” he said, and then as he was about to continue stopped. “That reminds me - could you get hold of Willow for me? I need to ask her a favour.”

***

When Spike rejoined them a while later, Angel was busy laying out his plans for a big concealing spell of some sort for the Hyperion - partly because Nina used the cage in the basement and partly because he thought it might be a nice base for them in between the dimension hopping.

“Much better!” Buffy said, taking in the shiny clean vampire in front of her. And the hair was kinda cute when not dirty she had to admit. Turning she asked, “Angel - would you like to borrow the shower as well?”

He shook his head. “For a start I don’t have spare clothes here...”

Oh.

Spike shot him a look, but Buffy reached out, pulling him down on the sofa beside her. “It’s OK - Angel and I had a little talk. He’s... OK.”

Spike looked from her to Angel and back again, pondering. “Well that’s good.”

She nodded enthusiastically, willing them all to make this work. ‘Cause they could, right? They were
all grown up and mature and she could be perfectly comfortable playing hostess to her current and her ex...

The word ‘hostess’ decided to come back for another spin through her head, and she belatedly realised that she’d not offered them anything to eat. A swift question confirmed that they were indeed hungry, and since she still had blood left in the fridge - there was no denying it, she was a terrible housekeeper - she went off to heat it up.

She came back a little later with two mugs, and settling down again next to Spike she couldn’t help but notice the face he pulled as he took his first sip.

“Has it gone off? It seemed OK.”

He shrugged. “Nah, ‘s fine, it’s just...” he scanned what he could see of the room. “Don’t suppose you’ve got a kitten hidden anywhere?”

“No! And you’re not allowed to play kitten poker either,” she said firmly, and he sighed deeply and kept drinking.

Angel however appeared more pleased. “Thanks Buffy. Hopefully-” he didn’t get any further as the door opened without warning and Illyria strode in.

“Do you wish to go to LA?” she asked and Angel after a second’s hesitation nodded and got up.

“Thank you for everything Buffy - especially Willow’s phone number. You sure she won’t mind?”

She shook her head vehemently.

“Spike-”

The other vampire looked up.

“Do you have any preferences when it comes to a room? I’m figuring we could add extra protection for where we sleep.”

Spike shrugged. “Not bothered, as long as it’s as far away from you as possible.”

Buffy blinked at this apparent rudeness, but Spike caught Angel’s eyes, a tiny smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Angel looked back silently, then slowly nodded. “Seems like a good idea. Very good idea.” A smile was hiding somewhere in his eyes, although Buffy couldn’t work out what was so funny.

“I’ll call you when we’re ready to set off again.”

***

As Angel stepped through the portal into the lobby of the Hyperion he looked over his shoulder. They had already forgotten him... Spike must have said something, because Buffy was giggling and mock punching him - and then they vanished.

He sighed. It wasn’t easy, no matter what he said. He’d just have to learn to live with it... to let go of a dream he thought he’d stopped believing in years ago. And compared to all the people he’d lost... at least these two were still alive. He should know by now that the only way of keeping anything safe was by letting it go.

Except for Nina - so far anyway. She was like a surprise - something that he wasn’t supposed to
have, and yet he did. He smiled as he walked up the stairs - he’d definitely have to make sure Spike’s
room was as far away as possible.

***

As Illyria geared up to open the portal, Buffy, still pondering their odd behaviour, turned to Spike.

“Can you read minds - vampires I mean?”

Spike shot her a look full of meaning, a sudden wicked grin on his face. “Pretty certain I can read
your mind!”

She spluttered and punched him. “No - I mean you and Angel.” She looked up and realised that
Angel was gone.

“No...” Spike answered, shaking his head and looking at her like she was crazy, and she sighed.

“You just do this thing, and it’s like telepathy or something. It... it kinda freaks me out.”

“Oh,” he frowned. “Sorry - I guess we’ve just been on alone together for what - half a year now?
We just...” he thought for a moment, “We know each other too well.” He shook his head, suddenly
looking more worn out than he had since he stepped through the door. “And of course there’s the
fact that we spent twenty years in the killing field together... that never goes away. Too many bloody
memories.”

He almost smiled at the unintentional pun, then with a slow, deep sigh of contentment let himself
settle down with his head in her lap. Looking up at her he continued.

“Thing is, now we’re bloody well stuck with each other, which isn’t exactly a dream come true...
An’ just how am I supposed to survive that when he has a bleedin’ existential crisis whenever it’s
dinner time?”

She frowned a little. “So your cure for this is... moving in together?”

He chuckled. “Well I like havin’ my own place, but since my flat got flattened along with half of LA
- and Angel actually owns the big brickpile - it seemed dumb not to take advantage... and I like
taking advantage!”

A wicked grin spread across his face as he went on to prove the truth in his words, and Buffy forgot
everything about Angel and dimension travelling and baby slayers; the only thing in her world one
vampire, kissing her.

Five minutes later Dawn walked through the door, screeched, and with warp-speed fled to her
bedroom. As Buffy tried to straighten her clothing she thought to herself that Spike having his own
place might be very nice indeed.
“You *do* know this is all your fault, right?”

Angel’s voice was hard to make out over the din of the fighting and screaming, even though he and Spike were back to back.

But hear it Spike did, as he with a well-aimed elbow took out an opponent, before having to duck sharply to avoid a particularly nasty-looking axe. Jumping back up he caught the axe-wielder under the arm, and then managed to stab it through where its heart was hopefully located.

“How *exactly*—” Feint, parry, thrust; feel Angel’s reassuringly solid back against his own, “—is this *my* fault?”

The conversation was lost for a few minutes as the onslaught thickened, and they had to concentrate on the fighting - Spike killed eleven demons, got stabbed three times and almost lost a hand - but then Angel answered, as he grimly hacked away at a large burly brute.

“You... said... that you were *bored*!” After parting the slow but powerful demon from most of its limbs the creature finally collapsed, and Angel suddenly had a horde of 3 foot tall creatures swarming at him and had to stop talking as he concentrated on staying alive.

Spike gritted his teeth and used the anger Angel’s words caused as fuel for the fight. As if his throwaway comment could be held responsible for this situation, when the culprit was gleefully tearing her enemies to pieces just a few feet away. No - there was no way Angel was pinning this on him.

They weren’t sure how long the battle took. The murky, pea-soup green sky never changed its hue, and Angel’s watch had been an early casualty. When they were finally victorious, if exhausted and battered, the only one who felt like partying was Illyria. In fact she looked so happy they almost expected her to hum, which was very unnerving.

Ignoring her for the time being, Spike focussed on Angel who had collapsed against a large stone, clutching his stomach.

“Right mate, let’s have a look.”

Angel winced, but slowly unbuttoned his blood-soaked shirt, revealing a deep and nasty looking stab wound - the edges of the weapon had obviously been serrated and Spike smiled grimly. They could
really do with getting armour of some sort...

“Well Peaches, it just so happens that today is your lucky day.”

He reached inside the duster and brought out a small compact first aid kit.

“Buffy insisted I bring this. ‘S a new slayer thing - they all have to carry them around on patrol and whatnot. Told her it’d just make ‘em soft and sloppy, but she’s like a bloody mother hen when it comes to the next generation. Anyway, should be able to fix you more or less.”

Angel just nodded silently and closed his eyes.

As Spike deftly cleaned up the wound and patched it up as best he could, Illyria came and hovered behind him, a satisfied smile on her face.

“I shall make you trophies. You fought bravely and helped restore my honour.”

After finally packing away the first aid kit, Spike slowly turned his head, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“Wanna elaborate on that Blue? Angel dearest feels that somehow this mess is my fault, but I can’t help but thinking that it’s got somethin’ to do with a certain bitchy ex-God who suddenly started slaughtering the people we were trying to negotiate with.”

Illyria’s smile widened and she suddenly reminded them of Dru after a good night out hunting children. “In amongst their worthless prattle they revealed that once upon a time they were the servants of my sworn enemies. The blood of their ancestors was spilled in battle against me when I was defeated. This was only justice much delayed - the price for dishonour is death.”

Angel grimaced and sat himself up, thinly concealed anger on his face.

“You mean I got skewered because these guys fought against you millennia ago?”

His only answer was a superior smile.

Slowly he shook his head. “Spike - I take it back.”

Spike grinned. “Sure you’re OK Peaches? No major brain damage? Can’t remember the last time you admitted to bein’ wrong...”

Angel glared, but didn’t retaliate as his face suddenly clouded over in pain again. Spike turned to Illyria.

“So then - any idea what to do now? Don’t get me wrong, I thought that was a fun tussle, but it hardly helped us find what we’re looking for. An’ since we’ve now been to The World of Smoke and The World of Beetles before ending up in this hellhole, I thought maybe we could go someplace slightly more civilised!”

Illyria stared him down haughtily. “What you so dismissively refer to as ‘beetles’ are the descendants of a deity as brilliant as I, who once dazzled all the dimensions. Their world was beauty and splendour untold.”

Spike shrugged, indifferent. “What goes up, must come down. You wanna spend 5 days talking to a cockroach about its fabulous past, please do it on your own time in future.”

Blue eyes met blue eyes, sparked, and locked together.
“Do not presume to tell me what to do vampire-”

Angel cut her off. “Look - do you know if there’s anything edible around? Not birds!”

Spike caught his eyes and they shared a moment. World of Smoke had been mighty pretty, but food had been a moot point. World of Bugs had - apart from the roaches - not had any other discernible life except for odd little birdlike creatures that had been smaller than rats and tasted twice as bad. And instead of taking them home, Illyria had brought them to this place, where they’d finally found intelligent life before the Blue Queen had gone on her vengeance spree. But if there were demons, there would be something for them to eat.

Illyria just shrugged off Angel’s question, and Spike sighed.

“I’ll go look. Try not to bleed any more than necessary, ‘K?”

***

Many hours later Spike returned with an assortment of various odd looking creatures. Hunting was definitely not as much fun when injured - his stab wounds did not merit any medical attention, but the pain was pretty constant, and added to that was of course the exhaustion and the general battering he’d taken. What he’d have done without the crossbow he didn’t like to think about.

On the upside he had spotted some sort of village in the far distance, so maybe they could find a tribe that hadn’t quarrelled with Illyria back in the Cretaceous Period...

*The price for dishonour is death*... These god types were all the same he thought, as he with a small smile recalled pissing off Glory. Just press the buttons and watch them go.

Angel was asleep when he returned, but Spike woke him, since blood would heal him a lot quicker than a nap. Illyria had been busy, having separated several of the largest fallen demons from their skin and flesh, and she was now busy creating fantastical structures out of the bones, tying them together with the tough, long grass that covered the ground as far as they eye could see.

“You know that really reminds me of Fred…” Angel remarked with a frown, having drained the last animal - a strange three-legged, beaked, fuzzy thing that neither of them could classify, but that didn’t taste half-bad.

Spike raised an eyebrow, and Angel began explaining about Fred’s cave in Pylea and what that world had been like.

“Hey - you think mirrors work here?” Spike asked, pulling out his sword, before sighing. “Nope. No reflection.”

“Lucky for your sword,” Angel deadpanned, and Spike scoffed. “Says the guy who *still* has demon goo in his hair.”

“What?”

Angel dragged his hand through his hair and grimaced in distaste at the sticky mess. Spike grinned and pointed out that there was a stream not far away, and Angel walked off immediately to have a rudimentary clean.

After getting some sleep they slowly set off towards the distant village, leaving behind two tall trophies set on a small hill, visible for miles around.
“Can anyone tell me why we’re not going home?” Spike asked. “This place doesn’t appear to have anythin’ except thick demons and sharp grass. And Angel’s still hurt and probably can’t fight better than a kitten.”

"I’m fine. And we won’t need to fight if no one starts any fights!”

Angel’s jaw was working, and Spike sent him a look. “I didn’t start anything. And if you’re fine, why don’t you go hunting tonight?”

That earned him a scowl and they kept walking in prickly silence, until Illyria suddenly spoke.

“Before I metered out my punishment, the blasphemers spoke of a minor deity residing in this dimension, not far away. We will find It and see what power and knowledge It possess.”

“Hunh.”

Spike and Angel shared a look. That actually made sense, although as usual Illyria had kept her knowledge to herself until she deemed the time right.

***

The hilly country took a lot longer to cross than they had first estimated, and what Spike had first thought a small collection of huts turned out to be a bit bigger than they had anticipated. A tall wall of logs surrounded the large village, the ends sharpened in a way rather worrying for a vampire, and there were heavily armed guards at the gate. Illyria of course walked straight up, fixing them with her cool, unnerving stare.

“Take me to your leader.”

Spike nearly choked and did his very best not to look at Angel. Getting the giggles now was probably a bad idea, but he had a terrible suspicion that Illyria was actually channelling Fred...

As they walked through the randomly arranged huts, Spike half-wondered what sort of demi-God would be happy in a place like this. It looked more comfortable than anything else they’d seen so far, but it was dirty and smelly and a far cry from the opulence Glory had surrounded herself with. Finally they arrived at a large building, dwarfing the surrounding huts and decorated with simple, but ornate symbols. A well-endowed female demon was waiting for them, smiling and letting them know that her Master was willing to see them now.

Angel elbowed Spike, muttering to stop ogling her chest, but it really wasn’t easy. As demons went she really was something special, if possibly a bit on the chubby side for Spike’s tastes... but what was he supposed to do when she wore a dress so low-cut that it appeared to defy gravity? Ilona had nothing on this chick.

Thankfully she turned around and led them into the temple. Taking his eyes off her rather fetching behind, Spike looked ahead to see who their host could be. And then the giggles that he had managed to suppress at the gate came back hundred fold.

Angel and Illyria both stopped and glared at him. Angel was beginning to look very pissed off. “Spike!” he hissed. “What is it now?”

Reaching out and leaning on Angel’s arm, Spike tried to find enough breath to speak, as he waved weakly towards the creature sat on the large throne on a raised dais at the end of the hall. “It’s... it’s Olaf!”
Illyria looked from Olaf the troll to Spike and back again. “You have encountered this being before?”

Wiping his eyes, Spike nodded. “You could say that... well been thrown around by him at least.” Seeing the look on Angel’s face, he tried to explain a little more.

“Um... he was trapped in some mystical ball or other and Willow accidentally freed him - back in Sunnydale. He broke The Bronze to pieces. Oh and he was Anya’s ex - she was the one who turned him into a troll...”

He sighed, for a moment lost in memories. “Good times.”

Angel ran a hand across his face. “Does any of that actually help us, or...” but Olaf cut in.

“Who are these puny creatures? I was told that they were Champions, but they are clearly far too small and fragile for that. Throw them in the dungeon and we will sacrifice them to the wild animals for sport at the next games.”

Illyria stiffened in outrage, but Spike put a hand on her arm. “Hold your horses, your Majesty, remember we’re here to extract some information, yeah? Let me talk to him.”

Stepping forward, he smirked at the ugly green face. “You might not remember me, but we met once - just after Anya’s witch-friend freed you from the crystal thingy...”

“You are a friend of Anyanka’s?” Olaf interrupted, anger forming like black clouds on his face.

“Well I was before she died...” Spike replied, but at his words Olaf’s whole demeanour changed.

“She is dead? That is good news. Aaaaah, very good news! Wench!”

The comely demon reappeared.

“Spread the news in my kingdom that this is to be a day of feasting. Slaughter the biggest oxen and the plumpest babies and gather all the most attractive young girls!” Grinning he turned to Spike.

“Anyanka’s death was my most cherished wish. Impossible, infuriating woman, making my life arduous and troublesome with her ridiculous need for love and reassurance at every turn. I should have dumped her before she had the chance to exact vengeance! And her body was far too angular and lean.”

The booming words caused Spike’s world to go red in an instant. Every trace of laughter disappeared from his mind as he remembered an evening more than 3 years ago. An empty shop and a woman with a broken heart...

“When, really, I ... can’t sleep at night, thinking it ... has to be my fault, somehow... What if it was just pretending? What if he never wanted me ... the way I wanted him?”

Unable to stop his eyes from turning golden with anger, he stared at Olaf, hands clenching into fists at his side.

“You sure about that?”

Olaf laughed heartily. “You - the bearer of glad tidings - shall have my comeliest wench for your own, and shall sit at my side as we celebrate this glorious day! Never shall Anyanka aggravate a man again!”
The troll’s entire round countenance appeared to glow with goodwill, and Spike could feel the raw, ragged edges of grief tearing at him, as memory upon memory flooded his mind. Why was it always the good ones who died?

Speaking coldly and deliberately, he fixed Olaf with a fierce glare.

“Some of us like our women to be aggravating... And a man would have to be deaf, dumb and blind not to want a woman like Anya.”

Then, letting the demon out, he continued - sharp, cruel fangs a welcome feeling.

“So today just happens to be your lucky day, since I can arrange all of those!”

And in a single fluid motion he brought up his crossbow and fired an arrow straight into the troll’s left eye.

Roaring in pain Olaf pulled out the dart and stood up, furious and wild, but Spike had already reloaded and the next arrow took out the right eye. Flailing wildly, Olaf toppled off the dais, and the next instant Spike was on top of him, dagger in hand, cutting out first his tongue then slicing off an ear. Putting his mouth close to the one ear still intact, Spike spoke, voice icy. “My blue friend over there has a saying - ‘the price for dishonour is death’. I think she’s onto something. Anya was a bloody amazing woman, an’ she died saving the world. Whereas you were only ever an ugly waste of space!”

Olaf’s strong hands were trying to pull him off, but Spike tore off the second ear, and whilst the pain was distracting the troll, Spike jumped clear. Then he slowly drew his sword, waiting for the green giant to get to his feet, before with cold precision decapitating him.

For a moment he contemplated the bloody, mutilated head at his feet, smiling grimly; thinking it was a shame Anya couldn’t see this. Then turning around, letting his human features come forward again, he suddenly realised that Angel was yelling at him.

“What the fuck did you do that for, you braindead moron? You are without a doubt the single dumbest vampire to ever have been sired in this or any other dimension! Christ Spike - how are we ever going to get any information if you slaughter those we talk to?”

“I liked Anya,” Spike replied, then realised that this was not going to be enough for Angel.

“An’ we had... a thing. Once. And this guy was a total jerk towards her - he’s had this coming for eleven hundred years. Like what Blue said - it was much-delayed justice!”

He caught Illyria’s eyes and smiled. Turning only her head she looked at Angel. “Defending a friend’s honour is noble indeed.”

Looking back at Spike she asked, “Will you keep the head for a trophy?”

Picking it up by the unruly red hair, he studied it more closely. “Might, you know. Will need somethin’ to decorate my new digs, won’t I?”

He could see Angel ready to launch into another tirade, but then the doors burst open and a horde of angry demons flooded through, yelling something about vengeance.

As Spike and Angel instinctively took up positions back-to-back to fight off the onslaught, Angel angrily threw one last irate comment over his shoulder.
“This time it really is all your fault!”
Buffy didn’t like stairs. She’d never had any particular antipathy towards them before, but now she was beginning to develop some serious issues.

Why couldn’t Willow have fixed the lift while she was doing the big protection spell thing for the hotel? Sighing deeply, Buffy thought to herself that her friend had probably been too distracted researching that hell beastie that was supposed to herald the latest apocalypse, to worry about people’s legs...

“Why did you decide to have a room on the top floor?” she asked Spike petulantly, taking a tiny break before scaling what she hoped was the last flight.

He turned and looked at her. “It’s as far away from Angel’s as possible,” he replied, as though it was obvious, and then kept walking.

“Yeah - what’s up with that? Do you really dislike each other that much?”

He stopped halfway up and shot her a bemused look over his shoulder, eyebrow raised.

“Um - we’re vampires? This way we can’t hear each other.”

“Oh...” she replied, things suddenly falling into place. Oh. She’d never realised that vampire hearing was that good...

Did things ever stop being complicated?

Finally walking down a corridor she felt a need to change the subject, and asked what his old flat had been like.

He thought for a little moment, then shrugged. “Spartan. To go with the whole hero life-style...”

Then he stopped by the last door and slowly pushed it open.

“So - what do you think?”

There were happy secrets dancing in his eyes, and she stepped through the door she understood why.

Blinking against the the soft candlelight, she found that she was unable to stop the smile spreading across her face as she took in the large cosy bed, the mismatched furniture and the ornate rugs on the
floor. The walls were dark red, like most other rooms in the hotel, and she could see a stash of weapons stacked in a corner.

Angel’s rooms were - as she remembered from his place in Sunnydale - elegant and furnished with great taste. But Spike - for some impossible, illogical reason - went straight for the warm and snuggly. This room, like the downstairs of his long-gone crypt, could not be at greater odds with the image he projected. And in the strangest, most wonderful way, it felt like finding a long-lost piece of home.

Seeing that he was waiting for an answer, she said the first thing that came into her head.

“Not so much with the spartan, more with the... comfy.”

“Remember that, do you?” he replied, his smile widening to match hers.

“Oh yeah,” she said, “and so do Rona and Vi - didn’t I tell you about that? They were all over me - or rather us - at the Slayer meet...”

Then, lifting an eyebrow, she couldn’t help teasing. “Anyway - does all this comfort mean you’ve given up on the hero thing?”

Chuckling he shook his head. “Figured that since I spend most of my time sleeping with a rock for a pillow, I deserved somethin’ nice back here. Also the old place wasn’t home - just a place to crash.”

“And this is? Home?”

“This has you,” he replied, reaching out and brushing a lock of hair off her face, and the catch in his voice made her swallow. She looked at him, at the flickering golden light skimming over his features, and the look in his eyes abruptly brought up memories she’d thought long forgotten...

“I’m drowning in you Summers, I’m drowning...”

The next moment the world went away, as he was kissing her and all she knew was that he should never, ever stop.

Somehow they ended up on the bed, which was wide and soft and she traced his features with a finger, trying to understand how come he could be so perfect in every way.

Then she caught sight of something over his shoulder - something hairy and large and green and bloody that had been hidden behind the door.

“Spike... What. Is. That?”

***

Angel didn’t know anyone else who started the day with beer. As he sipped his blood, he took in the look of bliss that passed over Spike’s face as he emptied the cool bottle, and wondered again at how exactly Spike worked. He seemed to defy logic.

It was mid-afternoon, and they were sitting in the kitchen of the Hyperion, having just got up. Spike had come in as Angel was taking his blood out of the microwave, still sleepy-eyed and tousle-haired and wearing only a pair of jeans. And smelling like Buffy and sex.

He’d stopped in the doorway and obviously contemplated turning back the way he’d come, but Angel had sighed and shaken his head.
“Just... whatever. Told you I was OK.”

Spike had nodded, although he’d not looked quite convinced, and gone to fetch a beer. Of course Spike was onto something, because it wasn’t easy for Angel at all, but he’d decided to just go with it... for Buffy’s sake. He didn’t want to make her uncomfortable. And he couldn’t really fault her for being attracted to Spike - his family had always been beautiful...

“So Buffy liked your room then?” he asked, unable to think of anything else to say, and mentally kicking himself the second the words left his mouth.

Spike nodded and then tried to curb the wide smile that spread across his face, before suddenly frowning.

“She didn’t like Olaf. Made me put him in the room next door.”

His voice was petulant, and this time it was Angel trying to hide a smile.

“You mean Buffy doesn’t like mutilated troll heads? How strange...”

Spike scowled and Angel felt back on firmer ground. He’d watched with interest as Spike had furnished his room - wondering if he’d changed since they’d last shared accommodation a century before (Sunnydale didn’t count), and, much to his secret delight, discovering that he’d not. You could apparently take the Victorian out of the drawing room, but not vice versa. Fair enough, Spike wasn’t big on knick-knacks, but Angel would bet the entire hotel that Spike had in some way replicated his childhood interiors. With the odd addition of course... He had really taken to the troll head, and was currently trying to decide whether to try to shrink it or boil off the flesh and use it as a punchbowl. Angel wondered what Buffy had thought of those options, or if she’d just wanted rid of it, full stop.

And maybe she’d been a bit put off by the Anya connection too...

After they’d fought their way out of Olaf’s village, Angel had tried to extract some more information about Anya, having only the vaguest memory of an attractive young woman by Xander’s side.

Spike had not been particularly forthcoming, but Angel had slowly wheedled the story out of him - having been run through again helping well in the piling on of guilt. Of course once Spike relayed the circumstances of the ‘one time’, Angel began to see just how awkward and painful the whole situation had been. He’d also learned more about Buffy’s initial relationship with Spike than he’d really wished.

“I mean he was some sort of God right?” Angel belatedly realised that Spike was still speaking. “A minor one, but still - shouldn’t I get some sort of props for taking him down?”

Angel silently shook his head, before getting up to rinse his cup. He was absolutely not getting involved.

“You inviting Nina round tonight? Know Buffy would like to meet her.”

“What?”

Angel turned, stared at Spike. “Let them... meet?”

Spike nodded, as though this was a perfectly sane thing to say.

“They’re curious, and they’ll probably get along. An’ since Buffy is here for a few days...”
It would be awkward. Very awkward. Angel didn’t like awkward. He’d managed to keep the Buffy-
part of his life separate from the Nina-part and that’s how he’d like it to continue.

He grimaced. “Wouldn’t it be... awkward?”

Spike laughed. “You do not know the meaning of the word ‘awkward’, trust me. There was this one
time...”

He stopped, then bit his lip and shook his head. “Not telling you that one. Anyway, I’m just saying
that they’re going to be all civilised and nice... So why not try?”

Damn. But there seemed no way around it - he could imagine that Buffy would start asking too, as
soon as she returned. Oh he really did hate it when Spike was right.

“I guess. If she’s free...”

“Like she’s going to pass up a chance like that!” Spike was grinning, and then with perfect aim
threw the empty bottle into the bin. Standing up he shot Angel a droll look.

“Dunno what you’re so worried about. What’s the worst that’s gonna happen? Hell if you can look
me in the eyes on a daily basis...”

Staring back, Angel was momentarily speechless. Then he answered, features immobile and voice
tightly controlled.

“That’s different.”

A beat, then Spike abruptly looked away.

“S’posse it is...”

Then without another word he walked off - not quite using vampire speed, but nearly.

Closing his eyes Angel swore quietly. What did Spike have to go do that for? Their whole
relationship and getting along hinged on not bringing up those parts of their past. That way only lay
pain - pain and regret and all sorts of other things that were far too tender to touch upon. And they
had dealt with it. Put it behind them. Moved on. Maybe one day in the far distant future they could
talk about it... but not yet. Had Spike swapped his brain for a bag of sawdust or something? Damn
him.

Slowly Angel unclenched his hands and took a deep breath. Call Nina - that was the thing to do. Let
her meet Buffy, and then her curiosity would be satisfied and they needn’t meet again...

A few minutes later he had arranged to pick her up after college - she was staying late to finish a
project, so it would be nicely dark before she was done. Of course it was risky for him to go out, but
the protection spell on Nina’s family was strong enough for an all-out apocalypse, so he’d only be
putting himself at risk... and after Spike had insisted on taking Buffy out to a romantic dinner the
night before, W&H or no, if anyone had wanted to throw bombs at them it’d have happened
already...

***

Life was a strange, strange thing, Angel thought. His own life in particular. The way it lurched
wildly from despair to brief bursts of happiness always confused him, and he was not good at
grasping the good while it was there.
But this moment, walking along hand in hand with his beautiful girlfriend on a cool November evening, was pretty perfect. They were chatting - she was telling him about about her studies and her family, and he was relating tales from various dimensions, and it was just... comfortable. Easy. He studied her, the animated face, the woollen jacket, her warm hand clasped in his, and he still felt that it was a dream. This didn’t happen...

His women, his relationships had always been incredible... and complicated. Difficult. Heartbreaking.

But things with Nina were different. She liked him. He liked her. And that was it. He’d broken up with her, and she’d been mad. And then taken him back and things were OK again. No drama. Angel wasn’t entirely sure how to deal with a relationship that didn’t contain drama, but he was beginning to suspect that he liked it very much indeed.

“So... where was I?”

“Something about the weird melty land?”

“Oh...” he frowned. “No, that was just boring. After that we went to a place where we talked to these three witches who sent us on a wild goose chase round 5 different dimensions... Remind me never to trust witches again. Except for Willow of course - when she isn’t evil.”

“Actually - I’ve been meaning to ask... this big spell thing that Willow did on the hotel. How does it work?”

“Um...” he thought for a moment. “Basically anyone not included in the spell enters a parallel world when they go through the gates. So they could blow the whole building up, and it’d make no difference to us... She said it was a variation of a spell she did a few years ago in Sunnydale, but I didn’t quite catch the details.”

“Smart!”

He smiled. “Willow was always smart.”

They were nearly there now, and he turned to look at her, reaching out and stroking her face. “You are so beautiful...”

She laughed. “You’re just saying that to stop me worrying about meeting Buffy.”

He looked at her, before shaking his head. “No I’m not.” Then he leaned in and kissed her, and she happily responded; her body moulding itself to fit his, and her scent - so clear and clean, but with an undercurrent of feral blood thirst running through it - made him shiver.

Slowly he pulled away, looking into her eyes, and he was unable to stop a smile spreading across his face.

Then he offered her his arm, and nodding towards the gates asked, “Shall we?”

She grinned and put her arm through his. “We shall!”

***

Grumbling in disgust, Willow threw ‘The Anthology of Pan-Dimensional Creatures and Beings’ across the table. She knew it all by heart anyway. And the other books had been even less help.
‘The Beast, heralding the Ending of All Things, will appear in the Desert of the Desolate, one year before the Great Rising.’

And that was all... there was something about its horns, but the translation was... impossible. Not to mention the fact that trying to figure out which desert was proving far more difficult than she’d ever imagined. In a fit of despair she’d even shown it to Angel a few weeks before. He had frowned in an encouraging manner, before telling her about The Beast (with horns!) that had been running around LA a few years before, blocking out the sun and such like. But then he’d grinned.

“Of course that was before I killed it...”

So that had been another dead end. Although if that Beast had been the one mentioned in these texts also, then all this research was for nothing.

She needed a distraction. Maybe she could call someone for a chat? It wasn’t far from dawn here, so Buffy ought to be up... wherever she was.

The phone only rang twice before Buffy picked up.

“Willow! Hi! How are you? Actually... just hang on, I need to go somewhere where I can talk in peace... Spike’s still asleep...”

Willow listened in silence as there was some scuffling and then the sound of a door opening.

“OK, this should be... oh no! Troll head. Yuk!”

“Um... troll head?” Willow frowned. There were some non-sequiteurs that were just too bizarre to follow.

“Remember Olaf? Spike and Angel ran across him in some helldimension and Spike decided to kill him and bring the head home as a souvenir or something. Just gross. Didn’t realise he’d put it this room.” Buffy made a shuddery sort of sound and Willow heard a door being firmly shut.

“Anything happen that didn’t involve trolls?” Willow asked, putting up her feet on a chair and studying the sunrise that was just beginning outside. She shouldn’t have stayed up so late, but she was still jet-lagged and couldn’t sleep.

“M-hm!” There was definite glee in Buffy’s voice. “I met Angel’s girlfriend last night!”

“Oooh tell tell! What’s she like? Do you want me to hate her too?”

Buffy laughed. “No, no need to hate her, even though she is lovely. In a perfectly-normal-just-happens-to-be-a-werewolf-and-dating-Angel-kinda-way... It’s just so weird! I mean... Angel. Dating. And they held hands and he smiled lots. Which is good of course, but...”

“ Weird, right?” Willow finished, smiling wryly and trying to stifle a yawn.

“Oh yeah. Much with the weirdness... But I’m dealing. I’m Coping!Buffy. Oh and we - as in me and Nina - went shopping today! Things are way different than when I used to live here. I mean apart from half the city being flattened by demon armies... All the shops that used to be cool are total no-go’s. But Nina showed me this gorgeous new shoe shop where I got the most adorable pumps - oh and she told me that Angel dumped her ‘for her own good’ before the big battle went down. Apparently she’s still making him pay for that!”

Willow could vividly picture the wicked grin on Buffy’s face. And abruptly she remembered her
friend crying inconsolably many years ago now... who could ever have foreseen that the story could have such a happy ending?

“So... you’re bonding over Angel’s misplaced protectiveness and shoes? Sounds wonderful...”

There might have been a twinge of jealousy in that last sentence, but Willow couldn’t help herself. And Buffy obviously picked up on it.

“So... where are you? Hiding in a library somewhere busy working?”

And now Buffy sounded guilty. Willow sighed. “Australia at the moment. I’m just so bored that I’m actually considering conjuring up an imaginary friend to keep me company. Of course when I was in London I had Andrew, but that was worse than being alone. And not even he could make sense of these texts. And if there really is another apocalypse on the way, it’d help to know. Like when and where and what...”

There was silence on the other end for a long moment. It had been a year and a half since they beat The First. There had been a feeling of elation, of having made a significant step forwards. And now with this new thing, they were losing grip... there were supposed to be signs and warnings, but if they couldn’t find them in time they’d be completely clueless. It didn’t help to have an army of Slayers, if it was in the wrong place. Then Buffy spoke again, voice light, skirting around the issue.

“I’d offer to help, but... Not really my forte. But - in good news I got you a really neat surprise! So when you come round next time that’ll be waiting for you. Oh and remember Illyria - the deity that makes Glory look humble? Guess what her favourite thing is - after eviscerating her enemies of course? Spike’s Playstation. Most of the time I’ve been here she’s been, like, glued to it, playing some game or other called ‘Crush Bandicooties’. It’s way, way beyond bizarre! Actually, that reminds me...”

Buffy’s voice suddenly turned hesitating, “...do I remind you of Fiona from Shrek?”

Willow blinked in confusion. “Um... I suppose you look a bit like Cameron Diaz... Why?”

“We watched Shrek last night and Spike had this really weird theory - but I don’t think being a Slayer is at all like turning green and fat and also my voice doesn’t make things explode - except for that one time with the Gentlemen, but that was magic and therefore doesn’t count, and did I tell you about the restaurant we - as in Spike and I - went out to the day before yesterday? Sooo romantic...”

A ‘Buffy In Love’ was a truly incredible creature, Willow thought. It had been so long since she’d observed it, that she’d almost forgotten just how - exuberant her friend could be, and she found herself being somewhat relieved that there was a half a world between them. Silently she half-wished that she herself had a new love to distract her... Not that she and Kennedy weren’t good, but - that kind of distraction would be very welcome.

As she listened with half an ear to Buffy’s happy chatter, she absentmindedly flicked through a book the local Watcher had brought in and a strange symbol caught her eyes. Wasn’t that the same as... Swiftly retrieving the Anthology she almost whooped with joy, because it was her hellbeastie! She could only work out one symbol in 10, but it was enough to show her that there was new info. Buffy abruptly bid goodbye since Spike had woken up, and Willow distractedly wished them both a nice day. She had an apocalypse to plan...
It rained and it rained and it rained. Spike stared out into the wetness, slowly turning the fragment of Dead Key over and over in his hands. 3 days it had been now - 3 days by this world's time at least. Felt like more, although he couldn’t be sure... his internal clock was irredeemably screwed up.

Tearing his eyes away from the window (a generous term for the small hole in the wall) he looked around the paltry stone hut again, as if by some miracle things would have improved. But it was no use. There was still nothing there except a primitive bed made up with straw and furs, and a stoic Angel, carefully inspecting the leather armour they had bartered their way to in the smithy down by the river.

Running his thumb along the small oddly shaped lump, Spike wondered if they’d ever actually need the armour now - unless of course their ‘hosts’ decided that they wanted to kill them after all...

Not being dead was the most surprising thing about the whole situation, actually. The battle had been vicious and they’d been so far outnumbered that Spike had been of more than half a mind to ask Illyria to get them the hell out of dodge, no matter what these creatures knew or guarded, so when he’d heard the familiar crackle of a portal opening he’d been more relieved than he dared admit.

Except... he’d turned to see Illyria step through by herself, a wide and fearsome smile on her bloodied face - and then the portal had closed.

For a long moment there had not been a sound or movement anywhere. Slowly he’d turned to Angel, and their eyes had met in silent resignation. This was it. She’d finally betrayed them for good and now their time was up.

But the onslaught didn’t continue. Their opponents began arguing - shouting and gesturing and waving weapons at each other - and after a long while Spike and Angel had been invited back to the local ‘town’... As far as they could tell the demons thought that Illyria had gone off to get reinforcements or invoke special powers or something. This was an idea they did their best to encourage, although the language barrier was quite formidable. The demons were obviously in some way related to Fyarl, although their horns were smaller and their brains quite clearly of a much superior quality. But the languages were so close that Spike could muddle through more or less...

So here they were. Lost. Stuck. Angel reckoned that there was probably a warlock somewhere that
would be able to get them home, but it was a tenuous hope, and asking would mean admitting that their Hellgod had abandoned them for good - which might in turn mean swift meetings with pointy sticks. And even if they did get home, what could they do except sit around, waiting for W&H to find them? What about their quest - their mission - their war?

With a sigh Spike tucked the key fragment into his pocket again. Two pieces they had found, and that was all. How many dimensions had they been to already? 20? 30? Slowly, against his will, he took out his cellphone. As his fingers hovered over the surface, magical symbols swirled to life and faded away again, like the ebb and flow of the tide. How many spells was it protected with? And yet it made no difference here... Pressing the contact list Buffy’s name appeared, next to the pointless ‘no signal’.

He took a shaky breath and closed his eyes. What if he never made it home? What if he never saw her again? What if she never found out what had happened, and was just left waiting and waiting? What if...

There were too many bloody ‘what if’s’. And all the issues he’d done his best to avoid thinking too deeply about were now staring him in the face. Because this - this possible loss - was one reason why he’d never called. He had let go of her once, in the Hellmouth itself, when she’d been within reach for only a moment. But to have had her - for her to really, truly be his - and then lose her again... it terrified him more than he could say. And the flip side was even worse - he now had the power to hurt her.

Forcing his eyes open, he deliberately put the phone back. Thinking too deeply invariably made the word ‘hell’ become far too prominent - since he could find no other term for the notion of being stuck anywhere permanently with Angel.

Dear lord he needed to get out.

“Wanna go get something to eat?”

Angel looked up and nodded. There was no point in waiting until the rain let up, since, as far as they’d been able to understand, they had arrived in the middle of the monsoon season. At least food wasn’t a problem - the species they were living amongst were all blood drinkers, and there was a well stocked slaughter house across the town square at the bottom of the hill.

If it wasn’t for the fact that they were stuck, and the never-ending rain, it was a pleasant enough place - by far the most civilised they’d come across so far. The town stretched out for miles, endless stone huts clinging to the hills, except for what they presumed to be a temple on the tallest of the hills across the valley. It was the largest structure they’d seen and was built for the local deity, whose name was unpronounceable, but whose statue was situated at the top end of the town square. It was usually flanked by soldiers, members of the efficient and well-trained army they’d faced when they first arrived. Spike sincerely hoped they’d not run across any more organised types... presuming they got out of here.

Walking through the streets, they could feel curious eyes follow them. In the world of humans they were always hidden, shadows in the night. But here they were regarded with a mixture of fear and admiration that was strange - and oddly gratifying. It was nothing like Andrew’s hero worship, or the younger Slayers’ curiosity... it was respect from the nearest they might have to peers. Or mortal enemies. The jury was still out on that one. If - when - Illyria came back they’d find out which one for sure.

And yet... for all the ways in which this place appeared to be a demon heaven, it felt as alien to them as the world of humans. For vampires, family was the base for everything. Bonds of blood (and love)
were stronger than allegiance to any outside person or god. And just the thought of actually building a house... Spike shook his head in wonder. Having never really contemplated the nature of what he was, he studied a team of demons busy laying the foundations for a new lot of huts with interest - quite an impressive feat in the rain. To settle down so thoroughly...

Spike was shaken out of his thoughts when a small child shyly ran up to them, pressing a charm into his hand and speaking quickly, almost stumbling over the words.

"From mine mother, through gratefulness for sparing mine father on warring fields."

Before he could react the kid had vanished again. He blinked - not remembering much of the battle except desperately trying to stay alive - and studied the small metal disk more closely. Standard good luck enchantment as far as he could make out. Casting Angel a surprised look, he couldn’t help but smiling. Angel shrugged.

"It was like this in Pylea - all ‘Welcome Great Warrior’. Then suddenly they started slaughtering people for food. Watch out."

Spike sighed, but still put the leather strap around his neck - it was much too long, since the demons had necks far wider than theirs, so he had to wind it round a few times. Couldn’t hurt though. And it was a nice charm.

If only he had an umbrella...

When they were halfway down the hill, there was a sudden bright blue light from down below and a loud cracking sound like thunder... And having a good view of the town square from their position, they saw a portal tear through the air and widen.

Relief soaked Spike more thoroughly than the rain, but then he frowned... because the portal kept growing. The street was suddenly full of demons, everyone obviously rushing down to find out what was happening. Following the crowds the two vampires hung back a little, climbing a wall on the side of the square to get a better overview of the situation. The surface of the portal was misty and obscure, and Spike and Angel looked at each other, worried... this could quite possibly be something different again.

A sudden blast nearly made them lose their footing.

Out from the rift stepped Illyria... a tiny figure in the crowded square, and yet it was impossible to look elsewhere. Her head was crowned with a wreath, like a Roman emperor, and around her neck hung necklaces made from skulls and bones. Through her and around her power crackled like electricity - her hair fanning out and her eyes shining like blue torches. Silently she held her right hand aloft, and in it a sudden green-white light ignited, so bright that it almost burned. It lit up the entire square, illuminating the thousands of demon faces and making the rain appear like falling drops of pure light.

"Listen! You who fought against me, you who profaned my name. I have found true followers, a people who honour me still. Forswear your blasphemous ways or I shall unleash terror upon you!"

She passed her left hand across the surface of the portal, and they could see through into the other side. Thousands upon thousands of demon soldiers underneath a black sky, weapons held aloft and screaming Illyria’s name, met their eyes.

Spike swallowed. Fuck it, but that head priest had been right. He could see him now, right at the front on the throng, face twisted with worry. So what would it be... bloodbath or submission?
Illyria at least tried to make their choice easier. Smiling cruelly, eyes flashing, with a single gesture of her hand she made the huge statue of ‘God-with-the-unpronounceable-name’ at the opposite end of the square collapse into ruins.

“And God smote the fake idols of the unbelievers...” Angel muttered, eyes fixed on the creature contained in the body of what had once been their sweetest friend.

Spike’s hand tightened around the hilt of his sword.

Illyria’s eyes passed over the crowd in front of her.

“I. Am. Illyria. I am the ruler of all that I behold. Bow before me!”

There was a sudden flash of lightning in the sky and a moment later the entire world seemed to shake with the force of the thunder that followed.

Then the head priest cried out, lifting his staff - and in a silent wave the entire crowd fell down.

Spike and Angel watched as Illyria with a tiny nod accepted the surrender, her expression haughty, but gratified.

The rain was still pouring down; but where everyone else was soaked and bedraggled-looking, the water made Illyria gleam all over, the power that illuminated her causing sparks to dance around her slender frame. She - for the first time Spike could remember - appeared truly otherworldly, like she could at any moment change into a different shape or possibly become pure energy. She looked... like a god. They forgot, no matter how often she harped on, what she really was.

Then, finally, her eyes sought them out. Spike wondered what she’d do... smite them for not bowing down like the rest? It was entirely possible - she was obviously on a serious power trip.

And then - she winked.

Spike nearly fell off the wall in surprise. Jaw dropping he stared at her, but her attention was again elsewhere. With a wave of her hand she closed the portal and let the light in her other hand go out, then walked up to the head priest.

“Arise, Priest, and take me to my temple.”

Then turning, she sent a supercilious glance at the crowd.

“You may return to your work. But remember to whom you owe your allegiance.”

Then, fixing Spike and Angel with a piercing glance, she added. “My champions - follow me.”

Unsure, yet seeing no choice, they both jumped off the wall and made their way to where their goddess was waiting. Sighing, Spike really wished that they’d managed to get a meal before she’d showed up. He felt hollow. And soggy.

The priest led the way, and Angel and Spike automatically fell into step a little behind Illyria - they must look rather like bodyguards, Spike thought wryly, as they made their way up to the top of the hill.

As they walked, Angel - probably fed up with the wet and the cold - moved forwards so he was almost level with Illyria.

“Excuse me your Highness -” Angel’s voice packed as much sarcasm into the title as was possible,
“- but do you feel like explaining why you abandoned us?”

She answered without turning her head. “They summoned me. And do not dare to suggest that I would steer away from our chosen path.”


“The inhabitants of the dimension of The Never Ending Black Night... as you saw, they still revere me in the way that is fitting. They held their yearly tribute, slaughtering beasts and enemies in my honour, calling upon my name. So I came.”

Spike was stunned. “You could... hear it? Or sense it or what?”

“I am a God. I know when my name is invoked in the proper manner.” She shot him a look so dry he was surprised the rain didn’t stop.

“Right...” Spike glanced at Angel. This was new. Angel appeared to turn it over in his head, then spoke.

“Still... you left us.”

“It was only three days for you! I am not your nurse, that I need to tend to your every need, vampire.”

She’d learned sarcasm as though born to it, Spike thought. Although... wait...

“How did you know that it was three days for us?”

She smiled, superior as always. “Time once bent to my will. Its ebbs and flows in all the worlds are as clear to me as the hands upon a clock.”

The whole abandonment issue vanished as Spike took in the implications. “So you always know how much time passes back home when we’re elsewhere?”

Illyria nodded, and Angel shook his head in disbelief. “So - what day is it on Earth?”

Without hesitation she replied. “Today - by human reckoning - is Wednesday 15th of December 2004. Two days have passed there since we left. And the three days that passed here are the equivalent of five days and thirteen hours by your world’s reckoning.”

Spike’s head was spinning. “So... how long have we been travelling altogether? I mean since we set off from The Raven’s cave.”

“One hundred and eighty three days and twenty hours.”

“Riiiiight. So like... around six months? Bloody hell.”

Spike was going to continue, but they now found themselves in front of the temple, and without another word Illyria scaled the steps and entered, the vampires and the priest slowly following.

Walking down the central aisle, flanked by intricately carved columns, Illyria for once looked at home. The roof was high and domed and the tall, narrow windows let in thin slits of light, illuminating statues along the walls. At the apex there was yet another tall statue of the God that had until so very recently been the favourite. Illyria with great relish toppled it of its dais, then took its place, slowly surveying the entire room.
“This will do.”

She tilted her head and stared unblinkingly at the priest. “Have your craftsmen carve a statue of my image. I will return and see that it is done in a satisfactory fashion.”

The priest bowed, praising her superior beauty in many ostentatious words. Illyria smiled coldly and cut him off.

“Now show me your treasures and holy items.”

There was the slightest hesitation, and her eyes flashed angrily. “I spared your sorry world from my wrath! Give me my due!”

Obviously unwilling, but having no choice, the priest showed the way to a side door - protected by heavily armed guards as well as spells, behind which was a small room packed with shelves and chests.

Spike muttered a long curse, taking in the untold riches in front of them. It was a great shame that they couldn’t just pillage the whole place. There were some very pretty things...

“D’you think I could nab a few necklaces for Buffy?” he asked, but Angel silently shook his head as Illyria stood still, concentrating so hard that the power made her shine brighter than the torches on the wall, giving everything a faint blue hue.

Sighing, Spike picked up a dagger, the blade gleaming ghostly white and the handle inlaid with some unknown substance that shimmered green and orange. “But just look at this - she’d love it. It’s like a handbag version of a knife. And I’ve still got to work out what to get her for Christmas. Troll heads are right out.”

He turned the dagger over admiringly, but Angel suddenly frowned. “Get her a collapsible sword. Wesley used to have one - they’re very handy. Of course we took out his old supplier last year, but I’m sure we can track someone down who still makes them.”

Spike looked up in surprise. Was Angel being actually, genuinely helpful? It was probably just a fluke...

“So... um... have you decided what to get Nina?” He almost added something about squeaky bones, but it would seem kinda petty after Angel being all decent - he’d just have to save it for another time. Because it had potential...

But Angel just smiled mysteriously. “Oh that’s all sorted.”

Before Spike could ask, however, Illyria shook her head.

“All useless. There are only trinkets and baubles here.” Then her eyes narrowed and she strode across the room, before tearing down a tall elaborately embroidered wall hanging.

The priest yelped, but Illyria smiled happily as she surveyed the featureless wall in front of her.

“Strong... very strong... but it matters not!”

She fixed the wall with a hard stare and for just a fraction of a second the image of the god she so very recently de-throned flickered onto the stones. Then it transformed into three animals.

Spike swore for the second time as he recognised the wolf, ram and hart. How had she known? They
had not seen a hint of the Senior Partners anywhere.

The priest was now wailing - something about how they’d all be killed and the Masters would not leave a stone standing... But Illyria ignored him completely as the image began bleeding together, until they showed Illyria in her original form.

Satisfied, she then proceeded to walk through the wall.

“What the-?” Angel was staring after her and then tried to follow, but the stones were just as hard and cold and solid as they looked.

***

On the other side, Illyria looked around with great pleasure. As she had thought, the spell protecting the most precious objects had been fashioned in such a way that only the rightful owner could enter. And that was now her.

The Wolf, Ram and Hart had been sneaky indeed. Just like in the realm of humans they were operating from underneath, and here they had let the population keep their religion - knowing that the god in question was safely locked away in the Deeper Well. The thought that someone like Illyria could ever come and challenge his position had obviously never entered their thoughts. And yet here she was...

Only much to her chagrin she could already sense that there was no key-fragment hidden here. But maybe there was something else...

Searching though the dusty shelves she found nothing to interest her, until she saw a small, faintly gleaming globe. Could it be? To find what she had given up looking for - a creature nearly as ancient as herself...

Reverently she picked up the globe and carefully peered inside. And indeed there it was... a child of He Who Came Forth From the Earth.

Days she had spent in His ancient home world, trying to discover if any of His progeny remained that could help them on their Quest, whilst her vampires had complained and sulked and wished for such trivialities as nourishment.

And yet here, serendipitously, she had found what would truly aid them. The Key that she had absorbed could open portals, but in her current form she was muted, her power and vision stunted... and the worlds had moved and shifted while she had been sleeping in The Deeper Well. Besides, The Home Office was a problem. A Higher Realm out of her knowledge where they would have to go once The Dead Key was complete.

But now they would be able to find it.

Smiling at the true treasure in her hand, she blew on it gently before speaking the ancient words that unbound the Scarab. The globe popped, like a golden bubble - and the glistening beetle on her hand fluttered to life, looking stunned and unsettled. She knew how it felt - it must have been resting as long as her. And for the first time since she had risen, she felt kinship with another living thing.

***

Being stuck in a treasure chest, but unable to take anything, was very boring. The priest glared whenever Spike as much as looked at anything, and in the end he just sat down on the floor and examined his new little charm. It was made out of a metal that he wasn’t familiar with, and inlaid
with the standard ‘good luck’ runes that obviously didn’t change much from dimension to dimension. And right on the edges of his perception he could feel a tiny buzz of magic, proving that it truly was enchanted. Whether it did anything other than buzz was of course a different question, but Illyria had turned up just moments after he had got it...

Then finally Illyria reappeared, only without any Key fragment or treasure as far as they could tell. But her hand was closed in a fist, so she might have found something valuable after all.

Ignoring the vampires she turned to the priest who still looked shell shocked at how she’d penetrated the inner sanctum. But, clearly trying his best to please his new deity, he bowed.

“Your Highness, I hope you found something fitting for your stature?”

She nodded, but didn’t - as he had obviously hoped - elaborate. Instead she studied him silently, before speaking.

“You will build me statues and observe my Holy Days. One year from now I expect a grand tribute, worthy of my splendour. If you win my favour your nation will indeed prosper.”

The priest uttered a long and flowery confirmation, but Illyria silenced him with a wave of her hand.

“I believe we are done. Vampires - are you ready?”

They looked at each other, then remembered. “Um... we got some armour, it’s still in our hut...”

“Very well. Fetch it. I will wait.”

Not much later, they were once again back in The Hyperion. Spike looked round at the familiar surroundings, feeling relieved and wishing nothing more than to get some food and then sleep for a week.

“So - what did you find?” Angel asked, and Illyria’s face started glowing with pleasure. Slowly she unfurled her hand and held it forth so they could see.

Spike looked, and he felt that of all the bizarre things she had done that day, this took the prize.

“It’s a beetle,” he said, superfluously, and shot Angel a disbelieving look. Angel was obviously trying to think of something more intelligent as he appeared to struggle with himself.

“A - a Scarab beetle... they’re supposed to bring good luck.”

“So’s this!” Spike replied, tugging at the charm around his neck, “But you won’t see any of these locked up in Swiss bank vaults!” He leaned forward and studied the thing more closely.

“Is it made of something rare and valuable or - bloody hell it’s alive!”

Illyria shot him a withering glance. “Of course it is alive. Beware your attitude half-breed, this is a child of Khepri - The Selfcreated One - and it is so far above you that you ought to fall down and pay homage!”

Spike’s eyes widened. “Did you just say that that thing is above me? It’s a bleedin’ dung beetle!”

Illyria’s eyes flashed dangerously. “This is the offspring of a God who once rolled suns across the sky. As different from its lowly namesakes in this world as I am from you!”
“So... what does it do?” Angel asked, and Illyria regarded him with a slightly less disapproving look.

“The children of Khepri possessed their Sire’s knowledge, if not His power, and were once greatly prized as guides for those travelling between worlds, knowing every realm and dimension and nether world there has ever been.”

Spike frowned. “So... it’s like an inter-dimensional sat-nav?”

Illyria’s eyes narrowed. “Your analogy is clumsy, but not incorrect.”

Angel however sat himself down on the central sofa, suddenly looking rather shrewd and with a glint in his eye. “So tell me Illyria - just how have we been steering so far? By whatever millennia old out-of-date map is in your head? We trusted you to lead us, and apparently it’s all been stabs in the dark.”

Illyria was bristling now. “I have found us a great aid, and you question me?”

“Like I would question any member of my team who’s not been entirely honest!”

They stared at each other silently, and Spike was rather amused by the fact that for once it wasn’t their anger was aimed at.

Then a yawn overwhelmed him. “Look, I’m just gonna leave you two to it, okay? I’m too tired-”

But Illyria ignored him completely, coldly staring down Angel. “I have with great skill taken us from world to world, to every dimension the Wolf, Ram and Hart influenced back in the ancient times. Do not doubt me again!”

Angel looked somewhat mollified, but as Spike turned to go a thought suddenly occurred to him.

“Hey - why did you wink?”

Illyria finally took notice of him.

“I am Illyria. I do not wink!” And she walked off, head held high.

Spike met Angel’s eyes and shook his head. No, they’d never understand her.

***

Half an hour later, after two cups of blood and a warm shower, Spike was sitting on his bed, naked except for a towel wrapped around his middle and the amulet around his neck, studying his cellphone. Buffy’s name and number were displayed on the screen, her voice only a push of a button away. But he put the cell down on the blanket in front of him, knowing that he needed to collect his thoughts a little more. Because there were new facts to take into consideration.

Illyria could tell time from anywhere.

A slow smile crept over his face. He would be able to arrange to meet Buffy, could plan times and places, not just turn up unannounced... they could even spend Christmas together! Happiness spread through him, making him tingle all over.

There was also of course the fact that Illyria was contactable... after a fashion. Not really something he needed to bother Buffy with, since he couldn’t see her attempting a ritual sacrifice, but it was certainly food for thought. Maybe he should have some new cards made? His old ones were woefully boring, and he had obviously been unable to put any contact details on them. Yes - that was a good idea. Something more... interesting. He grinned widely as he finally pressed the button and
held the phone up to his ear.

On the roof Illyria smiled a not dissimilar smile. She now had two worlds who worshipped her - and a companion.

The wings of the tiny creature shimmered in the lights from the street below, as it softly landed on her outstretched palm. As beautiful and self contained as she herself. And - best of all - it didn’t talk.
“Kvennkyn ikki loyvd!”

The doorman/bouncer, easily 3 feet taller than Angel and with a grey-green scaly hide, stared impassively at Illyria, who suddenly began to bristle.

“Sorry what was that?” Spike cut in, and the demon took in the two vampires.

“Oh, she’s with you? An’ you’re English-speakers? Sorry - thought she was a Huldra in some fancy threads, hence the language confusion. ‘Fraid she can’t come in - wimmin not allowed.”

Spike’s eyebrows went up a good inch, and he turned to look at Angel, who was equally thrown. Illyria tilted her head and looked at the demon with murder in her eyes.

“I am not a ‘woman’ - I am a God, far beyond such simple concepts as male and female! Foolish imbecile, I will rip your spine out through your chest and feed your carcass to my worshippers!”

The demon leisurely let his eyes travel over her, and then shook his head again. “Sorry Princess. I’ve got rules to work with, and that religious bullshit won’t wash - I’ve seen enough nut-jobs settin’ up cults to last me three lifetimes.”

Seeing that Illyria was about to explode, Spike and Angel grabbed hold of an arm each, and pulled her back.

“Just need a moment with our lady!” Spike said to the bouncer, who nodded sagely.

Illyria, furious, never took her eyes off her new mortal enemy. “How dare you - heathen! I will tear you and every creature within limb from limb! I will raze this place to the ground! My armies-”

“Yeah your Highness, that’s not going to help, is it?” Spike replied when they were far away enough not to be overheard, and Illyria fumed at him.

Angel sighed and shook his head. “I said this was a bad idea-”

But Spike cut in. “No, sorry, this is a good idea. We’ve been following her ideas - and yours - ever
since we started, and we’ve got exactly nowhere in the last year. *This—*” he waved a hand towards the bar stretched out behind them, “—will work! An’ if it doesn’t, at least we’ll have had a good time. And as for you Miss Universe, we’re here to get info, and we can’t get any of that if you’ve ripped everyone’s head off.”

Angel sighed again. Spike had a point... They had been to dimension upon dimension by now, and nowhere had they found more pieces of the Dead Key. Endless negotiations, ‘dead cert’ tips, witches, warlocks, ‘holy’ places... all useless.

Fed up, Spike had suggested they search out this demon bar, famous throughout most of the places they’d been to - apparently the gathering place for all the worst riff-raff throughout the dimensions. Spike reckoned they could get someone to talk, since liquor tended to loosen the tongue, and, having run out of counter-arguments, Angel had agreed. Except now of course they had a different problem...

“Why does this place not allow females? Both sexes are equally revolting, but surely life-givers should be honoured in some way? And why does that worthless speck of muck think that I am female?”

Spike bit his lip, and Angel tried to keep a straight face, thankfully succeeding - but only just.

Illyria had surprised them both by her ingenious manner of transporting her scarab guide - she had braided a strand of her hair, and the beetle was stuck at the top end of the braid, looking like a small, fancy hair-clip of some sort. Only this ornament, combined with her delicate features and general shape, gave her an unmistakable air of not just being female, but feminine.

“Well you *look* like a bird, and, what’s more, you behave like one too! I’ve had this self-same argument with Buffy once,” Spike shot back. “Say - why don’t you skip off back home and google the suffragette movement and feminism? You can come back later and free the women here from the shackles of oppression before picking us up. How does that sound?”

Illyria of course ignored every word. “It is not permitted to judge me on my appearance. I did not choose this shell.”

Spike shrugged. “Yeah good luck with that - ‘fraid that’s how the world works. Shame for you that that Knox bloke wasn’t gay...”

Then abruptly he looked down as his words caught up with him. Angel couldn’t help wincing himself, as layer upon layer of familiar guilt settled over him. Illyria was so utterly unlike Fred that mostly it was easy to forget whose features she inhabited, but Spike’s words had yet again brought up the endless barrage of ‘what if’s’ that he usually tried to avoid thinking about. He sighed.

“Illyria... it’s not like you’d enjoy it anyway. If I remember rightly you... don’t have much patience with drunken demons.”

She looked from one to the other, and then much to their surprise nodded, an unsettling look in her cold, blue eyes. Maybe she was thinking back to the few occasions when the two of them had been drunk - or maybe she was remembering Wesley?

“Very well.”

Then she abruptly turned on her heel and walked off.

Angel looked after her. “Well that went... better than I thought. Unless of course she’s actually gone off to get an army.”
He frowned, knowing that she was endlessly unpredictable, but Spike shrugged. “Let’s worry about that when the army turns up. Actually -” he chuckled, “we were lucky the doorman didn’t think she was a stripper...”

Angel nodded silently, easily being able to picture Illyria’s reaction to such an insinuation, and was grateful for small mercies.

“Well - shall we?” Spike asked. “It looks like rain and I’d like to get inside!”

“Fine,” Angel replied, glumly raising his eyes up at the dark brown sky, in which murky, sticky-looking clouds hung low over the valley, as though trying to smother the decrepit town - if the collection of hovels, mud-huts and assorted dwellings could really be called ‘a town’. The bar, although filthy, ugly, and looking like it might collapse at any moment, seemed almost grand in comparison.

A little later they were inside, and as the barman - a Karathamamanyuhg demon with odd hairy spots all over his face - got them their drinks, Spike looked around, and shook his head.

“What is it?” Angel asked, knowing well when Spike was dissatisfied with something.

“Dunno... Just thought...” Spike tilted his head and studied a group of particularly nasty-looking Ttakarashs’ in a corner, “Thought it be more like... Tortuga, and less like Willy’s.”

“Tortuga?” Angel asked, and Spike looked at him, raising an eyebrow. “Pirates of the Caribbean? Pirate hide-out with round the clock fighting and shagging?”

“Oh,” Angel replied. He remembered it now, and was personally grateful for the differences. Ignoring Spike he struck up a conversation with the barman and found out who’d be the best creatures to ask for advice when it came to treasure hunting of the ancient variety.

They were pointed towards a table populated with demons so aged Angel wondered if they were still alive, and hadn’t been mummified and left as a visitor attraction - The Prince of Lies would have felt right at home. Spike looked at them and tried not to pull a face. “Hoped that there might be some... well some interestin’ characters here, y’know? Somethin’ to give this place its reputation...”

Which confirmed to Angel that the other had been looking forward to a fun time, rather than information gathering. Well, such was life.

“Probably just a slow day,” he said, and then made the appropriate excuses and offering of liquid gifts before settling down at the veterans’ table.

And, just as Spike had predicted, soon enough they were regaled with tales from far and wide - some they’d heard of, but many they hadn’t. There was apparently a dragon somewhere on a hoard, all fairytale-like; and a treasure at the bottom of the sea in a dimension populated by vicious mermaids. A grizzly little gnome-like demon spoke of a ‘most trusted servant’ of the Senior Partners who kept all sort of secrets (although he might have retired by now), and a pale, speckly-red demon - who had lost most of his limbs and all but one eye - told them about a ‘cursed treasure’ guarded by an immortal warrior...

After a long while one demon, black and wearing an old tunic, so worn and threadbare that it was impossible to tell what colour it had originally been, sat up and shook itself awake. Bright yellow eyes studied Angel, and then it spoke up, voice croaky and whispery.

“Oooodid Iim? if it is true treasure you’re after, there is only one place to go. Mind you, you need bravery and cunning more than anyone who yet has lived...” He raised a shaky arm and looked
Angel straight in the eye. “Back when I was young, and my sword-arm strong, I was the shield carrier of Grohmul-Djun - you have heard of him, surely? The greatest warrior that ever breathed...”

Angel could see the faces around him sink into the tired, glassy look that always accompanied those who’ve heard a tale a thousand times, and sure enough the grizzly gnome-demon cut in.

“Quiet. These youngsters are more likely to kill the dragon of Qust’thak than to return from the Labyrinth. Why no one-”

“I’ve killed a dragon,” Angel cut in. “Please, shield-carrier of Grohmul, continue.”

He could feel the respect go up a few notches, and the black demon tried to sit a little straighter.

“Back in the days of yore, when all the worlds sought out the Ramulka-ha, my master entered the Labyrinth of Ramulkl, as many before him, to find the treasures and forbidden items that are fabled to be contained within its centre. Oh I recall the day so clearly - we had come to the Citadel of the Ramulka-ha Clan - a mighty warlock breaking down the barriers between the worlds for the sake of my master’s quest - and spent a day amongst the brilliance of the shining city. Oh, you have never seen such a sight...”

There followed a long description of the town, and many praises of the skills of the Ramulka-ha clan, who had apparently been the one-stop-shop for luxuries in the ancient demon worlds.

With snail-like speed the demon finally got back to the tale of the Labyrinth. “Taller than the tallest tree, taller than the towers on Tlinkoos, the greatest thing I ever saw. My master released me from my servitude, but even so I waited for him for many days. But he never returned and in the end I found my way home to my own people...”

An ugly, lumpy brown demon, with three small, skittering eyes, sneered. “Your stories are useless. The home of the Ramulka-ha has been closed for years upon years, everyone knows that. My guess is that they finally had enough wealth and decided that they were too good for the rest of us. I too saw the great city in my youth, and recall the way they barely permitted anyone to look upon it, let alone walk in it. Proud and haughty every one of them, contemptuous of anyone who didn’t fawn over their precious baubles... And even before they decided to ‘retire’, the Champions who wished to enter the Labyrinth had to ‘negotiate’ with the clan before they were permitted to go through the hidden gateway, to ascertain if they were ‘worthy’ - mark my words it was their gold they were testing!”

Angel figured that the demon had wanted nothing more than to own such a ‘bauble’, and was wondering if there was a way to exploit this to get him to talk more, when there was a sudden commotion outside.

Spike, who’d been doing his best not to nod off, turned and tried to peer out of the little window that was nearly caked over with grime, and swore softly under his breath.

“Holy fuck it can’t be...”

Then his head snapped round as the new-comers entered, and his eyes followed them as though hypnotised as they walked up to the bar.

Suddenly a wide, excited grin spread across his face. “I knew it! This bar is best bloody bar in the history of forever!”

In a swift flourish he got up, but Angel’s quick hand on his arm held him back.
“Where do you think you’re going?”

Spike stared at him like he was an idiot. “Where do you think? I’m going to buy them a drink!”

“But-

Angel indicated the ancient story tellers with a small tilt of his head, but Spike just grinned. “You seem to be gettin’ on fine - don’t need me!”

Angel glared at him silently.

“Oh come on Angel - when will I ever get a chance like this again? I mean... I didn’t even know they were real!”

He turned again to take in the figures that were now leaning nonchalantly against the bar, as the barman effusively and submissively rushed to get their drinks, and Angel sighed.

“Fine - but you do know that you’re turning into Andrew, right?”

“Maybe Andrew is onto something... You have fun with your Ramulka-what’s-it chat,” Spike replied, not really listening anymore, as he untangled himself from Angel’s grip before sauntering up to the bar, face as excited and in awe as the night when he’d first seen what Angelus could do...

Sighing Angel turned back to the antediluvian relics around the table, who were now busy talking about the way the younger generation were useless and never showed the proper respect to their elders, and part of him desperately wanted to just say ‘forget it’ and join Spike... but someone had to get some info, and now, because he had a feeling Illyria would never grace the place with her presence again. Presuming she didn’t decide to smite it with some kind of hellfire.

When Angel carried Spike out many, many hours later - a boneless, inert body held together by his coat - Angel reflected grimly that it was lucky for whatever plans Buffy had for Christmas that Spike would have at least a day to sober up before he was due to meet her. Angel would even get ample time to torment him during the hangover from hell that would soon show up... Presuming of course that Illyria came back for them.

But when he looked around he saw her waiting, as calm and impassive as ever. Whether this was good or bad he wasn’t sure - mostly he was just relieved.

She looked at Spike with barely concealed disgust, and didn’t say a word as she opened a portal to the Hyperion. Realising that they were in the lobby, Angel sighed and dumped Spike on the sofa in the office. No way he was carrying him up all those stairs.

But five minutes later Angel came back and threw a blanket over him. In the spirit of Christmas, or something.

Chapter End Notes

The next few chapters will center on Angel & Spike's respective Christmasses. Am aiming to post a chapter a week.
There were definitely upsides to inter-dimensional traveling, because, although it was barely past dawn, Angel wasn’t tired at all, and even the daylight scarcely bothered him - he was too focussed on what was happening around him. He didn’t think he’d ever experienced a real family Christmas since he had been human, and back then... well things had been different. He had been different. As in, an idiot who couldn’t appreciate what he had.

Now, however, he understood how impossibly precious the idyll around him was, and soaked it all up to the full. Sitting on a sofa, with his arms around a beautiful young woman and watching her niece excitedly dole out presents, was stuff straight out of his day dreams.

There were Christmas decorations all over the house, and a real tree, with fake candles, in the corner of the room, and the floor was rapidly disappearing beneath masses of wrapping paper. By carefully controlling his thoughts, Angel had also for the most part been able to avoid thinking about all the Christmases with Connor that he’d missed out on (he’d see him later in the week, and that was something to be grateful for), or the last few years with his friends. Live in the now, that was the key...

He smiled as he saw Nina’s sister, Jill, attempting to control the chaos, just to have it all upset again when Jill’s daughter, Amanda, tried to find a small piece of a toy that had become lost.

He himself had bought a calligraphy set for Amanda, and found a very beautiful gold bracelet for her mother in one of the nicer dimensions they’d been to. Both presents were happily received, and he promised to show Amanda how to write with a feather pen later on.

“OK then Mister,” Nina said, turning to him, looking especially beautiful in a wine red dress. “Where’s my present?”

He smiled secretively and reached down by the side of the sofa, bringing out a small, round, prettily wrapped present, not much bigger than his hand.

Excitedly she unwrapped, as her sister and niece watched, and then, to his great satisfaction, her jaw dropped as she slowly held up the grey stone she had uncovered. She turned her head, unable to speak, eyes full of questions.

Amanda however quickly found her voice.

“Geez - you get my mom a real pretty bracelet, but you get your girlfriend a rock? I know she said...”
you didn’t have a lot of money anymore, but that’s just sad.”

Angel chuckled. “It’s... special!”

Then he turned to Nina. “Smell it.”

Her eyes had narrowed. “Is this some kinda joke?”

He shook his head. “No. But see if you can place the smell...”

Frowning she took a tentative sniff, and then wrinkled her nose. “It smells... odd. Unfamiliar.”

She was still eyeing him skeptically, and then Amanda grabbed the stone and had a sniff too, before declaring that it didn’t smell like anything.

Finally he relented and explained: “It’s a moon rock.”

Nina’s eyebrows went up a good fraction. “A moon rock? What do you mean?”

“I mean - it’s a rock from the moon!”

Automatically she turned her head and looked out the window, where a pale winter sun was just beginning to shine.

Jill looked astonished. “But how...?”

Angel smiled a little. “I might not have a law firm anymore, but I still have... contacts. It’s absolutely genuine, despite the lack of documentation.”

(Getting hold of divers boots in Illyria’s size hadn’t been easy, but thankfully she had kicked up less of a fuss than he’d imagined - obviously she had retained whatever part of Fred’s knowledge that dealt with gravity. She had however on her return declared the moon to be ‘dull and monotonous’.)

Nina was now turning the stone over in her hands. “Wow... That’s... I don’t know what to say...”

“Don’t say anything,” he replied, planting a kiss on her cheek - the look on her face was more than he could have wished for. He couldn’t even remember when he’d first got the idea, but once he’d thought of it, he couldn’t get it out of his head. Getting her a piece of that which ruled her life - it just seemed fitting. And maybe one day it might help her explain her... condition to her family.

Of course it wasn’t exactly something she could wear, and he pulled out the other present that had been hidden in his pocket. “I got you something pretty too.”

The happy excitement on her face was wonderful and made Angel full of warm, glowy feelings - he was sure that Tiny Tim himself would have felt right at home. The demon bar, and all the other unpleasantness he’d been through recently, felt like it belonged to another life... But he knew that he could easily carry on with that part, as long as this was waiting for him at home.

***

Sadly, the peace didn’t last. At midday there was a knock on the door and Jill went to answer it, puzzled.

The voice that floated through into the sitting room was so unexpected - so shocking - that Angel got up and almost used vampire speed to get to the hallway.
And there, as clear as day, stood Fred…

“Angel!” she exclaimed, looking flustered and apologetic and smiling enough to power a small town. “I am so sorry to drop in like this - like I was just explaining to Jill here - but when I was gonna set off to my folks’ my car packed in, and there is nowhere that’ll fix a car on Christmas Day, trust me. So I thought instead I could stop by, just saying Merry Christmas and drop off a few presents? I hope I’m not intruding, I was just late buying gifts - as usual, I was rushing around on Christmas Eve before all the shops closed - and figured that at least this way you could get your presents on Christmas Day and not in a week’s time…”

Angel was speechless, but Jill was of course drawn in:

“You mean, you haven’t got anywhere to go?”

‘Fred’ dismissed her with a wave of her hand.

“Aw, don’t worry about it. I’ll dig somethin’ out of the freezer and power up the ol’ web camera and have a long distance Christmas. I’ll just have to hope dad hasn’t accidentally uninstalled somethin’ at their end. Again.”

She rolled her eyes, the action so perfectly Fred that Angel wished he could reach out and touch her.

Believe that she was real. He felt oddly winded, like he’d been kicked in the stomach, hard, and couldn’t breathe. (Ironic for a vampire, he knew, but it was the best description he could think of.)

“Don’t be stupid,” Jill said. “I’ve got plenty for one more. After all isn’t that what Christmas is all about?”

‘Fred’ allowed herself to be talked into staying, and walked through the house with a big wobbly pile of presents in her arms, refusing any help, chatting all the while. The act so perfect that only someone who knew who she really was could see through it.

When had she gotten so clever, so manipulative? Angel wondered. Did she pretend to be Fred often? She never divulged where she went during their ‘breaks’, he’d just presumed she went off to kill things, or be worshipped.

“So you work with Angel,” Jill said, looking speculative. “I’m sorry, but did we meet…”

‘Fred’ smiled bashfully, depositing the prettily wrapped boxes on the coffee table. “It’s a while ago, and I think it was a little awkward…” She glanced at Nina, who looked as shell-shocked as Angel felt, but they never got further as Amanda interrupted.

“Is one of those for me?”

“Amanda!” Jill said sharply. “Christmas isn’t all about you. Please say hello to Fred - she works with Angel, but got stranded, so is going to have Christmas with us.”

“Hello Fred,” Amanda said dutifully, before wrinkling her nose. “That’s a funny name. Isn’t it, like, a boy’s name?”

‘Fred’ laughed, and then pulled out the biggest present.

“You’re absolutely right, I have a funny name. ‘Fred’ is short for ‘Winifred’, it’s quite old fashioned. And this one’s for you, sweetheart. Christmas is definitely all about the children. ”

Amanda pounced on the present, delighted, as Angel watched helplessly, and ‘Fred’ distributed the
other presents. What was going on? Why was she doing this? Was it some sort of experiment, did she want to experience human Christmas?

When Jill went to see to the food, ordering Amanda to abandon her presents for two minutes to add another place setting to the table, Angel took his chance immediately.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked in a low angry whisper, and ‘Fred’ tilted her head, Illyria studying him coldly out of Fred’s warm brown eyes.

“You are compromising the safety of this family. If Wolfram & Hart attack now, you are vulnerable due to the sunshine. I have come to protect you.”

“Are you trying to suggest you care about these people?” he asked, incredulous, and she almost sneered.

“You have feelings for them. They are your weak point and it is impossible that those we fight do not know this. If these people were to be kidnapped, our enemies would have leverage over you, jeopardising our mission. If they were to die, you would grieve, rendering you unfit for the work we have to do. I cannot allow it.”

Nina had joined them, face gone pale.

“But - you said that Willow did a spell, protecting us…”

“She did, you’re fine!” he replied tersely, glaring at Illyria. He knew it had been a risk coming here, rather than have Nina come to the Hyperion which is how they usually met, but dammit, the spell was practically apocalypse proof…

“Besides, your highness, Buffy has made sure the local Slayers keep a lookout. As well you know.”

‘Fred’s’ features had become immobile, her whole body frozen. He was used to Illyria’s stillness, but seeing it applied to Fred was unnerving on a whole new level.

“The quiet bothers me,” Illyria eventually said, tonelessly, almost as if speaking to herself. “They allow us to remain unharmed in this dimension. If I were hunting prey, I would not allow it respite. They are planning something. But if not here, then where?”

Angel had no reply, and then they were interrupted by Amanda returning, a napkin on her head, declaring herself to be a nun.

“Well gosh, aren’t you just the darnedest thing?” ‘Fred’ beamed, and Angel had to abandon his interrogation. Nina didn’t look happy either, and he wondered what he’d done to deserve this.

The answer was immediate, and didn’t help. He was trying. He’d just hoped he could have one day…

“Angel,” Nina said, when they were alone. “Are we safe?”

He pulled her into a hug, drawing strength from her youth, her quiet, steady courage, the fierceness that he could sense in the wolf embedded at her core.

‘Let me keep this’, he thought. ‘Powers above, just this.’

“You are as safe as I can make you,” he eventually replied. “Is that enough?”

A beat; then she smiled, lopsidedly, and tried to make light of the situation, not quite succeeding.
“Well, it’ll have to be. I mean, for starters I’d need some anti-wolf medicine…”

The meal was painfully uncomfortable. ‘Fred’ chatted happily, mostly with Jill, as Angel and Nina pretended to re-capture the Christmas spirit, yet found themselves smiling too much and saying too little. The festive decorations seemed to be mocking them, and the obligatory Santa hats that they all had to wear for the meal (family tradition!) added an extra touch of the surreal.

The food was delicious (the meat very rare, and tasty), but Angel might as well have been eating ashes. Did Illyria understand even a fraction of the pain she was causing? Did she care? Because this could have been real. A Christmas meal with his girlfriend, her family, and his friend. If it hadn’t been for Knox…

Realising that his cutlery was beginning to bend to his silent frustration he tried to pay attention to what was going on, laughing along to a story from ‘Fred’s’ student days. However, she then fixed him with those big eyes, smiling innocently and addressing him directly:

“Sorry, didn’t mean to monopolise the conversation. Angel, will you be seeing Connor? I could give you a lift once my car is up and running again…”

Angel froze, fork suspended in mid-air, speechless for the second time in two hours.

“Who’s Connor?” Jill asked, and Angel tried to speak, but found that his voice wasn’t working.

‘Fred’ tilted her head, puzzled, then contrite. “You haven’t told them? Oh, are you… Have I just gone and put my foot in it? Angel, I’m so sorry, I had no idea they didn’t know-”

Forcing himself to speak, Angel smiled stiffly and answered Jill’s question:

“Connor is… my son.”

“He’s at Stanford!” ‘Fred’ interrupted, beaming once more, “Angel is very proud.”

A pause followed her words, as Jill slowly looked from Nina to Angel, and he knew exactly what she was thinking. So far he’d been very unspecific regarding how old he was, but knowing that he had a son who was basically Nina’s age was not a point in his favour.

“You… must have been very young when he was born.” Jill eventually observed, and Angel readily grasped onto the proffered olive branch, his mind working overtime to come up with a plausible story, whilst keeping the underlying truth in sight.

“It was… not easy,” he said slowly. “His mother died in childbirth, and I was… not able to look after him. He was adopted by a very kind couple who love him as their own. We only established contact this past year. But it’s… going well. He’s a good kid.”

He saw Jill relax, making it all fit into her world view; the accidental teenage pregnancy where everything went wrong, the man who now tried to amend for his past missteps, the story with the happy outcome.

Idly he wondered how Spike was getting on in Rome - from what he’d heard, Spike, Buffy and Dawn would be spending Christmas with the local Watcher and his wife. Pettily, he half-wished that they, too, would have their peace interrupted by someone unexpected.

Little did he know how accurate his wish turned out to be.
It was odd just being a tourist, not continually looking for signs of a hostile presence, but Riley was beginning to enjoy it. And having Sam wearing dresses every day was an added bonus. After their last assignment they’d been given a whole month off over the Christmas holidays for a job well done, and Sam had insisted that they go somewhere different, pointing out that they always went home, and that travelling round Europe without being on duty was an opportunity to be grasped. Which was how they found themselves in Rome just before Christmas.

It was now the 23rd of December and a beautiful, clear evening. The sky had a hazy orange-y glow from the streetlights, obscuring the blackness and the stars. Riley and Sam were walking along hand in hand, stopping now and again to admire the architecture or to jump out of the way of a moped. Then the street opened out into a pretty square, lined with little cafés and half full of people, mostly teenagers meeting up before the night’s excursions. In the middle was a large ornate fountain with a wide rim, every inch of which was occupied by chatting people.

As they sauntered across, Sam suddenly squeezed Riley’s hand. “Honey look! That girl looks just like Buffy Summers!”

He turned his head the way she was pointing and saw a young, black-clad woman sitting on a bench on the other side of the square, who indeed bore a striking resemblance to Buffy.

Curious, they changed their direction and soon an astonished Riley was certain that it was Buffy, or if not she had an undiscovered twin. Taking a good look at her, as they waited for a gaggle of scantily clad young girls to pass, he was pleasantly surprised at how different she looked from the last time he’d seen her. The strange insecurity and worry had vanished - she looked prettier and more self assured than he’d seen for a long time before he left...

Her hair was very blonde - as blonde as when he’d first met her - but it was flowing down onto her shoulders in wide, smooth waves, gleaming softly in the sheen from the street lights. She was all in black - a long leather coat splayed out over the bench where she was sitting, a low-cut v-neck top
underneath along with tight-fitting leather pants, her feet and shins encased in black boots with heels that could no doubt stake a vampire. The only thing to alleviate all this blackness was a pendant around her neck which gleamed with a red fiery glow. But Riley’s eyes were drawn back to her face, no longer pale and drawn but with a beautiful honey-coloured tan, her eyes bright as she scanned the crowds, now and again looking up at the houses at the edges of the square, an expectant look on her face.

Seeing her so obviously happy and content, Riley smiled to himself. He had often wondered what the fallout had been from his little lie, but he had told himself that if a lie was what it might take for her to realise her ‘mistake’ (as he called her thing with Spike) it was well worth it... and it wasn’t as if he could have made Spike’s name any blacker than it was already. He could still picture the scene far too clearly in his mind: The two figures on the stone slab; the vampire’s cock-sure-ness; Buffy’s shame. And suddenly the reason for all her changes had been abundantly clear; scattered pieces fitting together perfectly into an obvious conclusion. It had been an intuitive flash of inspiration to say that Spike was 'The Doctor'. And really, since Spike was in the guy’s pay, it wasn’t much of a stretch. Riley just hoped that Buffy had managed to break it off without the vampire retaliating.

As the throng moved on, and Riley and Sam moved forward again, Buffy’s eyes fell on them. And for the tiniest fraction of a second a very odd look passed over her face - resentful, almost angry. But it vanished so quickly that Riley thought that he must have imagined it, as a wide smile lit up her face.

She jumped up off the bench and came over to them, the surprise on her face obvious. “Riley! Sam! What are you doing here?”

“We were going to ask you the same,” Riley answered, smiling back as a host of memories came flooding back - there had been a lot of good times, before it all went bad.

“I live here,” Buffy replied as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“You live here?” Riley asked, surprised.

“Well Sunnydale became a big hole in the ground after the last apocalypse as you probably know, so after travelling a bit, Dawn and I settled here. Rebuilding the Council, training Slayers. That’s me - what about you?”

“We’re here on holiday,” Sam replied. “We got this extended leave and I thought it’d be nice to just be tourists for once.”

Buffy grinned. “Oh I know that feeling! But how are you guys? Still doing the military thing obviously - met any interesting demons?”

There followed a chat about their travels and adventures, until Sam remarked upon Buffy’s necklace. “Sorry, but that is a gorgeous pendant - can I ask where you got it?”

Buffy smiled widely. “Oh it was a present from my boyfriend on our first date... I mean we’d known each other for ages, but never really been on a proper date, so he wanted to make it memorable...”

Her voice trailed off, clearly unable to convey the loveliness of the occasion.

“You have a new boyfriend? How wonderful!” Sam exclaimed happily. “Any chance we could meet him?” She stopped and put a hand to her mouth. “Oh I’m sorry - I’m always too curious.”

Buffy shook her head. “Hey no worries - he was supposed to have met me here half an hour ago, but as usual he’s late. He... does a lot of travelling so I don’t see as much of him as I’d like and he’s
nearly always late.” She smiled wryly. “It’s been more than 2 weeks since he last visited, but I made him promise to show up for Christmas.”

Riley had the strange impression that there was more to this than she let on, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was. Before he could ask, there was a sudden flash in the sky, as though from lightning. Buffy’s head snapped up, scanning the surroundings. Then her face lit up in a wide smile, causing Riley to automatically turn his head to see what she saw. And froze.

On top of a building at the opposite side of the piazza there was a black shadow outlined against the night sky. He only saw it for a second, then the figure leapt off the tall building - not in a suicidal tumble, but precisely and carefully like a cat, obviously intending to land with both feet on the ground, rather than in a heap of broken bones, which would be the usual outcome from such a fall... the coat billowed out and then the figure was hidden by a group of people.

Riley blinked, unable to make what he had seen fit in with what he knew. It had looked just like - but it couldn’t be - only the jump... he turned back to Buffy, just as she skimmed past Sam, saying something about having ‘promised to meet him by the fountain’. Rooted on the spot, he didn’t move until Sam poked him. Then he slowly turned around all the way, just in time to see a sight he had never thought possible.

Through the glittering spray of the water, he saw someone who could only be Spike weaving through the crowds. And then Buffy - smiling from ear to ear - jumped into his embrace, flinging her arms around his shoulders as she kissed him. A very thorough, deep kiss... and she was obviously not in the least worried about who could see them.

His mind having given up on understanding what was happening, Riley almost didn’t hear Sam sighing. After a moment he abruptly came to. “Did you say something?”

She smiled. “Aren’t they cute? I mean look at them - even their outfits match.”

He nodded mutely, unable to express his horror. He wanted to explain to her that it was a vampire Buffy was kissing so enthusiastically, that he was bad news in every possible way, but he didn’t know where to start. Then he saw the couple part and Buffy explain something to Spike. His head turned and he looked at Riley, a most unpleasant expression on his face, but then it became completely blank and he nodded to whatever Buffy was saying. Taking his hand, Buffy led the way round the fountain up to Sam and Riley. She smiled - slightly nervously - but focussing on Sam she said:

“Sam, meet my boyfriend Spike. Spike, this is Sam, Riley’s wife.”

Spike held out his hand with a wide grin on his face and shook Sam’s hand enthusiastically. “I’ve never met you before, but I can say with absolute certainty that he doesn’t deserve you!”

Buffy said: “Spike!” and shot him a look, but Sam laughed. “Oh Riley doesn’t mind. Do you darling?” she asked, smiling at him.

Spike, studying Riley’s closed face, answered. “You know I think he does. Sorry about that Cap’n, but based on past experiences etcetera...”

Sam looked from one to the other. “OK, there is obviously some kind of history here that I’m not familiar with.”

Riley finally found his voice again. “It’s a long story Sam, one that you might not want to hear.” Looking at Spike, he couldn’t help asking. “So, what do you do for a living now Spike? I guess
you’ve changed professions since last - although I hope the diet’s the same.”

Spike’s eyes twinkled in amusement, making Riley rather nervous. What was going on? Why was Buffy dating him? Was it a thrall? Then Spike reached inside his coat and brought out - a wallet! An expensive looking one too. Carefully going through it, he finally pulled out what appeared to be a business card. He held it out with a grin: “This should explain most of it - I just had a new lot made. A... special edition.”

Riley took the card cautiously, wondering what it could be. The one thing he was certain of was that Spike wasn’t a business man.

All it said on the card was ‘Angel's Avengers’. Riley blinked, feeling more out of his depth every second.

“Oh - turn it round!” Spike said helpfully, and Riley obeyed. As he slowly read the card aloud, Riley’s eyebrows felt like disappearing over the top of his head... because Spike had obviously gone completely insane. This is what he read:

SPIKE
Full-time Champion and
Saviour of the World.

If you wish to contact Spike
make a suitable offering to Illyria,
God-King of the Primordium.
Alternatively contact Buffy Summers,
The Watcher’s Council, Rome.

Snorting derisively he looked at Spike. “What, no solid gold palace and rocket-car?” he asked. The guy was unbelievable! Or possibly crazy.

Spike however wasn’t listening - he was looking at Buffy, who was eyeing him coolly with ‘You’re SO full of bull-shit’ written all over her face. Only she chose the strangest bit to focus on. “A suitable offering?” she asked archly and Spike shrugged. “Well, like a goat say - anything smaller she’ll just smite you for being irreverent.”

“A goat and she’ll turn up?” Buffy still looked skeptical.

“If you do the sacrifice properly, yeah.”

Spike appeared not to be joking, but Riley could tell that Buffy wasn’t convinced. What she wasn’t convinced of he didn't know. What the hell was a god-king of the primordium?

“Since when?” Buffy asked and Spike suddenly frowned. “Oh - I never told you about that whole thing! A few weeks ago we were in the middle of this big fight, right, and all of a sudden Illyria did this bloody big scary grin, opened a portal and disappeared, leaving us high and dry. Thankfully our opponents thought she’d gone to get some back-up and we made a truce, but we didn’t see her again for three days. When she finally turned up she was...” he stopped, and appeared to consider his next words carefully. "Let's just say that she was over the moon. She had loads of skull necklaces round her neck and some kind of wreath on her head. Turns out there’s some dimension where she’s still worshipped and they were having their grand yearly tribute. And what with being a god and all she could somehow sense it... rather nifty if you ask me!”

Sam looked as baffled as Riley felt. “Sorry, but I don’t understand what you’re talking about - at all.”
Suppressing his urge to walk away, Riley looked at Buffy, talking before she could answer, desperately needing to find out what the deal was, before the conversation was completely sidetracked: “I hope there’s a very good explanation for all this. How can you be with him still, knowing what he is?”

Looking uncomfortable - or possibly angry, Riley wasn’t sure which - Buffy took a deep breath. “Riley - he’s different! Every word on that card is true. He got his soul back and then he died saving the world. Now he and Angel are fighting in this apocalypse that’s gonna take like a millennium. Yes he’s still a vampire, but he’s on the side of good now. So trust me, everything is different to the last time we met.”

Sam said, “He’s a vampire?”, but before anyone could explain, there was a loud yell: “Buuuuuffy - where aaaaaare you?”

Rolling her eyes, Buffy looked around, then jumped up and down and waved. “I’m over here!”

Moments later yet another gaggle of teenage girls arrived. This lot was slightly more sensibly dressed, and it was only after a few moments that Riley noticed that their bags looked awfully pointy and that a couple of them had stakes in their hands. With them was a tall and slightly gangly man who looked to be in his mid-thirties, whose air of intellectual superiority was slightly undermined by the colourful, knitted jumper he wore over his shirt, the words ‘Everything stops for a cup of tea’ standing out in crimson red.

Smiling proudly Buffy introduced the newcomers: “Riley - Sam, these are my Slayers...” but as soon as the girls saw Spike, they ignored everyone else and gathered round him, bombarding him with questions:

“Spike! How long are you staying for?” “Is Angel coming too?” “Can you train with us again?” “Have you been to any cool dimensions?”

Looking somewhere between pained and flattered Spike attempted to answer the various questions, until Buffy called out: “Girls! Stop!”

The chatter died out and the group turned round to face Buffy who looked at them sternly. “Now - let Spike be. He’s only come for Christmas, but if there’s time he might drop by and say hello. And, um, this here is my old boyfriend Riley who’s in a special demon killing branch of the army and his wife Sam. Riley, Sam - these are my Slayers. Oh - and this is Johnson who’s the resident Watcher.”

Johnson came forward and eagerly shook their hands. “A pleasure to meet you both! I have heard of you from Buffy of course, and about the type of work you do, and I would be very interested in such matters as kevlar armour...”

Riley countered his questions with one about how come there were suddenly this many slayers, and only vaguely noticed Buffy swiftly sending the girls to wherever they were going in twos and threes. As Johnson’s tale came to a close, the only two left were Buffy and Spike.

Trying to digest all the information he’d received (including confirmation that Spike had indeed saved the world, which was such a curve ball that it would probably take years to sink in) he made no effort to stop Buffy as she said she had to go - apparently they were making the town as safe as could be before Christmas. She and Sam exchanged phone numbers and agreed to talk soon. Spike then asked: “So what’s our job - you seem to have sent the girls to all the hot spots.”

Buffy smiled a very mischievous smile: “Oh - we’re intimidation!”
Spike raised an eyebrow. “Is that so? Well it would explain the outfit.”

He waved an appreciative hand at her black leather costume.

“Yeah - gonna go round all the dives and explain that if any of them feel like having some kind of ritual sacrifice over the holidays, they’ll have us to deal with.”

“Sounds perfect,” he purred.

“See? A nice night out and entertainment.” She smiled again, then turned back to Sam and Riley. “See you around guys - call me after Christmas and we can meet up, ‘K?”

And with Spike’s arm around her waist, the two of them walked off. Riley looked after them for a long time, trying to get his thoughts in order. Having your past jump out at you without warning was a bit of a shock. Thankfully Sam was chatting away with Johnson, giving Riley some time to reflect. Thinking it all over, the thing that stood out was how very carefully they’d all avoided mentioning the last time they met - and he still couldn’t work out why Buffy was with the vampire. Unless... he absentmindedly passed his fingers over the bite marks on his neck. Would a vampire - even a souled one - be able to say no to Slayer-blood on tap? And why had she wanted the chip out? Had it been before or after the soul? If only he didn’t remember that whole Dracula incident so clearly, not to mention other things...

He shook his head, trying to dispel the worryingly vivid recollections of sharp fangs sinking into his skin in a wondrous mixture of pain and pleasure... He was absolutely NOT going to dwell on that particular chapter of his life. It was long gone - long, long gone!

*Deep breath, concentrate on the conversation.*

What was that Johnson had just said about his wife being pregnant? Riley put his arm around Sam and gave her a little squeeze, thinking that maybe in a few years time they should retire from active demon fighting...
By far the best Christmas, Buffy decided, was one she didn’t have to arrange herself. Not that it would ever be quite right without Mom, but this year was already way ahead of all the others. She snuggled deeper into Spike’s embrace and let the conversation wrap around her like a warm blanket. They were in Johnson’s cosy flat, having just finished a wonderful and very English Christmas dinner, complete with flaming pudding, and there was now a good natured argument going on over what they should watch. Spike and Johnson for some bizarre reason wanted to watch ‘The Great Escape’ which apparently was another one of those mystifying British traditions. Dawn wanted a comedy and was enthusiastically backed up by Kristina, the only Slayer to have stayed in Rome since her whole family had been killed by Bringers.

Johnson looked at his wife pleadingly: “Sarah - please explain to these dear young things that it is quite simply not a proper Christmas unless one watches ‘The Great Escape’. I despair of them - they need to be inspired by this heroic tale, and all they care about is some pretty boy movie star and his tepid tale of comical woes in the pursuit of so-called love!”

Sarah, whose dark curly hair somehow accentuated her cheerful face, contemplated the wine bottle on the table. “You don’t think the baby would be harmed if I drank just a little, do you? And in answer to your question, I honestly couldn’t care less, especially since you are channelling Lady Bracknell again. A comedy sounds fine to me. ”

This caused Spike to enter the conversation again. “But patriotism is important!”

“Says the vampire,” Dawn said, raising a quizzical eyebrow.

“Says the British vampire,” Spike corrected. “I’ll have you know I did my bit in the war-effort, eating as many German soldiers as I could find - I’d have got a medal for sure if I wasn’t dead! And um... was in the army.” He frowned slightly, worried that this might not have been the best thing to say, but Sarah burst out laughing.
“Spike! What are you like? God, you’ll be the end of me...“

Spike smirked, and Buffy thought to herself that it would be impossible to find better people to spend Christmas with. She missed her friends of course, but there was no way things would have been as relaxed as this if everyone had come. Apart from Dawn, these people only knew Spike as ‘the big hero’ and had just accepted him - much like the Scoobies had accepted Angel to begin with.

Sarah, who had only recently moved to Rome after commuting back-and-forth for half a year after Johnson’s appointment, found Spike wonderfully fascinating. A ‘Watcher born and bred’ (“My dad used flash cards from when I was tiny, which is why I have such a good knowledge of demons - I could tell the difference between a Rishmon and an Arumah-ka age 4 just from the horns,”), she loved his perspective on various incidents, but what separated her from any other Watcher Buffy had ever met was her wonderful sense of humour and irreverence (“Dad always wanted me to do well - I think he had some crazy idea of beating the Wyndham-Pryces - but sadly I am hopeless at languages and then I discovered boys when I was fifteen, so only just scraped through college. I did excel at kissing though!”) and Buffy fervently hoped that she and Johnson would stay in Rome for years to come - although the baby might complicate things.

The arguments having finally been settled when everyone agreed to watch ‘Return of the King’, she cautiously asked Sarah what their plans were now - did she want to return to England when the baby arrived?

“We were actually just discussing this earlier on, before we argued over how long the turkey should cook,” she replied and Johnson tore his eyes off the screen for a moment to join in. “I still think it was under-cooked dear - one has to be careful with birds.”

“I liked it!” Spike chimed in. “And I’m an expert on birds.” He gave Buffy a little squeeze and she giggled.

Johnson however looked at his wife pointedly. “See?”

“Oh shut up,” Sarah retaliated. “It was fine. And I got my information from my mother who has never been wrong on a cooking-related matter since she baked her first sponge cake aged 7.”

“Really? She was 7?” Buffy asked, thinking that this was rather young to let someone near an oven.

“Well, granny helped of course, but honestly my mother is one of these scarily perfect housewives and I think you have to be born that way. She'll have the house spick and span by 10.30 on a morning and then spend the rest of the day knitting and baking and sorting out the hundreds of organisations she’s a member of. Actually the knitting is the only thing I was ever any good at.”

She pointed proudly at her husband’s festive jumper and then stopped and tilted her head with a frown. “What on earth did you ask me about?”

Before Buffy could answer, she remembered herself. “Oh yes - if we were ‘going home’ so to speak. I think,” she cast a speculative glance at Johnson, “That we decided to stay here. It’s fairly easy to travel between here and England - as well I know - and if we went back my mother would not be able to stop herself from interfering all the time! Not that I know the first thing about babies mind you, so I guess I’ll just have to make it up as I go along.”

She chuckled, then her face suddenly turned sombre. “You’ll make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid, won’t you?” she asked Buffy. “I know that the risks are not as big as they used to be for active Watchers, what with all the new slayers, but I do worry - it just takes a demon to flick its wrist to make mincemeat of someone. I’m still not sure that ordinary humans should be involved in the
fighting side of the business at all. Especially those who like to practically walk into the lion’s mouth.”

Buffy reassured her as much as she could, knowing that Johnson had a thing for wanting to try out new weapons for himself in the field. Noticing that Spike had become unusually quiet, she asked him what the matter was.

“’S nothing pet.” He said, planting a kiss on her forehead. “Just got to thinking about... something.”

She didn’t feel like prying, since she could tell that he wasn’t going to spill easily. And she’d vetoed any talk about his and Angel's travels. Instead she leaned back against her vampire cushion and tried to focus on the movie. Another fight scene began and she glanced up at Spike. “Y’know, this really makes me want to try out my present!”

“Does it now?” he replied. “You’re going to have to get it off your Watcher first.”

She laughed, since her fabulous collapsible sword was still nestled in Johnson’s lap and she’d probably have to threaten him with violence to get it back.

Sarah shook her head. “I still can’t believe that I fell for a weapon’s geek.”

Kristina, who had appeared completely absorbed in the movie, turned around. “Are there any Watchers who don’t love weapons? Well apart from you Sarah?”

“And books!” Dawn added, “Don’t forget books - if you don’t love books with all your heart you can’t become a Watcher. It’s in their secret oath!”

Sarah laughed again. “I really hope this baby is a girl, because I’ll bring her up to love pink frilly things and despise all this fighting business.”

“Hear, hear!” Dawn cheered before turning back to the TV. “Oh - this is one of my favourite bits - Faramir is just so hot!”

Buffy sighed happily. This year’s Christmas was very, very good indeed.
‘Smile and the world smiles back’. That was a saying, right? And in some ways it worked, because Riley smiled and people smiled back. He smiled at Sam and she positively beamed back; the sun that kept him orbiting, even when he felt like spinning off into the void.

Christmas had been and gone and Sam had enjoyed it all to the full - even going to midnight mass at St Peter’s; a fact he’d better keep hidden from his grandma forever or she’d probably disown him. Demons would be an easier subject than the Catholic Church. But much as he tried to pretend, that wasn’t what had unsettled him. No, it was what he called ‘The Sunnydale Factor’, the embodiment of which was Buffy - golden haired, mysterious Buffy, whom he had once thought the love of his life. Although looking back, what had his life been then? He’d lost his mission, even lost himself to some degree. And he had clung to Buffy so fiercely, hoping against hope that one day she might need him; might love him; might be someone he could understand. Having ‘The Sunnydale Factor’ thrown into his life now was unsettling to say the least. He didn’t like chaos, didn’t cope well when the rules kept changing. And he really didn’t want to dwell on all the... things that had happened back then.

All he wanted to do was to enjoy this evening, sitting on this bench with an arm around his wife and the promise of an exciting mission starting in a few days. So it was a rude shock when out of the blue a very real bleached blond vampire appeared in front of them.

“Good evening,” the vampire smiled, as though they were all the best of friends.

Before either could reply, he continued swiftly: “Sorry to be rude, but I’m afraid I need to borrow your husband for a little while Sam. I’m in a bit of a rush or I’d love to have a chat.”

Slightly bewildered, but friendly, Sam replied. “Sure - Riley, I think I’ll go browse in that little boutique just around the corner - you can come and dig me out when you two are done.”

Riley wondered why he didn’t just say no, but instead he nodded, gave Sam a kiss and watched her walk off down the street. Leaving him alone with Spike...

Slowly he turned his head to take in Buffy’s ‘New Boyfriend’. No - he still didn’t get it. But then had he ever really understood her?

Without a word Spike started walking. Puzzled, but loath to start an argument already, Riley followed. After a short while they were in the back streets, the darkness more prevalent and making
Riley tense, scanning the surroundings for possible danger.

A moment later Spike stopped and looked around. “This seems quiet enough,” he said, and jumped up on a dumpster, then searched through his pockets for a cigarette and lighter. Riley watched him carefully light up, the flame highlighting his chiselled features, before turning to look at the human. “Want a seat?”

Riley shook his head mutely. What was going on? Was it a trap? But Spike had a soul, so surely that meant he didn’t hurt people... although that hadn’t stopped Angel that time. He tightened his grip on the stake in his pocket, but Spike caught the tiny motion and chuckled.

“Oh please - don’t insult both of us by even pretending that you could take me on.”

Riley gritted his teeth and replied tersely: “I’ve killed a helluva lot of demons these last few years Spike-” but Spike cut him off with an authoritative wave of his hand.

“Listen boy, I killed my first Slayer before your grandfather was even born. I could break your neck before that thing was out of your pocket, understood? But...” a resigned sigh, "I didn’t bring you here for a fight, so just calm down.”

Riley took a deep breath and nearly turned to walk away, but then curiosity got the better of him.

“So - what do you want Spike?”

The vampire smiled one of those infuriatingly smug smiles, and then said the last thing Riley could ever have imagined:

“I wanted to thank you!”

He knew that he probably looked like a complete idiot, but Riley couldn’t help his jaw from dropping.

“You... wanted to thank me?” Even if he had wanted to, he couldn’t have kept the sarcasm out of his voice. “What for?”

“The chip.”

“Very funny Spike. Care to tell me when exactly you went insane?”

Spike chuckled. “Oh I’m not saying I liked it - or that it was fun having migraines from hell every time I looked at someone the wrong way. Or that I enjoyed it when it nearly blew up my head. But overall - looking back, right, seeing what happened because of it - it was a good thing. For a start, me and Buffy bein’ together wouldn’t ever have happened otherwise. Probably would have killed each other sooner or later. So, yeah, I felt like thanking someone. And since I only have a choice between The Initiative and The-Powers-That-Screw, you got to be a substitute for Maggie Walsh and her bunch of crazy doctors.”

Seeing that Riley was speechless, the vampire continued. “Now seein’ as I’m such a forgiving and caring sort of fella, I figured that one good turn deserves another, so I’m gonna try to do you a favour in return.”

Riley shook his head. This was ridiculous. He had no idea what Spike was playing at, and he really didn’t care.

“You know what Spike? I think I’m just going to take off. It was...” he almost said ‘nice to see you’,
but that would be such a gratuitous lie that he’d just make the vampire burst out laughing. As he was trying to come up with a suitable farewell, Spike took a long drag of his cigarette, then asked leisurely:

“Tell me before you go - what was her name?”

OK, now the guy was being surreal. “What? Who?”

“The first vampire who bit you - what was her name?”

And although Riley had been certain that any such detail had been long since forgotten, he answered without thinking: “Sandy.”

Spike slowly nodded. “Look anything like Olivia Newton John?”

Riley shook his head and, for reasons that escaped him, felt compelled to explain. “No - quite petite and pretty with light brown hair. She was -”

He managed to stop himself before he started relating the whole sorry story.

But Spike pressed on. “Where did you meet her?”

“Willy’s,” he answered curtly, slowly backing away. Why the hell am I still here?

Spike’s face turned thoughtful, then suddenly he smiled a little. “Yeah - I remember her. Never really got over being turned that one…” he stopped and shot Riley a dark look. “I suppose you staked her?”

Riley nodded, but before he could turn around and walk away, Spike started talking again. Softly, almost like he was talking to himself, and Riley found himself spellbound. Spike’s voice had become strangely soothing, as though reciting poetry or recalling long-gone memories...

“That first bite... funny how all the pain suddenly stops after a few seconds. It’s like everything crystallises and you know that this is... it. And you think ‘I’m going to die!’ and part of you just doesn’t care.”

Spike’s eyes were staring into the distance, lost to this world. There was a small smile on his lips as he continued, his words causing darkness to creep into Riley’s head one little step at a time.

“There is such a pull to the other side, like the sea draggin’ you down. That incredible rush of standing on the edge and looking into the abyss. Never knowing if this time maybe you’ll fall…”

Riley hadn’t even registered that Spike had jumped off his seat. The vampire was standing in front of him, eyes shining in the dull light and speaking words that Riley had never been able to formulate. He could feel his heart beating wildly, but seemed unable to move, as though he had grown roots through the pavement. And Spike kept talking...

“To be so wanted... needed... to know that something stronger than mere feelings are at work. Because you are life to a vampire - it cannot exist without you. What runs through your veins in the most important thing in their existence…”

Spike slowly reached out and almost touched Riley’s neck. “Riiight here is the spot. Mmm - little Sandy had good aim.”

Part of Riley was panicking wildly. What was happening? Why was he letting Spike so close?

It’s a thrall! It must be a thrall! There is no other explanation!
The vampire’s eyes suddenly shifted to bright amber and Riley tried to swallow, but his mouth had gone dry. He closed his eyes, waiting, wondering why he wasn’t running - only the anticipated move towards his neck never came.

Instead Spike stepped back abruptly, a leer on his face. “Shame of course for both of us that I wouldn’t touch you, even if you were the last person in this dimension or any other.”

As if suffering from vertigo, Riley swayed slightly on his feet. He stared at Spike, the last few moments replaying themselves as he gripped onto the stake tightly again. His mind was racing, and watching the vampire silently saunter back to his former seat and dig out another smoke, he was unable to hold back the accusation on his lips:

“You did a thrall!”

Spike stopped trying to light his cigarette and laughed. “I knew you’d say that! So bloody predictable little farm boy. But no - that wasn’t a thrall. I believe the technical term is a mind fuck.”

Seeing Riley’s stunned face, he chuckled to himself. “Although you could say that I activated your chip - well sort of. You could have snapped out of it if you’d wanted.”

Then he looked up, eyes shrewd and calculating. “But you didn’t, did you? I could have drained you dry and your last words would probably have been ‘thank you’.”

Riley frowned. Surely the vampire was lying...

But Spike wasn’t finished. Gesturing with his free hand, he began explaining in earnest. “See you, Mr Finn, have what is called ‘an addiction’. Some people drink, some gamble, some put needles in themselves - you like to dance with death! And all these things are dangerous. Especially when you don’t deal with the problem, but just stick your tail between your legs and run away.”

He stopped for a moment to concentrate on his cigarette and Riley found himself asking.

“But... how did you...?”

Spike took a deep satisfied drag and smiled smugly. “Ah! Now that was a little trick I learned from my grandsire. You might have heard that Angelus is the worst vampire on record. Now he isn’t as famous as Dracula or as old as The Prince of Lies was - and I’m sure The Master must have killed more people. Hell, I’ve probably killed more! But what Angelus did better than anyone else was destroy individuals. Screw with their heads until there was nothing left. Now me, I just like killing stuff, but that don’t mean that I can’t step into his shoes now and again. And you, my dear Commander Finn, were easy as pie! Problem is, one day a vamp will come along who’s not as thick as most of them and he’ll work you out too - and before you know it, you’ll be someone’s lunch.”

He sighed, and flicked the half-dead fag end away. “None of this really bothers me, except your wife seems like a very nice lady indeed, and she deserves better than some spineless junkie for a husband. Also Buffy used to have a thing for you. And, having walked much further than a bloody mile in your shoes... hm, more like crawling across broken glass actually - I might have found just the tiniest little dreg of sympathy for you.”

Riley silently shook his head. What the hell did Spike think he was doing?

Before he could say anything, Spike continued. “But to get back to the main point, consider this - what if I’d been soulless still and killed you? Or maybe turned you? Because if that happened it’s very likely that your dear wife would meet her death at your hands...”
Shocked, Riley didn’t know what to say, when a loud bleeping interrupted them. Swearing Spike pulled out a cellphone and answered, only to have whoever was on the other end yell so loudly that even Riley could hear. “Spike! Where are you? I told you to be on time!”

Looking only vaguely concerned, Spike shrugged. “Hunh - didn’t realise it was that late. Have been a bit busy - I’ll head your way now.”

Then he frowned and listened, before sighing. “Fine - come and pick me up then! I’m...” He looked around, obviously trying to find a good way of explaining their whereabouts, when he half-smiled. “Hey, this is the alley where we killed that redhead prostitute in ‘94.” “That’s it! See you in a minute.”

“You were here in ‘94?” Riley asked, latching onto the end of the conversation.

Spike smiled a little. “Eighteen-ninety four young padawan. But as I was saying - your wife deserves kiddies and one day grandchildren and you’d better be there for her, OK? So - sort yourself out and get some help. I might just come and check up on you in 50 years' time.”

There was a sudden strange crackle and Riley turned his head to see a portal open up in mid-air at the end of the alley. His eyes opened wide as he saw Angel step out, followed by an odd blueish creature, all dressed in leather.

Angel looked pissed off and opened his mouth to say something, but then caught sight of Riley and faltered. Looking from him to Spike he frowned. “What’s going on?”

Spike shrugged. “Nothing much, I was just doing him a favour, since I owed him one... where are we going again?”

“To negotiate with the Ramulka-ha clan! Did someone extract your brain over Christmas?”

“Make haste, your insolence and tardiness is wearying,” the strange humanoid demon said and with a flick of her wrist opened another portal. Riley stared, remembering the card with ‘Illy-something, God-King of the Primordium.’ Could it really be true?

The odd companions stepped through one after the other, Spike being the last one. Mid-step he suddenly froze and looked over his shoulder.

“Ah what the hell,” he said, then before Riley had time to blink the vampire was in front of him.

“This,” Spike carefully explained, “is for staking me, blowing up my home and all the other crap.”

And his fist flashed forward, connecting with Riley’s nose in a painful crunch.

His hand over his nose, Riley almost cried out loud, when he caught the very grim look that suddenly came over Spike’s face.

“And this is for leaving Buffy high and dry when she needed all the help she could get!”

Spike’s fist connected with Riley again, but this time the punch landed on his chin and sent him flying backwards, hitting the wall.

When Riley managed to see through the pain, the vampire had vanished, the only proof that he hadn’t been a figment of Riley’s imagination the cigarette butts on the ground. He slowly got up in the darkened alley and tried to stop the bleeding from his nose, but he couldn’t help thinking. Maybe... maybe Spike was right? Carefully he passed his fingers over the bite mark on his neck and
could almost feel that invisible pull again...

A little later he caught up with Sam, now deeply embedded in the boutique and with an ever growing pile of pretty ornaments. “Look honey - I know we have too much baggage already, but aren’t these just the most incredible candlesticks?”

He was silent for so long, that she stopped her browsing and eventually looked up. “What’s wrong? You look...” Her eyes widened, as she took in his face properly. “Oh my god, Riley - what happened to your nose?”

He took her hands, then asked her slowly, “Sam - do you love me? No matter what?”

“Of course,” she answered, her face beginning to look troubled.

“I... I need to tell you something. About my past - about Sunnydale.”
Chapter 14

Waiting for Spike to turn up at their chosen meeting place, Angel tried to evaluate Christmas…

Christmas Day had been lovely until ‘Fred’ appeared, and her strange paranoia had unfortunately been rather infectious. He’d found himself unable to relax after that.

But even so it had been good to see Connor - and not just because Connor was a complete counterpoint to everything else that Christmas.

He’d told Connor about Illyria’s Christmas Day stunt, and how he’d had to divulge Connor’s existence to Nina and her family.

Connor had stared at him, then laughed.

“My ‘real’ parents were teenagers and I was adopted by a kind couple? That’ll be an interesting one to explain to my folks if they ever all meet…”

“Look, I had to make something up on the spot, I-“

“It’s fine,” he said, eyes still full of mirth, and Angel sighed.

“Look, she wasn’t just being difficult for the sake of it… She’s worried Wolfram and Hart will attack those I care about. And she sees you as the nearest warrior who can protect them.”

Connor raised an eyebrow, pleased. “Huh. Well I’ll try, should the need arise, but aren’t there, like, ten Slayers in LA?”

“She reckons they would be busy protecting the general population. She seems to think you are… devoted to me. Or that you should be.”

It was all rather uncomfortable, but Connor didn’t seem bothered, telling him to give his number to Nina so she could call if there was an emergency.

Angel still marvelled at how calm and unperturbed his son had turned out; somehow it made the memories of the past even worse. Knowing how resilient the boy was, how he took everything in his stride, the damage inflicted by Holtz and Jasmine was thrown into sharper relief.

Checking his watch again, he realised that Spike was now nearly half an hour late.
“In times past I would not have tolerated such tardiness,” Illyria remarked, and Angel - swearing to himself - finally brought out his cellphone. The guy had had almost a week with Buffy, was it too much to ask that he arrived on time?

Once Angel got through, Spike was of course completely unapologetic. And since he was still miles away, Angel decided that they had better go to him.

He glowered silently when Spike gave him directions based on a past murder - it was bad enough having silent reminders everywhere, having someone pretty much reminisce was worse...

As he stepped through the portal he was about to tell Spike in no uncertain terms how he felt, but seeing who his companion was, Angel abruptly forgot what he was about to say. Of all the people in the world, Riley Finn was the last one he’d expected to find Spike chatting with. And, vaguely remembering a very drunk conversation half a year ago in London, he frowned.

“What’s going on?”

Spike shrugged. “Nothing much, I was just doing him a favour, since I owed him one... where are we going again?”

Angel decided to ignore the Riley part, since he really didn’t want to know, and confined himself to answering the question.

“To negotiate with the Ramulka-ha clan. Did someone extract your brain over Christmas?”

Without waiting for a response he stepped through Illyria’s new portal to the demons’ dimension.

For a moment he wondered if maybe Illyria had gotten it wrong, as there was no sign of the ‘great palaces’ he’d had described to him. All around them a huge forest grew - giant, towering pale purple trees with foliage so thick the sun barely shone through.

With a sinking heart, Angel realised that this would be another one of those ‘blunder about until hitting something’ situations that was always so infuriating and boring.

Illyria - never one for chit-chat - just set off, her inner compass needle once more directing them. She didn’t even bother casting them a glance to see if they were following, knowing full well that they had no alternative. After her antics at Christmas, Angel was particularly annoyed about being beholden to her, but there was nothing he could do, no alternative option. Gloomily he trudged along, wishing that he could somehow get one over on their Old One.

Spike on the other hand seemed annoyingly chipper.

After they had been walking for a good while, and noticing Spike didn’t even swear when he accidentally stood in a muddy puddle that had been hidden underneath the bracken or when a branch flicked across his face, Angel finally asked:

“OK, what’s with the happy face?”

“I beat up Riley Finn,” Spike answered, nimbly jumping over a fallen tree. “And not just that, but pretty much had him eating out of my hand first. Well the other way round actually - could have eaten him if I’d wanted. Oh you should have seen the look on his face when he began figuring out what was going on. Bloody priceless.” He grinned wickedly. “Best. Christmas. Ever!”

Angel couldn’t help smiling back, but still had to ask.
“And how’s Buffy? I mean, if Riley was the best thing about your Christmas...”

Spike, not even attempting to raise to the bait, smoothly answered.

“She’s fine. Bit worried about this apocalypse that’s on the horizon, but apparently Willow had a break-through in her translating recently, so they’re hoping for the best. Oh - and she’d like it if we could do some training with the young ‘uns. Gettin’ a bit too complacent apparently, and she wants them toughening up if it really is the end of the world. Said we could probably give her a hand, yeah?”

Angel nodded slowly. Although the thought of training sessions abruptly and painfully reminded him of Cordy, it might be nice to do some simple sparring - fighting for his life every other day was wearying.

As evening fell some hours later, Angel noticed something. “Hey...”

He walked up to an oddly shaped moss-covered lump, and pulled away the green covering. Underneath was a softly gleaming white piece of marble - perfectly smooth, and with a careful pattern along one side.

In the growing darkness they discovered the remnants of what must once have been a magnificent place - and yet clearly it had been destroyed a long time ago. It would seem that the Ramulka-ha had not retired of their own will...

Yet again Angel found himself depressed at how many worlds were now nothing more than shadows of what they’d once been. Unlike the human world, where one empire followed another, in most demon dimensions once decline started, it was often terminal. Demons could be smart and cunning, but most lacked imagination and vision - no wonder the Senior Partners were so focussed on the humans.

He wondered what had happened here, and why. And if there were any left of the Ramulka-ha... Still, the Labyrinth ought to be there still. From what he had been told it would appear to be pretty indestructible - although getting in might be a problem.

After four days they came to the end of the forest and were faced with a wide, empty plain, before the ground rose up to tall mountains in the far distance. But... in between the forest and the mountains was a village, made up of hundreds of finely woven huts centered around a large, ancient looking tree. And there – towering behind the village - there was what appeared to be a long, grey-blue petrified wall. Could it really be the Labyrinth?

Now all they needed was for the clan to grant them access.

When they neared the huts, Angel saw a welcoming committee already waiting; the demons had built their village very strategically - there was nowhere to hide on the open plain. Everyone - friend or foe - was forced to walk in full view of the village for many miles.

The demons were tall and slender - almost elegant - with pale skin and large, widely set, red eyes, watching the world impassively. There was something oddly insect-like about them, although maybe it was just their immense stillness. Or possibly their very taut, smooth skin. They wore long, pale red robes, carefully embroidered and decorated, the designs echoing those they had found on the ruins in the forest.

Spike however looked up at the wall and whistled softly.

“Sleeping Beauty, eat your heart out!”
Angel could only nod in assent. The Labyrinth had obviously been grown, rather than built as he’d first thought, and it looked old enough to have been around since Illyria’s time. It was nigh-on impossible to estimate how tall it was, but Angel reckoned it’d dwarf even the tallest building in LA, and had stood there so long that the wood had petrified - an impenetrable mass of twisted branches, white-ish blue, and probably as tough as granite. There was no obvious entrance, so - just as predicted - they’d have to do some talking.

The negotiations took a long while, but were eased by the fact that the Shaman spoke fairly decent English. Unfortunately Angel, trying to make small talk, asked what sort of catastrophe had occurred - it must have been quite spectacular to wipe out most of the population and reduce a once great city to rubble. The reply was a stentorian silence, and he swiftly apologised, but in his mind he silently ruled out natural causes.

Deciding to take a chance, he put on his best Friendly CEO Face, and decided to go for broke.

“We are enemies of the Wolf, Ram and Hart, and we are on a quest to undo their power. We hope that a part of our puzzle is in this Labyrinth. Would it be possible for you to grant us access?”

At his words there was a sudden glimmer in the otherwise calm eyes of the shaman across from him, and Angel had to stop himself from smiling in triumph.

Unless he was completely mistaken, he’d wager quite a lot that the Ramulka-ha had somehow gotten on Wolfram and Hart’s bad side - maybe attempting to break their contract, if they were clients - and had reaped the standard punishment.

The whole dimension appeared faded and somehow lost, with a quiet resentment running underneath - an impotent anger at a bright past snatched away. But if the clan’s residual wrath could be used to further Angel’s war, then that was good.

And so was the fact that the shaman stopped slyly asking for monetary donations.

Illyria - whom Angel had half-expected to lead the negotiations - had watched in silence, blue eyes not giving anything away. She hadn’t spoken at all since they’d arrived… something which should give Angel pause, but right now he was just grateful.

The shaman - clearly a cautious individual - warned them that no one had ever come back from the Labyrinth. Having been told this numerous times already, they just nodded and said that this didn’t deter them. Angel almost expected them to get out some sort of form for them to sign, saying that the Ramulka-ha were not to be held responsible for any unfortunate incidents. Or maybe he’d just spent too long with lawyers.

After a long while however, it would appear that they had satisfied whatever criteria the demons wanted, but the shaman then informed them that he had to consult the spirits of their ancestors before he could let them in.

This was such a standard procedure that not even Spike complained anymore, and they watched the shaman and his helpers set off towards the forest with tired resignation.

Two days later the small party returned, and the shaman bowed deeply, saying that the Champions had been found worthy and he would start the ritual as soon as the sun set.

The ritual, as it turned out, took most of the night. Angel thought that this was a good sign - this was by far the best protected place they’d seen in a long while, just the sort of impossible-to-get-at place that would be a perfect hiding place for a piece of the Dead Key.
As the sun peered over the horizon, a messenger came to fetch them. They made their way up to the Labyrinth wall, and, as the shaman recited yet another round of incantations, they saw an opening slowly grow in amongst the branches. As though a silent wind was blowing the boughs bent back, revealing a dark and cold space, and not even the faintest glimmer of light appeared to get through.

As they motioned to enter, Illyria held up the hand in which she was not holding her axe, and turned to them - a most unpleasant look in her eyes.

“Kalkyn ikki loyvd.”

“Hey - that sounds like-” Spike began, but didn’t get any further as Illyria punched him so hard he flew several feet backwards. He didn’t get up, and Angel realised he was out cold. As he turned to the hell god, an angry diatribe on his lips, he belatedly realised that her foot was swinging towards him with deadly precision- and then everything went black.

When he came to again, he was met with the sight of several demons bent over him, clucking worriedly, and arguing with each other.

Illyria had vanished, and the gateway into the Labyrinth had grown back together as if never there. No prizes for working out what had happened… The Queen Bitch had decided she didn’t want sidekicks for this adventure.

Slowly he sat up, rubbing his sore head, and finally looked around to see Spike carefully getting on his feet. The other walked up to him, followed by hovering Ramulka-ha’s, and Angel noticed the colourful bruise spreading across his face.

“Now I reckon that was for the bar,” Spike said, resignedly, and Angel nodded. Illyria always, one way or another, got her own back - ‘forgive and forget’ wasn’t part of her vocabulary. And the fact that she’d made them look like idiots was probably just a bonus in her world.

The Ramulka-ha’s were still staring at them, whispering urgently amongst themselves, clearly thrown. The shaman, obviously worn out after all his recent work and looking actually upset, informed them that he could not perform the rite a second time until ‘the new moon passed before the old moon’ - whatever that meant - and Angel shrugged.

“Nevermind. We’ll just wait for her to come back.”

The shaman muttered something under his breath, and turned away, clearly not thinking she had a hope. Angel refused to even consider the possibility that she’d not return - he had great faith in her tenaciousness.

Spike dug out a cigarette, then flicked open his lighter and carefully lit up, before taking a deep drag.

“So - don’t suppose you brought any cards?”

***

The week that followed was one of the slowest Angel could ever remember. Spike had been ready to crawl up the walls of the Labyrinth on the second day, and he only got more difficult when he ran out of cigarettes on the third. Angel had at first found the atmosphere soothing, but even he was beginning to wish for something to happen - anything at all.

The Ramulka-ha were careful and precise in everything; a bit like demonic Shakers, except that they had a penchant for ornate, intricate designs, rather than simplicity. Everything they made and used was beautiful, and it wasn’t hard to see how they’d once used these skills to further their people...
For the first few days he tried to chat and be friendly. Partly in order to see if maybe he could find out a little more about the history, partly just to pass the time, but the Ramulkha-ha had the single-minded outlook of true artists and were busy from dusk till dawn and not interested in small talk.

He and Spike had been stuck before of course, abandoned in the dimension with the endless rain, but those demons had been warriors first and foremost, a forthright and tough species. He’d been happy to leave, but had they been forced to stay the two of them could probably have found a place within their society.

But they seemed to have nothing at all in common with the Ramulkha-ha. Apart from the manufacture of their pots, baskets, clothing and other items, they cultivated arid fields for growing food, necessitating daily water gathering from the river which was a full hour’s walk away.

The first time he witnessed the procession setting off, a long row of tall, willow-y youth with large, ornate jars balanced on their heads, he asked why they hadn’t located their village closer to the river? And were there no beasts of burden which they could use?

Silence was his only answer.

He quickly learned that this was their standard response to anything they didn’t want to discuss. No arguments, no excuses, just silence.

After a while he wondered if maybe they were literally cursed. Being unable to voice any upset couldn’t possibly be a choice, it had to be something enforced.

Even the children were stoic and quiet, watching their unusual visitors with large curious eyes, but never daring to speak. Not that they had any time to play or fool around - from the moment they were old enough to walk, they were in training, tiny little hands marshalled into creating beauty.

He almost said something, but then thought better of it. What alternatives were there? At least it was peaceful. There were worse lives, that was for sure.

There wasn’t even the frisson of dangerous predators or warring tribes. Nothing at all to break the monotony of the quiet, everyday life. So after a few days he found himself joining Spike on one of his hunting expeditions, more out of boredom than anything else, and discovered that the experience was far more enjoyable than he had anticipated. Not that he told Spike that of course.

Besides, there was nothing else for them to eat, since the Ramulkha-ha were vegan in their diet and he didn’t fancy the gruel-like substance they seemed to be surviving on.

Still, the boredom made him miss Nina even more - knowing that there was a place where he could just relax and not worry about anything was like a special, private treasure. He often conjured up the image of Nina’s face - sweet and still so innocent, despite her strength. And her warm, supple body was not far behind in his fantasies. Shame that the huts had such thin walls...

Then on the 8th day something finally happened, and Angel desperately wished for the peace that would never return.

***

It was late afternoon, the shadows lengthening as the sun sent a few last beams across the landscape before vanishing behind the horizon, when there was a sudden commotion. Spike, who had been reduced to whittling stakes and crossbow darts to stave off boredom, glanced up and suddenly froze. Angel raised his eyes too - and barely believed what he saw.
Across the plain walked a lawyer - wearing a neat suit and tasteful tie, carrying a briefcase and not a hair out of place. The smug look on his face would have felt right at home on Lindsey MacDonald’s features.

Slowly both vampires got up from their resting place underneath the large tree in the middle of the village and waited, weapons concealed and ready.

The shaman went out to greet the stranger, and at their greeting Angel felt his fingers tighten around his dagger.

“We apologise most profusely for having to send for you - but their God went into the Labyrinth without them. And we did not know what to do.”

“No problem,” the lawyer smoothly replied. “If they’re stupid enough to trust someone who betrayed them, then that is not your fault. I would have come sooner, but the time difference is most inconvenient. So - where are our Champions?”

When they arrived, Angel coldly looked past the lawyer and caught the shaman’s eyes, the demon’s face as much of a blank as ever.

“You betrayed us!” he said, angrily, and the lawyer chuckled. “My dear Mr Angel, your surprise is rather amusing. Surely you know the price on your head is quite extraordinary - quite large enough to repay this people’s debt and more besides... It’s a shame you didn’t all go into the Labyrinth, but that can’t be helped. At least your Goddess has been taken out of action. But - as things stand, I have some paperwork I need you to complete.”

He opened his briefcase, and pulled out a piece of paper and a pen.

“What do you mean?” Angel asked, eyes darting to the tall, foreboding wall, now almost vanished in the encroaching darkness.

The lawyer smiled. “I need you to sign here, and here-”

“No - about the Labyrinth and Illyria. What’s in it?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not here to answer questions, only to make sure the paperwork is done correctly.”

“Very funny,” Angel answered, pulling out his dagger. “I’d like some answers, and I’d like them now!”

A nasty glint appeared in the lawyer’s eyes. “Your little hell god is lost forever - you can trust me on that one. And how very fortunate that you have a knife - you will of course have to sign in blood!”

The lawyer raised his hand, and with a sudden, terrified lurch in his stomach Angel felt his own hand move, before neatly slicing his left palm open.

“I also happen to be a necromancer,” the lawyer said coldly. “We did not want any more surprises from you... Please, take the pen. As I said, signature here, here and here.”

As Angel helplessly dipped the pen in his own blood, he almost felt sick. It couldn’t end like this... except, of course, that apparently it already had. This was what Illyria had worried about, at Christmas. A plan behind the scenes… It had all been too easy for them. He briefly wondered what really was at the heart of that Labyrinth, but if Wolfram and Hart thought that it could do away with a hell god, then they probably had their reasons - maybe it had been a trap? And what was the document - another way of stealing his free will?
The lawyer smiled a superior smile as the nib of the pen touched the paper - and then suddenly his head was at Angel’s feet. Angel swayed, unstable, as he abruptly regained control of his own body, and could sense Spike re-gaining his balance too. But all he could see was Illyria, bloodied axe in hand, studying him.

“Can I never leave you alone without you getting into trouble?” she asked, looking from one to the other, and then kicked the headless body out of the way. She could have taught Lindsey a thing or two about understated smugness.

“But how... he said that you were lost...”

Belatedly he realised that he was still holding the pen, and broke it, before he brought up his injured hand to his mouth, gently cleaning the wound with his tongue. Thankfully it had almost stopped bleeding by now.

Illyria looked round at the shocked faces of the clan who were surrounding them, and silently shook her head. Then, with a small smile, she held up her left hand, in which she held a bundle - it looked as though there was writing on the fabric, but Angel couldn’t make it out.

Slowly Spike reached out. “Is that-?”

Illyria nodded once, and Spike grinned widely as he shoved the bundle into his pocket, and Angel could feel relief and accomplishment flood through him. Their search wasn’t in vain!

“Better get the hell out of dodge, eh?” Spike remarked, and Angel took in the great number of demons silently staring at them in the darkness - the usual evening ritual of lighting the village fire obviously having been forgotten in the upheaval.

Slowly he shook his head. “No - we’re not done here.” Taking a step back he broke a branch off the huge tree behind him, and he could hear the gasp from all around. The tree was holy - apparently a shoot of the giant labyrinth wall from ancient times - and only the shaman was allowed to touch it.

“Give me your lighter,” Angel said to Spike, and, after a swift glance, the other obeyed.

There was now a wall of demons all around them, a palpable air of anger in their eyes and careful movements.

“Listen!” Angel said, eyes fixed on the shaman, as he deliberately flicked open the lighter and set fire to the branch in his hand. “You betrayed us - and there will be a price to pay. Let it be known that this is a war, and whoever works against us will be made to suffer!”

He held his torch aloft, and then in a swift movement turned and let the flames leap onto the tree.

A wail arose and Angel smiled harshly. “I will leave you alive - but that is all. If that is mercy or not I shall let you decide.”

Then he flung his burning branch over the crowd’s heads, and it landed with perfect precision on the roof of the shaman’s hut. The finely woven sturdy grass caught fire in an instant, and, thanks to the evening breeze, soon enough more huts were ablaze.

Panic broke out as the crowd suddenly scattered, desperate to salvage their homes as the flames spread and orange tongues licked up against the now black sky.

(And water was an hour away...)
Turning his head, Angel saw Spike studying him, face closed. He could imagine only too vividly what the other vampire was thinking. Wordlessly he handed the lighter back, and Spike pocketed it with a hollow-sounding “Thanks”.

Illyria however was watching the mayhem with undiluted pleasure, before turning her eyes on Angel. “You act like the great rulers of old. It... pleases me.”

Slowly Angel bent down, emptied the lawyer’s pockets and collected everything in the briefcase. As he stood up, he caught a furtive movement out of the corner of his eye, and a second later threw himself down on the ground to avoid the blast of magic that the shaman had directed at him. Before he had another chance, Angel’s dagger was embedded in his chest.

Getting back on his feet, retrieving his weapon, he saw Spike look around with an unhappy face. “Really ought to get out.”

Angel nodded, but for a moment took in the inferno all around. He’d spent his year at Wolfram and Hart trying to live with a compromise that tore him in half. Having finally made his choice, he had turned himself into that which he was fighting - trying to reach a different goal, sure, but using the same methods.

All he wanted was to go back to Nina, to recapture that wonderful Christmas spirit he had soaked himself in so thoroughly before ‘Fred’s’ appearance, but looking at the hell he’d created he suddenly couldn’t bear the thought of anyone looking at him with admiration.

What was it Spike had said about Buffy wanting some help with her Slayers? That suddenly sounded like a great idea - actually doing some straightforward good for once. And Buffy would look at him with that mixed expression of disapproval and disappointment... the sort of look Nina ought to send him too. With a deep sigh he faced up to the fact that he had lied, but he had never told her straight what it was that he did... because he knew that then it would be over - again. For good. But he couldn't face that conversation right now.

“Illyria - take us to Rome.”

She nodded, and just like that they were back in the world of humans - staring at Buffy’s door. As though he hadn’t just destroyed a whole peoples’ livelihood - he’d seen the storage huts catch fire just as they left...

Buffy looked rather surprised when she opened the door, cellphone to her ear, but waved them in nonetheless.

“Um, Willow,” she said into her phone, “Can I call you back? I’ve just been invaded by vampires...”

***

With a sigh Willow said goodbye to Buffy, and for the thousandth time brushed off a little bug. She’d spent six days in the desert now, waiting for her hell beastie to show up, and so far there had been nothing except bugs and scorching heat. She’d been over her notes a million times, re-calibrated and re-translated every scrap of information and ancient prophecy she had, and it ought to be here by now...

Then suddenly she could feel a strange tugging sensation at the very edge of her awareness, and the bug she’d shooed away had now come back with five little friends. She watched in wonder as they flew up in front of her face, creating a perfect circle in the air, their bodies fanning out like a flower - then more tiny winged creatures and insects joined in, creating a fantastical, living pattern, and
Willow suddenly realised that this had to be the ‘Circle of the Least’, that had so vexed her when translating...

Through the ever-expanding ring she could now see a shimmery shape slowly become solid; whispery shadows gradually solidifying into a firm body. Three heads, six legs, fantastical horns growing ever larger, and faces both terrible and hideous...

But Willow only saw power. She took a deep breath, smiled, and walked through the circle.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

By the way, I think I will go back to a regular posting schedule - a new chapter every other Saturday. Thank you all for reading. <3

January 2005

Spike stepped through Buffy’s door and into Buffy’s arms. He held her silently for a moment, feeling her warmth through the fabric between them and inhaling her wonderful scent. He never wanted to leave.

But then he let her go, dumping their weapons’ bag by the door and settling down tiredly on her pretty, white sofa. How come that he was so exhausted after a week of doing nothing?

Buffy clearly sensed that something was wrong and looked from him to Angel and then to Illyria who was smiled enigmatically; and then back to Spike again, a frown deepening on her forehead.

“Are you OK? You smell like... smoke... Oh my god, did someone try to set you on fire?”

Angel’s face was a mask, and wordlessly he turned and started looking at the photos scattered on the mantlepiece, body so tense that Spike was sure that if someone tried to touch him he’d rip their head off without even looking who it was first.

Tiredly Spike rubbed his eyes, wondering what the hell to say, then looked at Buffy. “No - we’re...” Seeing the worried look on her face, he faltered. “We’re fine. Technically at least.”

The smell of smoke clung to them, rasping in his throat, and he wanted nothing more than to wash it off, but he knew it’d not help - he’d still remember the scene every time he closed his eyes.

*The dead bodies - the lawyer and the shaman both, and the double-cross they symbolised - the flames from Angel’s fire-y torch spreading further and further, the panicked screams...*

Buffy was still rather thrown he could tell, obviously wondering what had happened to them... if she’d known Illyria better, Spike reflected, she’d know that the fact that the hell god was happy
meant that they’d been stepping over several moral boundaries. Thank goodness she didn’t - although she was clearly expecting more of an answer.

“Look - it’s just... just been a rough week, yeah? But we thought we could come and give you a hand with the girls, like you asked. Could do with a good workout...”

She looked at him silently for a while, then, much to his relief, nodded. She’d probably try to get the story out of him later, but knew that now was not the time. Instead she smiled, her take-charge attitude showing up and masking the discomfort. “That’s great. Your timing is impeccable, ’cause I was just about to go... Lemme just get changed.”

She disappeared into the bedroom, closing the door behind her, and a second later Angel turned, seeking out Spike’s eyes.

“I had to-” he began, but Spike cut him off.

“I know.”

They couldn’t afford to show mercy.

Especially not against traitors... And Spike felt the sting of the treachery again. But then it had been a well-timed lesson: Just because someone hated Wolfram and Hart didn’t mean that they could be trusted. Things had been so simple - so much simpler than back here they’d thought. Some demons had been against them, others had helped. Some had been trying to trick them, but the attempts had been so obvious - there were creatures like Willy everywhere.

This had been different. They couldn’t even be sure if it’d been the whole clan acting together, or just the shaman working on his own. Overall they’d just been so... harmless. Like all artists, so absorbed in their work that they invariably came off as somewhat aloof - and defenseless in the face of true danger. Spike was sure that if he’d asked what they thought of fighting and war they would have echoed his own words from many, many years ago:

‘We prefer not to think of such dark, ugly business at all. We prefer placing our energies into creating things of beauty.’

But pathetic little poets got murdered in dark alleys, and artists who tried to get themselves back in favour with the establishment got punished by those trying to overthrow the status quo.

He buried his head in his hands, not wanting to look at Angel and see the self-loathing magnified. It was all too complicated and difficult - and he didn’t like it. There was good, and there was bad - surely they shouldn’t be so muddled up? For the first time he truly began questioning the nature of their quest. Then with a start he remembered that they’d actually been successful - were another step closer to their goal.

But at that moment Buffy returned, and he’d have to wait until later before adding the new piece of Key to the rest. He should feel elated - and yet it struck him that they had found all three pieces in ways that made him deeply uncomfortable. Maybe it was cursed? Or maybe it was just the inevitable result of being messed up in W&H business... everything got tainted and murky.

He needed a distraction, and thankfully Buffy was there to provide it. She of course looked amazing - her legs wrapped in tight black leggings with a pale blue tank top above was balm to his eyes. She’d pulled her hair back into a practical ponytail, but he could still almost feel the silkiness of it beneath his fingers... She was softness and strength all wrapped up together, and he still found it hard to believe that she was really his. That when he caught her eyes, like now, she smiled at him in a
way that made everything else fuzzy and out of focus.

Angel turned, swiftly putting back the photo he’d absently held in his hands, then looked at Buffy, face blank, and asked simply, “We going?” and Buffy frowned again.

Illyria, who’d been silent and lost in a world of her own, suddenly snapped her head round. Looking from one to the other, she held out her axe to Spike with the words: “Clean it!”

He stared at her, wanting to tell her to go to hell, but with a sigh he realised that Angel was her favourite for the foreseeable future, and she’d also expect lots of gratitude - which in her world equalled servitude - for saving their lives. Rolling his eyes he muttered, “Fine!” and got up, before getting a cloth from Buffy’s weapons’ chest.

“Kill anything fun?” Buffy asked, trying to make conversation as she tied the laces on her trainers, and Illyria looked at her; a tiny, triumphant smile on her lips.

“Lawyer.”

“Oh,” Buffy answered, and didn’t ask anymore. A moment later Spike handed the axe back to Illyria, hoping that Buffy’s curiosity was satisfied for good - if she thought they felt guilty over Illyria’s kill, that was fine... because he didn’t want to talk; didn’t want to try to put into words all the complex feelings and myriad shades of guilt that he now carried around. Briefly he wondered when he’d stopped thinking of lawyers as human, and worthy of anguish.

“Ready?” Angel asked, and Buffy nodded as Spike picked up their bag. They’d not had any use for it this time around... If nothing else they had lots of new darts.

It was a grey and overcast day, so they needn’t worry about burning up. As they set off, Buffy took Spike’s hand, and he grasped onto her like the lifeline she was. He desperately wanted to haul her off somewhere and do his best to drown in her, but that was out of the question until whenever Angel had left - if he was leaving. The fact that Angel probably wouldn’t mind the two of them making out under his nose - might even welcome the added pain - ruled it out even more...

Whenever Spike tried to work out just how their relationship fitted, he got a headache.

“So,” he asked, holding Buffy’s hand a little tighter, “What do you want us to do with the lil’ ones?”

She sighed. “Well, you know they were all the most ‘hopeless’ ones - those that would never have been called if it wasn’t for me. Like... some of them were insecure, and some were totally unimaginative, and some had just freaked out... I used to have almost 20, but about half left in the autumn - which is good, of course. Buffy’s extra-special training program works wonders! The problem is that... I think I’ve been doing too good a job,” she smiled wryly. “They’re all brilliant now, and think they’re kinda invincible. And now of course there’s this apocalypse coming - again...” her voice trailed off and Angel turned his head to look at her.

“It’s going to be bad?”

She nodded, and the frown was back. But now it was obviously there because of her own problems.

“I thought that... things would be easier now there are lots of us, but instead I’m just worrying how many are going to die - because of me. Again. If Willow is right, this thing goes down in about a year’s time, but we still don’t know where... Oh and there’s supposed to be lots of signs and stuff, not sure what exactly, so keep your eyes open for two-headed cats and a rain of stones...”

Despite the half-joke, there was a tired note in her voice that reminded Spike of times he’d rather not
think about, and he could see Angel sinking even further down into brood mode. Well this had to stop - before long they’d all be sitting in a corner somewhere, drinking whiskey and listening to Country music. Time for him to shake things up a little.

“Well - if you see the Four Horsemen, tell them hello from Spike!”

“Huh?” She turned her head, and he grinned at her. Angel even pulled himself out of his self-imposed silence and shot him a droll look. “You never told her? Or were you so drunk that you’ve only just remembered?”

He laughed. “Nah - but she put a veto on talking about anything apocalypse-related for Christmas.”

Buffy was looking at them both, unsure whether to take them seriously or not. “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse - you... met them?”

He nodded proudly, and felt that thrill of pure excitement again - there were legends and then there were legends...

“Bloody brilliant guys, to tell you the truth. Oh and if they show up, then whoever is organising your apocalypse has plenty of spare change - their fee is fuckin’ astronomical. But then that’s the thing with being famous - they got their name into the big book, and now they’ve got it made. Oh and -”

He turned to Buffy and raised an eyebrow, “-they really like you.”

She stared at him. “Me?”

“Quite the fans to be honest. I mean they’d heard ‘bout me and Angel obviously, what with tryin’ to save or destroy the world a few times, but you’re in a league of your own.”

She flushed, unable to stop a genuine smile deepening, and he could feel the world beginning to feel right again.

Angel rolled his eyes. “You turned into Andrew, and you know it. I’m surprised you didn’t ask for their autograph.”

“I did!” Spike countered, rooting through his pockets, after a moment’s search bringing out one of his cards, with four signatures crammed onto the back.

Studying it, Angel shook his head. “You’re insane.”

Spike grinned. “Well if we’re ever in need of cash that will fetch a small fortune on eBay.”

Illyria didn’t say anything, but Spike had the distinct impression that she’d pricked up her ears when the talk turned to money.

Which was so weird that he decided to ignore it.

Then they began discussing what to do with the baby Slayers, and by the time they reached the Council building had worked out a nice strategy that hopefully ought to unsettle them enough to sit up and take notice.

As Spike and Angel watched the warm-up a little later, Spike cast the other vampire a droll look, “So - ready to shatter some illusions?”

“Ready to help them grow up,” Angel answered, studying the vivid young faces of the girls as they went through their exercises. Spike tilted his head.
“Oh and you might like to know that Cora - the black girl, in the green top - is left-handed; Gemma -
the brown haired one with the ponytail - has a way with an axe that’s quite something; although
Kristina - the blonde gawky-looking one - is probably the best of the lot. Watch out, she’s got
imagination!”

Angel turned his head, frowning. “You’ve done this before?”

Spike shrugged. “Given Buffy a hand a couple of times, nothin’ more than some simple sparrin’...
Oh - try to ignore the smell. First time they pretty much walked all over me ’cause I kept gettin’
distracted.”

Angel rolled his eyes, and then they straightened up and gripped their wooden swords as Buffy
called the girls together.

“OK. You know how I said that we need to train extra hard, because of the apocalypse? Well we
just got some help!” She indicated Spike and Angel with her hand, and a quick flurry of excitement
flared up, before Buffy’s stern eyes quelled it. But Spike noticed all the swift, adoring glances sent
their way. And suddenly he could again see bright orange flames licking up against a black sky, and
hear the screams of panic...

All the way down memory lane, the same cries echoed, and this was a fresh reminder again of what
he was... He had joked once that he and Angel had a good cop/bad cop thing going - except it
wasn’t funny when the good cop had to let the bad one beat the witness into oblivion...

He shuddered, and vowed to stop those adoring looks for good, if he could at all help it. He knew
none of the girls had ever connected the dots between Spike-Buffy’s-boyfriend and Spike-the-slayer-
of-Slayers in a real and tangible way. Absentmindedly he grabbed hold of his pendant, taking a deep
breath as he felt its reassuring weight against his palm.

“I know you’re very good,” Buffy continued, and the young Slayers all smiled proudly, “but - and
that is a big but - “Spike saw some of the girls try to hide a smile, before Buffy swiftly continued, “-you’ve never really had any proper big fights - and no, that gross sewer thing doesn’t count, nor does
that battle with the Frofundo clan. I mean fights where your opponent is older, stronger and more
experienced than you, and will kick your ass! So - please say hello to today’s guests - two
Champions who more than fulfill those criteria.”

Spike could almost feel Angel wince, but there it was. He cleared his throat.

“OK then my ladies - grab your pointy sticks and let’s see what you’re made of!”

Spike smiled, turning the charm up as far as he could, and he saw two of them blush. Oh, fighting
dirty could be fun...

“But-” a dark haired girl spoke up, a little shyly, “Won’t that be dangerous... for you I mean?”

Spike shook his head, incredulous. He had to hand it to Buffy, these girls weren’t lacking in
confidence.

“Listen pet, it won’t come to that. An’ if it does - in which case I’ll dress up in a tutu and sing
‘Mandy’ - we’re wearing armour, so knock yourself out!”

“Oh,” she said, obviously rather flummoxed, and Spike grinned. He could see Buffy’s brow draw
together, but he didn’t care. He was itching for a good fight, not having had a decent one in weeks -
and this one was just the ticket.
“Step on up then!” he called out, and they looked at each other.

“What - all nine of us against just you two?” Gemma asked.

“Well duh!” Spike replied.

“But... that doesn’t seem fair.”

“Fair’s got nothing to do with it,” Angel said, voice calm and deceptively light, but Spike could hear the strain underneath.

There was another moment’s hesitation, but then the girls attacked, and finally Spike could forget about everything that weighed on him.

It was probably insane - trying to fight nine slayers at once, but to begin with there was quite simply not enough space, and it was rather amusing to see them almost jostling for room... and Buffy was right. They were good - but not used to smart opponents. Spike took two down within the first minute, and then Kristina’s stake got far too close for comfort - damn that girl was fast - before he managed to slip under her defenses. As he and Angel thinned the crowd they split up, and suddenly they were both fighting one-against-one... and then the game was up.

Spike looked down at the last slayer - who’d been standing just a moment earlier - and frowned in surprise. He turned to Angel, and saw the other with the same puzzled look on his face.

“Well that’s... did she just go down too?”

Angel nodded.

Spike looked round at the rather sheepish looking girls, and couldn’t help smiling. “Hey - the first time I fought Buffy, I got the better of her too!”

He could see Buffy open her mouth, and stopped her before she could speak. “Oh I so did! If it hadn’t been for your mum...”

One if the girls - Megan he thought her name was - piped up.

“Her mother?”

Spike nodded. “Hit me over the head with an axe. Brilliant woman, Joyce Summers!”

He caught Buffy’s eyes, and suddenly the whole world fell away. “’No one puts a hand on my little girl’, she said...”

Buffy smiled, eyes huge and shining, and he was one step away from crossing the room and pulling her into his arms, when he remembered where they were.

“Anyway - she held her own. Which is more than I can say for you...” He let his eyes travel over the girls, then shot Angel a look, and the other continued, speaking to Buffy.

“You’ve trained them too well. They’re formidable as a group, but once they’re on their own they flag.”

Spike could see Buffy nodding slowly, and smiled a little. “Kinda bizarre, I gotta tell you. Wanna show ‘em how it’s done?”

A wicked glint appeared in Buffy’s eyes, and she nodded.
Angel settled down on one of the benches along the wall, watching as Spike threw off his duster before he and Buffy began circling each other. He could sense the anticipation in the girls next to him, and couldn’t help sharing some of it - although he couldn’t shake the feeling of deja-vu that settled over him... thankfully though, this time the ending would be different.

Then suddenly Spike pounced and all thoughts vanished as Angel became utterly absorbed in the battle that unfolded. He noticed that Buffy had a stake in her hand, and she had a few almost-hits that Spike laughed off. Angel saw him try the move that had done for her last time, but now she slipped away easily, and Angel marvelled again at how amazing she was. He remembered sparring with her himself, and how easily things had almost gotten out of hand...

*Focus, focus - don’t think about the past, don’t dwell on the fact that you’ve lost her for good...*

The fight flowed back and forth, skill and cunning and strength unfolding in an astonishing display that kept the onlookers riveted. Suddenly Spike sent Buffy crashing into a wall, but she kicked his legs out from underneath him and the next second she was straddling him, stake to his chest.

“See?”

She looked around at the avid faces, triumph and a touch of smugness in her eyes. The girls broke into spontaneous applause - eyes bright and excited and obviously hero-worshipping Buffy even more than before.

Angel noticed the second she shifted her weight a fraction, but even so he was almost taken aback at Spike’s swift reaction. In the blink of an eye he had reversed their positions, his hands around Buffy’s throat.

He looked up at the shocked faces, eyes hard and cold: “And now - she’s dead.”

Angel followed his gaze, saw certainties crushed into nothing. It was clear that the girls thought that Buffy could do no wrong, could never fail - and now they’d witnessed her bested in front of their eyes. And her cool, handsome, charming boyfriend had just reminded them that he was a murderer.

Then Spike continued, voice calm and matter of fact; but Angel knew exactly what his thoughts - his memories - were at this moment. Face after face springing to life unbidden, the blood on their hands that refused to go away...

“This was how I killed my second Slayer. She hesitated just a moment too long and then - I snapped her neck.”

The girls were silent, and abruptly Spike jumped up, then slowly - almost hesitantly - holding out his hand to Buffy.

“Sooner or later,” he continued, “You will fight alone with no one watching your back. You mess up - you die.”

Buffy took a deep breath, and shot Spike a swift look. “Thank you.”

Then she focussed on her charges again. “Dying is easy. The problem is that we are Slayers...”

She swallowed. “You might not just fight for your own life - you might be fighting for the fate of the whole world. And in an apocalypse you get creatures far stronger than anything you’ve ever seen...”
She shot Angel a look, since he was sat next to the door, and he swiftly located their pièce de résistance.

“This is Illyria,” he said as she walked in, coolly looking over the Slayers staring at her. “She is a hell god from before the time of men.”

The girls looked a little dubious now, but Angel turned to Spike and saw the other smirking.

“Buffy - lend us a weapon, yeah? Something strong but ugly.”

She nodded and fetched an axe, and Spike weighed in his hands, assessing.

“This’ll do. Right girls, pay careful attention. You ready Blue?”

Illyria didn’t move, and Spike shrugged, then lifted the axe before swinging it with deadly force and accuracy towards Illyria’s head. At least two of the Slayers cried out in alarm, but then Angel heard them all gasp as the blade of the axe shattered against the god’s head.

Slowly she turned her head towards him. “Are you done?”

“I... yep,” he replied, and she walked out, clearly wishing that she wasn’t forced to hang out with such lowlives.

“That’s the kind of creature you might be facing,” Buffy continued, and the girls stared at her, clearly having had a lot of their world view scrambled.

“When you’ve worked out how to deal with that, let me know! I don’t have all the answers, I just tend to make it up as I go along. We are formidable together - but I need every single one of you to be everything you can be. Every apocalypse is different. You might have a role to play. Your idea or work or input might be the things that tips the balance. So remember - it’s OK to be scared, but what you do with that fear is what determines the outcome.”

Settling down again next to Angel, Spike folded his arms and tilted his head critically.

“She’s gotten a lot better at this, you know.”

Off Angel’s surprised look, he chuckled.

“The speechifying. Back when we were dealing with The First… Well, it got a bit tedious.”

Angel looked as if he was going to say something, then thought better of it.

***

Johnson’s office was very cosy, and somehow very out of place in the Italianness of the building, looking more like a hobbit’s home than a Renaissance room.

Spike and Angel had elected to wait there while Buffy sorted out the Slayers’ patrolling schedules and other boring tasks, not really knowing what to do with themselves.

Spike slumped down in the sofa and pulled out the two bits of Key. Holding them together they did the freaky melding thing again, and he shook his head. Magic was an inevitable part of life, but he didn’t like the way this thing weirded him out.

Tucking the Key back in his pocket, he picked up the cloth Illyria had wrapped the Key fragment in. Looking at it more closely he saw that it was actually a shroud of some kind, the finely woven fabric
When Johnson entered a few minutes later Spike held the fabric out towards him.

“Thought you might like this, mate. No idea what it is, but it looks like your kind of thing.”

The Watcher stopped in his tracks and reverently plucked it out of Spike’s hand, then carefully started looking it over, eyebrows sailing to the top of his head as he did so.

“This is... this is astonishing. Really, it’s... I can’t tell you... this could change-”

He stopped and looked up at the two vampires. “Where did you find this? It was supposed to be lost forever...”

Spike shrugged. “Illyria picked it up in this labyrinth that no one can get out of - until she came along at least. What is it?”

“I think... I mean I’m not sure, but I think that it could be The Shroud of Kizrath. The difference this will mean can’t be overestimated...”

Angel’s eyes narrowed. “You mean this has info on this apocalypse of yours?”

Johnson looked up, a little thrown. “What? Oh no, not at all. This is a... a historical document, telling the life story of Kizrath... we have a few snippets of his legend, and some say that they were just stories of other warriors that got a little mixed up... But look-”

He laid the shroud on his desk, and pointed to a bit of writing that looked just as incomprehensible as the rest to Spike.

“Here is the tale of when he met the sea serpent of Drok’kheen - I knew it was real - and oh... wait, this is complicated... Goodness... Please excuse me while I phone Mr Giles...”

The vampires shared a look, and retreated.

In the hallway, Spike stopped and turned to Angel.

“So what are we doing?”

Angel didn’t answer, and Spike frowned. “Angel?”

The other sighed.

“I... I don’t know. I’m just... tired.”

Spike nodded slowly, taking in what the words implied. “Do you want me to... Is there anything I can do?”

Angel shook his head silently, and Spike knew that this was one of the times where the Buffy situation complicated everything immensely. Angel wasn’t an over-sharer at the best of times, but there had been a closeness (and was that ever an uncomfortable word!) between them in the pre-Rome months which was lacking now.

Then suddenly Angel seemed to pull himself together.

“I think I’ll go see Nina. Will be back tomorrow, OK? Be ready to go early. And it might be a good idea not to leave this building.”
There was something hiding somewhere in his eyes, something Spike couldn’t quite put his finger on, but he had a feeling that Angel had made some sort of decision.

It worried him that he couldn’t work out what it was.

A little after Angel had left, Buffy returned. After a lot of very satisfying kisses, her eyes suddenly widened and she pulled out her cellphone.

“I never called Willow back! Just excuse me for a minute, she’s going to be really pissed off...”

A little later she put the cell down. “She didn’t pick up. That’s... odd.” She looked a little worried, but then shrugged it off as Spike let his hands slip under her top.

Soon they’d disappeared into one of the guest rooms, forgetting all about Willow.
Nina was busy trying to locate her homework when the phone rang.

As she called out a good-bye to Jill and Amanda - Jill practically pushing Amanda out the door - Nina held the phone between her ear and shoulder, rifling through the stack of papers on the kitchen counter. Her essay oughtn’t to be there, but it wasn’t anywhere else - and was rather thrown by Angel’s request when her brain finally got round to processing it.

“You want to come visit now? Um... that’s fine, except I have to go to college in 10 minutes-”

She could vividly picture the guilty look on his face as she heard him apologise and say that he’d explain once he was there.

“OK,” she replied, putting the receiver down and dragging a hand through her hair in frustration. The next moment the now familiar bright flash of an opening portal erupted in the middle of the sitting room, and then Angel and Illyria stepped through.

“I will see you tomorrow,” Illyria said to Angel, then walked past Nina as though she didn’t exist, and a few seconds later the front door shut. Fred was obviously not in today.

Angel slowly sat himself down on the sofa, and Nina could tell that something was… off. It had barely been two weeks since he’d left, after a lovely (if somewhat fraught) Christmas, but the look on his face now seemed to belong to a different man. And she could smell the faintest hint of smoke, which was a little confusing.

Before she could ask what the matter was, he shifted, frowning.

“Um...” he sat up and moved the cushion he was leaning against - and pulled out her essay.

“Oh my god. Thank you! I’ve spent half an hour looking for that.”
“My pleasure.”

He smiled at her, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Angel... what’s the matter?”

She sat down next to him, taking his hands, but when he looked up into her eyes she had a horrible sense of déjà-vu, and rising anger.

“Oh... you’ve... You've come to break up with me, haven’t you?”

He sat very still for a few moments, then slowly said, “I’ve come to be honest - with myself most of all I think. If you feel you still have reason to stay with me afterwards...”

He let the sentence hang as though he didn’t expect the outcome to be positive.

“How many people died here last May?”

The question came out of nowhere and she momentarily faltered. By some silent agreement they never talked about what had caused him to break up with her back then... any of it really. He’d apologised, she’d forgiven him, and they just moved on. What did it mean that he brought it up now?

After a moment’s hesitation she shook her head a little. “I... I’m not sure of the final figure...”

He looked down at their hands and said quietly, “I know you have to go - and I don’t want you to be late because of me. But could I borrow your PC while you’re gone? I need to look this up.”

“Sure,” she replied, somewhat relieved that she had to leave, and swiftly switched on the computer in the dining room.

As he sat down, he looked up at her. “Thank you - I could have done this at the Council, but there were lots of Slayerettes, and Buffy and Spike.... And I needed-”

“It’s OK. You’re always welcome here.” She bent down and kissed him on the cheek, before stowing her essay into her bag. “I have to hand this in, but might blow off the classes later on...”

Then she ran out the door, wondering again what on earth she was doing falling in love with a souled vampire.

***

When she came back four hours later he was still sitting in front of the screen, reading. Silently she walked up behind him, and without turning his head he answered her unspoken question.

“Found a website with links to obituaries for all the victims.”

“And... you’re reading them?”

He nodded, eyes still fixed on the screen.

“Angel...” Slowly she laid her hand on his shoulder. “Why?”

Finally he turned, and tilted his head, eyes dark. “Because I killed them.”
“But-”

“Nina, look...” Tiredly he rubbed his eyes, then sat forwards, elbows resting on his knees. “I... I’ve killed so very, very many people in my life. When I was evil I did it for pleasure... and I remember them all because I loved to watch them suffer. But this-” he waved towards the PC, “was war; a real war. *My* war. My chance to accomplish something... and these people were the collateral damage.” He stopped for a moment, eyes distant. “So, facing up to that - the price that innocents have to pay in what I do - I thought that the least I could do is to remember them along with all the rest. Their faces should haunt me also...”

She mulled this over quietly for a moment, feeling strangely hollow inside. Then she asked, “Why now?”

He looked down and suddenly buried his head in his hands.

“I don’t know how long I can keep doing this,” he mumbled, and she walked around and kneeled down in front of him.

“Do what? Angel, *talk* to me.”

He looked at her then, sighing deeply. “Do you think the war in Iraq is justified?”

“Um...” She blinked at the unexpected question, and didn’t know what to say. Thankfully he didn’t seem to expect an answer.

“That is what I do - fight a battle where the end must justify the means. It’s tearing me apart, but I can’t stop now... Remember how you told me I was your hero? Am I still?”

She stared at him silently for a moment, at the despair hiding just under the surface, then asked the only relevant questions he could think of.

“Angel… What happened? Where did you go, what did you do?”

(‘Who did you kill?’ was on the tip of her tongue, but she stopped herself.)

When he spoke, the story wasn’t what she’d expected.

“I... destroyed a people’s livelihood. Burned down their village, their food stores, their work... Because they betrayed us. It was vengeance and a warning and a message. The thing is, if I had been evil still, it wouldn’t have been any different - certainly, I’m sure they couldn’t see the difference. I think...”

His voice trailed off, and she waited. Last time it had been rushed, Angel forcing her out of his life ‘for her own good’, with no explanations, just an overbearing ‘I Know Best’ held up as an impenetrable shield. This time she was getting a look below the surface, and she wasn’t about to waste the chance.

“I think that’s it,” he slowly continued. “I spent a hundred years trying to come to terms with the evil I had committed, distancing myself from the monster, and now... The things I do are no different to what I did back then. I do them for different reasons, but that doesn’t matter to those I hurt or kill.”

“It matters to *me*,” she said softly, and he almost flinched.

“No Nina, you don’t understand. Someone once told me that cruelty’s the only thing I ever had a true talent for - and they were right. I hate myself for it, but it comes naturally. And... I can’t pretend...
otherwise anymore. Darla saw it straightaway - and Dru felt the full force of it. As did Buffy, and
Cordy… And Buffy knows, now. What I do, and how. You should see the way she looks at me.
You should look at me the same, Nina. I am a weapon, nothing more. I tried - I hoped - or deluded
myself that the end justified the means. It doesn’t. But I can’t stop. And I thought you deserved to
know.”

She was silent for a long time, trying to understand what he was saying. She knew so little about his
past, and had deliberately not gone looking. And had not enquired overly into their current quest -
even Buffy was mostly in the dark she knew. He’d come into her life as a hero; not saving her so
much as saving her from herself. Showing her that it was possible to live hand-in-hand with the
monster inside, that a balance was possible.

So yes, she understood what he was saying. Could she live with herself if she had to let the wolf
loose every month? Even if the reason was to accomplish something that would eventually make the
world a better place overall?

She had never thought about war in any sort of detail, even if she had friends who had walked in
protest marches… War was an abstract, except… One of her grandfather’s had fought in World War
II. Had never ever talked about it, but she knew from her grandmother that it had been hell for him.

Slowly she shook her head, a shape of something settling in her mind.

“You are not a weapon, Angel. You are a soldier. Like the one bombing Japan maybe, and I don’t
know if that can ever be justified, even if it ended the war. But if… if you can carry on, I can be here
for you.”

In response to her words he fell silent for so long that she began to worry. Was this good or bad? His
silences were something she had tried to adjust to - random questions could bring them on, and she
knew Spike snarked about the ‘brooding’, but she was also loath to gauge their depth, to find out
what lay behind the sudden darkness in his eyes. And now… What could he be thinking? Had she
said something wrong?

Eventually, he nodded.

“Thank you,” he said solemnly. “I never… I never saw it like that. It doesn’t make it right, but it
helps.”

Which was reassuring, if cryptic.

But then he got that look in his eyes again.

“Just one thing. Don’t get me wrong, but... Remember what I told you back then? In May? I will
hurt you. Not on purpose, but every single person I’ve ever cared about is worse off because of me.
Illyria was right. And sooner or later something will happen to you too, because of me. I know it…”

At this something snapped inside her. Not again! She fixed him with angry eyes, and spoke slowly
and carefully, hoping that he’d get the message this time:

“Listen, maybe you will hurt me, maybe you won’t. No one can tell the future, not even you. But
what I do know is that everyone gets hurt - that’s part of life. Every time anyone takes a chance on
love they also know that they might end up with a broken heart... just ask my sister, who had the
divorce from hell. So let me take my chances with the man who is strong enough to face what he’s
doing and honest enough to tell me. And who will allow me to make up my own mind. Besides,” she
tried to smile, feeling scared and hopeful and nervous, and yet somehow more sure of herself than
she had before, even as she spoke a truth she had barely dared to acknowledge to herself: “I think I’m in love with you.”

His face was a picture of stunned surprise as she leaned forwards and kissed him.

***

Dawn was just breaking over Rome when Angel and Illyria stepped back into The Council. It hadn’t even been 24 hours since they left, and yet Angel felt more at peace than he’d would have thought possible the previous day. Maybe peace wasn’t the right word... gratitude probably came closer. For Nina to accept him - to be there for him - quite simply because she thought he needed it... he wasn’t quite sure what to say or do in response. Again he had been reminded just how different this thing they had was from any other relationship he’d had. He had always felt that their relationship was on borrowed time - adoring her company whilst at the same time keeping in mind that surely, sooner or later, it’d end again. Because that was just how it was with him and women. Now however, he could suddenly see something new, something that might be hope...

Which of course was absurd, even though the fact that she just liked him - not who he had been, who he could be, not who he wanted to be - but just him, was like the most incredible gift, just when he’d finally decided to own up and declare the whole thing over.

Slowly he let his mind run through some of the new names and faces... all his new victims. He’d taken the power of Wolfram & Hart - and yes, he had been blinded by it, because it wasn’t something he’d ever had. He had been in possession of the greatest weapon he’d ever held, and he couldn’t not wield it... but it had cut down so many innocents too. He’d been hiding from that for a long time, focussing on his own loss - his friends, his redemption. And yet if he was honest he’d known all the way back in the alley - back when he’d been on the verge of passing out and realised that the demon hordes were thinning. Where had the rest gone? Well now he knew...

“A Spike is late. Again.” Illyria observed, and Angel was torn out of his musings. Sighing, he pulled out his phone and dialled Spike’s number, hoping he wasn’t too far away. They really should be going - and after Wolfram & Hart’s latest trick, they ought to be thinking of new ways too see their girlfriends... despite all the Slayers, he didn’t feel safe.

Thoughts immediately jumping back to yesterday’s conversation, his eye unfocussed as he listened to the phone ring.

A soldier… He wasn’t sure why the word made such a difference, but it did. He had always thought in terms of being a monster or a hero; of being the leader, or - in Illyria’s vocabulary - a king. His battles, his war. But hadn’t he just been doing the work of the Powers That Be all this time? And wasn’t he just the supporting act this time round, with Spike being the Prophecy Boy? He wasn’t quite sure how to make it all fit, he needed time to re-evaluate things, but maybe…

Then Spike finally answered his phone, and Angel didn’t wait for him to speak, immediately asking:

“Are you ready to go then?”

There was a hesitation at the other end of the line, and then a sigh. “Come up to Johnson’s office, yeah?”

Angel could hear the tension in the other’s voice, and a little later he stood in the doorway watching Buffy pacing the floor, phone welded to her ear, and Johnson and two secretaries looking worried. Spike was on a sofa, slowly turning an unlit cigarette over in his hands.
“Are you sure, Xander?” Buffy’s voice was pleading. “Locator spells can be tricky...” she listened for a moment, then pulled a face. “Yes I know that she was the best wicca in the whole coven, but... just get her to try again, OK?”

Seeing them Spike came over and, not taking his eyes off Buffy, quietly said, “Willow’s gone missing.”

“Missing?” Angel asked, frowning. “You mean someone’s kidnapped her?”

Spike shrugged. “Dunno. She was out in the desert all by herself, and now they can’t reach her. Buffy must have got every wicca that The Council knows to do spells to try to find her, but...”

Turning off her cell Buffy looked up at the newcomers, and seeing Illyria her face suddenly changed.

“Hey! She can open portals! You - Madam Hell god - I need to go to the desert. Johnson - please give her the precise co-ordinates while I go get some better shoes and backup.”

Illyria slowly tilted her head, eyes turning dangerous.

“I do not follow orders from lesser beings.”

Buffy walked up to the god and stared straight into her eyes. “My best friend is missing, and you will help me.”

Then she smiled. “Of course if we find her, Willow can probably teleport you back here in case you don’t have enough power...”

“I do not require the help of witches!” Illyria bristled, but Buffy didn’t flinch, just did the patented ‘what-I-say-goes!’ stare. “In which case you shouldn’t mind doing me a favour.”

There was a moment’s silence, then Illyria inclined her head a fraction. “I shall aid your search.”

Angel shook his head in amazement; the time of miracles was clearly not over.

***

The sun was already burning hot in the sky when Buffy stepped through the portal. Not far off she saw Willow’s little tent and was soon standing next to it, Kristina and Gemma behind her. Slowly she tiptoed around to the entrance, before - heart suddenly beating wildly - she lifted the tent flap and looked inside. But the inside was empty too. Bewildered she looked around, and then asked her two slayers to search for anything that might give them a clue as to what had happened.

A few minutes later they were even more puzzled. There was no sign of struggle or violence, and all of Willow’s things were there - right down to the cellphone that had registered the dozens of missed calls...

Illyria stood around looking bored and impatient, and finally spoke up.

“She was here to find the Beast of the Apocalypse. Maybe it found her - and slew her.”

“But... how? Where?” Buffy looked around, and with a terrible, sinking feeling began wondering how much of the desert she might have to look through to find... No she wouldn’t even think it.

Illyria didn’t move a muscle, and yet appeared to somehow look even more disapproving. “In my original form I swallowed such as her whole. They were but motes, like a fly against my hide.”
Buffy looked at Kristina, who swiftly lowered her eyes. And Buffy suddenly realised how stupid she had been bringing this particular girl - she’d just wanted to bring the best fighters, and not stopped to think about the fact that Kristina’s whole family had been killed by Bringers, and that this was probably very traumatic for her. Catching the girl’s eyes, she softly said:

“Look - I shouldn’t have brought you. I’m sorry.”

Kristina shrugged a little. “It’s all part of the job, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t have to be...”

There were so many of them now.

“I think it does,” Kristina replied, meeting Buffy’s eyes evenly, and Buffy smiled, grateful for the support and understanding. Sometimes it was hard to remember the terrified, jumpy girl Kristina had been when she first arrived.

Then Buffy’s cell rang and Xander’s voice crackled through.

“Buffy... Mahima has done the spell five times now with a variation of different maps. And they all said the same - Willow... isn’t anywhere.”

Hearing the strain in his voice as he tried to keep it even suddenly made tears burn behind Buffy’s eyes.

“I... I know,” she replied. “I got Illyria to take us to the desert and it’s like... like Willow just went ‘poof’. No sign of a fight or anything. She’s just... vanished. Illyria-” She swallowed, “Illyria thinks that this Beast-thing might have eaten her... or... or something.”

It looked more and more likely that Willow really had bitten off more than she could chew this time. Not that she was reckless the way she had once been, but she had a lot confidence in her powers these days. Too much maybe?

Saying a subdued good-bye, and promising to call as soon as she knew anything, Buffy turned off the phone.

Looking at her fellow slayers she took a deep breath, wishing dearly that she’d thought to bring a hat, because the heat lay on her head like a molten helmet.

“Maybe we should spread out - look around to see if there might be some clues further away...”

Illyria shook her head. “You will not find your friend’s body. I do not sense death in the air...” Slowly she turned, apparently scanning the surroundings.

“There is nothing here. You waste time - I will return to my own quest now.”

And that was that. They collected most of Willow’s things, leaving only the tent and the cell - knowing that if Willow came back she’d be able to make it work by magic... and then they left.

As Buffy stood in Johnson’s office once more, watching the desert and the lonely, empty tent vanish, she could feel a terrible, horrible loss spreading inside. People didn’t just... disappear like this. At least not Willow...

But then Spike was by her side and she fell into his arms, fighting against tears.

He softly stroked her back, whispering that Willow was a big girl and that there was probably some
sort of perfectly logical explanation - like that time when she’d returned to Sunny D and nearly got eaten by that Gnarl demon. And when he came back Buffy could tell him all about it and it’d be a laugh.

“You’re leaving?” she asked, stupidly, even though she could see Illyria almost tapping her foot in the background.

“We’ll be back as soon as we can - promise,” he said, but she knew that it wasn’t a promise he could keep.

And then, only moments later, he too was gone.

As she stood there, suddenly lonely again, she began to realise that she still had an apocalypse to avert... and she’d just lost not just her best friend, but also her strongest weapon in the upcoming battles.

But then she raised her head and saw Kristina and Gemma side by side, watching her, and she took a deep breath and almost smiled.

She wasn’t alone.
January 2005

“OK guys, here’s the sitch.”

Buffy looked at the people sitting around the conference table, and had the strangest sensation of... well not déjá vu exactly, but something very similar. In less than a week she’d gathered together every Sunnydale veteran, and seeing them all together like this she felt a sudden, sharp stab of homesickness. This room - oak panelled and very proper as befitted the Headquarters of the Watcher’s Council - was somehow much too grand and official. She was used to small, friendly places for discussing the end of the world - the library, the Magic Box, her mom’s house...

*Focus, Buffy, focus!*

“We have almost a year to work out how to save the world. Again. Thankfully we were able to... retrieve Willow’s notes, since it seems she got a lot of work done out there in the desert.”

She managed to keep her voice mostly level, but a quick glance around the table revealed both Xander and Kennedy suddenly swallowing.

“So, we need to make sure that her - her sacrifice wasn’t in vain. Giles, Andrew, Dawn - I need all the best people we have to work on this. We need to find out what we’re dealing with if we want to have a fighting chance of winning. I need watch on all the remaining hellmouths, even though they don’t appear to be active at the moment. And finally we need to get all the slayers ready. We’ve had it easy until now-”

At this Faith cut her off. “Easy? Well speak for yourself and your comfy little dolce vita B, but nothing I’ve seen has been easy!”

Buffy tried not to flinch at the accusatory tone in the other’s voice. She knew that Faith had shoulder a lot of the harder matters. But she looked back evenly.

“We have not had a fight we couldn’t win. If the forerunner for this thing did away with Willow as easily as it apparently did, then we need to up our game a lot, and prepare all the new girls for what we might have to face. Try to put across to them what an apocalypse means. Last week I had Spike
and Angel help me with my nine in Rome, but they’re gone again, so we need a plan...”

***

March 2005

Paris. Paris was a city for lovers, or so Buffy had been informed. Last time she’d been there, she’d still been in mourning... and this time her lover was goodness knew where. Still, she had work to do — she’d spent the day talking to the local slayers, and now needed something to eat. One of the girls had recommended a restaurant, although Buffy had a feeling she was hopelessly lost despite the straightforward directions. Funny how Paris wasn’t romantic and exotic, but just labyrinthine and foreign when it was a cold March day.

As she was trying to work out which way to go - and having almost decided to get a cab - her cellphone rang. Seeing the name that popped up on the screen, her heart was suddenly in her throat.

“Spike?” she asked and heard a low chuckle on the other end.

“Indeed. Where are you pet?”

She tried to explain where she was, and he obviously knew the town better than she. “Stay where you are love, I’ll find you,” he said, and she looked around expectantly. But five minutes later he still wasn’t there, and she retreated to the opening of an alley to get out of the wind that was beginning to make her shiver. She was wondering if she should give him a call when suddenly she felt a hand yanking at her arm. In a flash she’d drawn her stake and pinned the assailant against the wall, before realising that it was him... His eyes were sparkling in the darkness, as they drifted from the stake pressed against his chest and up to her face.

“Good to see you haven’t lost your touch pet,” he drawled, and then in a moment reversed their positions, cool hands sneaking under her top and then brushing a nipple as she gasped against his mouth.

“Only a flying visit love,” he murmured, nibbling down her neck, “and I happen to know this little place just round the corner... What do you say?”

His other hand grabbed her ass and pulled her flush against him, and she could only nod. All she wanted was him - his hands, his mouth, his body... and the secretive nature of the tryst made her shiver with anticipation. She remembered this - the delicious thrill of disappearing for a little while without anyone ever knowing.

And then she smiled, catching his eyes. “Who needs a room?”

A dirty low chuckle was the only answer she got, and then all thoughts fled as their urgent need took over.

When the world came back into focus she wasn’t sure she’d actually be able to walk. Spike however pulled out his cellphone, swore quietly, and explained that he had to run.

As he planted one last scorching kiss on her lips he whispered, “Might have some good news for you next time we meet...”

Half an hour later she was back at Slayer Central, having imbibed a burger and a coke before getting lost again and having to hail a taxi. Three Slayers were in the sitting room working on something as she came through the door. They all looked up, and one of them (dammit, what was her name?), spoke up:
“Did you find the restaurant, Miss Summers?” and she smiled back, a little dazed. “Found a restaurant, and am feeling much better now, thank you,” she replied, happy little butterflies still dancing around inside.

“Are you OK?” the girl asked, looking a little unsure. “You look a little... I mean you’ve torn your stockings...”

Buffy smiled a little. “Just ran into a vampire. He was a little rough, but sure helped me build up an appetite.”

April 2005

It was a few weeks later when Spike and Angel turned up again. Buffy was in Poland by then, but Illyria came and whisked her away to London. Buffy thought that having a portal opening deity would be really handy what with all the travelling she was doing now, but when she mentioned it Spike shook his head.

“There’s permanent jet-lag and a feeling of displacement no matter where you are. Also, proper travelling is fun. Trains especially - although they were better in the old days, when they had compartments. Dinner and free tickets all rolled up in one and nobody any the wiser...”

Realising what he was saying he suddenly stopped, as Angel silently shook his head in the background.

Giles coughed discreetly. “Very interesting Spike. Now you say you’ve come to talk about Willow. Well that is a very fortuitous coincidence, since I believe I have found a way to discover her whereabouts... presuming she hasn’t died of course.” He cleared his throat, then continued. “You see I came across references to Dinza, a dark demigoddess of the lost. No one living can enter her presence, but I was hoping that...”

His voice trailed off as Spike and Angel both lowered their eyes. Spike shrugged a little, then shook his head and, avoiding Buffy’s eyes, looked at Giles.

“If you mean you have visited her already? I didn’t know that you were familiar with her - or maybe Illyria-”

Angel took a deep breath and cut in. “I went to see her after Cordelia vanished, and she was actually sort of helpful then. This time...” he spread his hands, “she couldn’t tell us a thing.”

“Nothing?” Giles frowned, and Angel hesitated a little. “Her exact words were that Willow ‘had slipped through the cracks of time and she couldn’t see her’. Not even with Illyria threatening to pull off her wings did she say any more.”

“OK,” Buffy said quietly. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Angel replied, then after an awkward pause added, “How’s the apocalypse progressing?”

She shrugged. “Got a few more leads. ‘Course now we wish we had 10 times more Slayers than we do...”
Illyria suddenly spoke up. “If you need fighters I have armies at my command, ready and willing to do battle.”

Buffy could feel her eyes widening, but Spike shook his head, trying to hide a smile.

“Doubt that what this apocalypse needs is another army of demons, your divine Blueness. The collateral damage would be-”

He suddenly stopped and shot Angel a look, but Angel had pulled one of his ‘I’m a stone’ metamorphosis, and didn’t react at all.

Buffy sighed. Everything was complicated and difficult, and the world was ending. Again. And for one absurd moment she longed for the calm and steady presence of The Immortal. To have just one part of her life be simple and straightforward...

***

May 2005

It was a beautiful Italian spring evening, just on the cusp of summer, and Buffy was wondering where to go for some dinner when her phone rang.

Seeing Spike’s name she could feel tiny pinpricks of excitement all over, and - despite the fact that Dawn would be back the next day and she had both housework and paperwork to do, since this was her first time home in weeks - asked if Illyria could pick her up and take her to the Hyperion.

And so, only a few minutes later she was astride Spike’s lap on his very roomy bed, eagerly pulling his shirt over his head and then shivering as he kissed his way up her neck.

“You know,” he mumbled, “I was just thinking the other day-”

“Shut up,” she replied, pushing him down on his back before starting to unbutton his pants, and he chuckled in response as he accommodatingly lifted his hips.

Then suddenly the words caught up with her - a memory from long ago rearing its ugly head, and in a flash she abruptly saw her actions in the past many months in a new light.

“Oh God. I’m doing it again!”

***

It took Spike a few moments before he realised that she had spoken, and trying to get his thoughts back into some sort of rational state he studied her, trying to work out what had happened - because judging by the look on her face she was very upset.

“Doin’ what again, Buffy?”

She lifted her eyes and he could see far too many echoes of the worried, depressed girl he’d once known for comfort.

“I’m using you,” she replied, with a finality to her tone that left no doubt in his mind that she was utterly serious. But he really couldn’t work out what she was on about.

“Sorry pet - but I haven’t got a clue what you’re talking ‘bout.”

“I’m using you to make myself feel better. My life is...” she dragged a tired hand through her hair, “a
total bitch at the moment.”

She stared at his chest for a moment, then started talking. Maybe more to herself than to him, he realised.

“When... when we first went around gathering up all the slayers, we told them all about how they could save the world. Now... I have to tell them if they do, they’ll probably die. I hoped...” she swallowed, “I hoped that now there were so many of us that I’d never have to do the ‘A Slayer’s life is all about death’ speech again, but I’m right back where I was with all the Potentials when The First was rising. And Willow is gone, Dawn is busy with her studies and doesn’t need me, Xander is in India, and whenever he calls he just talks about his new girlfriend - he keeps saying that they’re ‘just friends’, but it’s wicked obvious what’s really going on. Giles keeps telling me about the stuff they’ve translated which is always depressing...” she took a deep shaky breath, “So... when you come to visit I just want to hide away from it all.”

Seeing the look on his face, she shook her head. “When was the last time we had an actual conversation, just you and me? ‘Cause I can’t remember. We just go straight for the sex - every time.”

“Buffy...” he reached out and cupped her face, “Do you love me?”

“Of course I do-”

“Good. It’s nothing like we were back then.” He said this very carefully, because he needed her to get away from that. Whatever problems they might have now, it was new, because they were different. Literally.

“But... I... I know nothing about what you do or why you are travelling. I don’t think I’ve even asked about it.”

“Buffy-”

“I always do this. I get so caught up in my own stuff that I completely forget to think about anyone else - I mean look at the way Dawn acted out back in Sunnydale. And now you - who are clearly doing something important and dangerous - and I can’t even be bothered to ask. Spike-”

“Buffy! Shut up!”

She stopped talking, and he sat up, taking a deep breath as he tried to work out what to say.

“Look. The reason you don’t know what I’m doing is because I haven’t told you.” He saw her opening her mouth and put a finger against her lips. “And I’m not going to. Understood?”

“But...” he could see the hurt on her face, and knew that the next moment they’d be discussing trust issues. He sighed. “Listen, it’s too dangerous. Yes - I know that you’re little Miss Top Slayer, and that they needn’t touch you to extract information from your head.”

“Oh,” she replied, clearly thrown. “But still. We don’t talk. When we meet I just want you to make me forget everything - to run away for a while.”

He couldn’t help chuckling. “Love - what do you think I want? I’ve just spent the best part of two months trudging around a swamp - and not even a fun, scary swamp full of dead warriors like in the Lord of the Rings, but just a smelly, foggy one, with nothing to eat except fish, and no company except Illyria - who might as well have taken a vow of silence - and Angel... Do you have any idea
how grouchy he gets when he’s not getting any?”

Seeing the incredulous look on her face, Spike belatedly figured that this might not have been the thing to mention, and hastily continued. “Anyway, when we finally found the wizard we were looking for, he had been cut into about twenty different pieces, which is Wolfram & Hart’s way of saying ‘Nah-nah-nah-nah-nah’, and we’re back to square one. So yeah - I want to get away from it too.”

He sighed, and let his eyes travel over the room without really seeing it. Absentmindedly he grabbed hold of the pendant, and Buffy reached out and put her hand on top of his.

“Where did you get the necklace? Can you tell me that at least? I’ve never seen you take it off.”

He smiled and let his thumb caress the familiar symbols, before telling her about the big battle where they’d nearly been slaughtered before Illyria had up and left - and their subsequent stay with the demons.

“Then one day this little kid comes running up and presses this necklace in my hand - a present from the mother apparently, for sparing the father’s life when we were fighting. Thing is - I don’t have a clue what I did. Can’t remember anything much except trying not to get killed. But apparently I at some point went for the hurt and not the kill, and because of that a family is still intact…”

Looking up he caught Buffy’s eyes. “So I wear this to remind myself to hold back - that I can maybe do some good just by not killing. It’s so easy to forget that other people are just living their lives until we come stumbling in.”

She smiled back at him, and he softly stroked her cheek. “Would bring you with me if I could, trust me. But knowing that you’re here makes more of a difference than you can imagine. Never know where I am anymore, and feeling all... disconnected all the time. Can’t remember when the last time was that I went down to an ordinary pub and had a pint, or saw a film, or watched the telly and knew what the hell was going on. You remind me why I do this. Buffy-”

He studied her carefully, every facet of her face familiar to him, and yet new every time. “I wish things were different, I wish I could be there for you like I promised, but I can’t. If... if you need that, need someone like that, then please understand that you owe me nothing.”

Her eyes widened as she took in the implications of his words. “How - how dare you? Like breaking up with me will make me happy?”

“I’m not breaking up with you, you silly bint! I’m just saying that... that this is all we can have right now. Meeting up in secret, more or less, without any ordinary relationship stuff. Maybe someday it’ll be different, maybe it won’t. I don’t know how long this... quest of ours will take. Dunno if I’ll survive next week. All I know is that I love you. Is that enough?”

For along moment she looked at him, then she nodded. “Yes.”

And yet when he kissed her he could feel a new determination, and new fear. Could they make it work? Where would they be in a year’s time? Five? Already their lives were wildly out of synch.

For her it had been less than a year since they met again. For him it had been… He wasn’t sure. Two years minimum. Possibly three. Maybe more? The dimensions stacked up, all bleeding together, ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred, two hundred… Wonders and terrors and dullness and fighting for their lives. Over and over and over, an endless merry-go-round, and one of the only things tethering him to sanity was the woman in his arms.
Yes, Buffy loved him and she was his... but for how long?

Chapter End Notes

Quick note: Next chapter may be delayed, as my beta is on jury duty. Many apologies in advance!
September 2005

“Buffy - you’re finally here! Thank goodness!”

Giles tried his best to infuse his voice with warmth as well as relief, but considering the news he was about to impart he found it hard to appear jolly. Not that he wasn’t pleased to see her - he always was - but in the circumstances...

“So... what is it?” she asked, throwing down her always-ready-to-go essentials bag beside the door before taking a seat. He could tell that she was weary and somewhat annoyed at being summoned, not having been home for a good while when he called her, but he really had needed to see her in person.

Tiredly he ran a hand through his hair, and resisted the urge to sit down. He’d done far too much sitting these last few weeks, poring over old scrolls and books.

“Well - we’ve had a breakthrough in the translations.”

“And?”

Always so to the point, he thought. Always taking every hit straight on the chin. And even with all the travelling she still managed to look good - how she found time to shop he didn’t know, but he was sure her wardrobe was truly international now. A thoroughly modern, well-dressed and competent young woman, his Buffy. Sighing he forced his thoughts back to the matter at hand. She was also a warrior.

“We have discovered that this apocalypse is the work of Talnor, Master of all Beasts. A... mythical figure it was thought - from outside our dimension of course.”
She nodded, obviously wondering what the bad news was. A name didn’t merit her being there in person.

“So - he’s the guy who’ll show up in November?”

Giles nodded, taking off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. The ancient text danced behind his eyelids for a moment, then he met Buffy’s eyes.

“It’s not that simple... He will be leading an army of - of beasts. It is hard to find a description, or any sort of indication of how large this army is.”

”An army... of beasts?” He could hear the incredulous note in her voice, but she probably couldn’t help it.

“I’m afraid so. He... controls them, so they all work together. It is - a challenge I am not sure how to classify.”

“Challenge? Challenge? How - how are we supposed to fight an army of beasts with better co-ordination that us? How do we train for this? Can we train for this? I mean...” she threw her hands up, “I can’t just kidnap a few lions to use for practice, can I?”

He tried his best not wince at her words, and manfully refrained from telling her that he was only the messenger. Then he saw her taking a deep breath to calm down.

“Sorry Giles... I just...”

He nodded. “However - I’m afraid it’s not even that simple, Buffy.”

“No?” The exhaustion that had been lying just under the surface suddenly seemed to settle on her in earnest, and he dearly wished to just reach out and give her a hug. But that wasn’t an option just now. He sighed.

“If... it is an ‘if’, but there is the possibility, given the particular word choice in one of the texts-”

“What is it?” Tired she might be, but she still couldn’t stand waffle.

“Well, there is the possibility that he will also be able to control any animal in this dimension also.”

She stared at him for a long moment as the implications sank in.

“OK - we’re screwed.”

“Buffy...”

He could feel the memories of similar moments crowding in on them - the part where he was just the one to locate the danger, but she was the one who had to go and fight - put her life on the line while all he could do was watch. Of course there were so many of them now... so many girls who would go out and fight and never come back.

Slowly she raised her head, taking on this newest burden.

“I know how it goes Giles. We’ll figure something out - as usual. I presume all the wiccas are busy working on figuring out if anything magical can stop him?”

He nodded and was silently grateful that at least they still had four months to prepare... if they could work out how to prepare.
“Anything else?” she asked, and he shrugged. “We had some form of rodent infestation that chewed on all our back-up files and disks, but I’ve got a team working on making new ones. It’ll take a while, but it’s nothing to be worried about.”

She stared at him, sudden alarm in her eyes, and he frowned. “What?”

“Oh my God - you just totally jinxed it!”

When the door burst open two seconds later she clearly felt like shaking her finger at him and saying ‘What did I say?’ even before the young Slayer confirmed her prophetic words.

“Mr Giles? It’s the computers!”

He stared at the girl in mute horror.

***

“Spike.”

Giles never looked pleased to see Spike, but this time the antipathy was almost palpable, even though Giles was clearly trying his best to be civil. It really was the most unfortunate timing, Buffy thought to herself, but it couldn’t be helped. She could of course send Spike away again, but it had been weeks since she’d seen him, and what with the latest news she really needed him to just be there. He was her drop-dead gorgeous vampire boyfriend, and she had every right to have him by her side. And this was exactly the sort of thing she should be doing - involving him in her life and making sure he got along with her friends. And Angel had gone to spend time with his girlfriend…

“So, Buffy tells me you’re havin’ some problems with your databases, Rupert.” Spike drawled, and Buffy could see Giles’ inner anger-o-meter go up a few notches.

“A few-” he shook his head, and waved a hand towards the wall of computer screens, all of which displayed varying degrees of gobbledygook. “Everything is down. It’s dead! A - a virus or bacteria - whatever these things are called - has destroyed the whole thing!”

Spike looked around at the computers and the excessive wiring - all of which Illyria was studying like she’d found a particularly interesting insect. He also took in the techno-savvy Slayers, the two Watchers and a Wicca, all of whom looked fed-up and giving-up, and shrugged. “Hardly the end of the world though, is it? I mean - that’s still like half a year off, right?”

“Please,” Buffy said, putting a hand on his arm, “don’t be obnoxious.”

“I’m obnoxious?” he asked, and she nodded. “You’re always obnoxious when you’ve spent time with Angel. Obnoxious or broody.”

“Oh, but - but that’s not my fault, is it? He just brings out the worst in me! Also, how bad can this be?”

Buffy sighed, resignedly, and Giles took a deep breath, clearly trying to calm himself. “Spike - you don’t understand. This was where we stored all the information about all the Slayers. Every profile, every contact address, every status report, everything we’ve done this past two years... and I don’t know if we can get it back. I never trusted all this technology, but Willow...” he dragged a tired hand across his face, “Willow set it all up, saying it was safe as houses, and I’m not sure if anyone else can ever hope to figure it out. Our experts here have tried their best, but it’s not doing any good. Andrew - who is our last hope, as ridiculous as that might sound - is away at some convention or other in America and... unreachable. And we can - for obvious reasons - not ask for outside help. If I were a
religious man, I would pray for a miracle, but...”

His voice trailed off, and Buffy could tell that Spike was trying his hardest to look sympathetic. Then suddenly Illyria materialised in front of them.

“Phone,” she demanded, holding out her hand, and Spike frowned.

“What?”

“Phone.”

Looking puzzled Spike pulled out his cell from his pocket, and Illyria plucked it out of his hand. Swiftly typing in a number with one hand she walked over to the main console, grabbed a chair and sat down, whilst at the same time something strange seemed to be happening to her face and body.

As they could faintly hear the phone start to ring, Buffy involuntarily gasped. On the chair now sat a pretty young girl, dressed in a white top and blue jeans and with soft brown hair caressing her shoulders.

“Hi Marty,” she smiled as someone picked up, “it’s Coco. Can I ask a you a favour?”

Looking around, Buffy saw that the other girls looked as stunned as she felt. Of course she knew that Illyria’s body had once belonged to one of Spike and Angel’s friends, but she hadn’t known that she could change like that. With a small frown she realised that Giles didn’t look surprised, just grim - yet another thing that he’d known about, and she not.

Turning to glance at Spike, she saw that he looked ready to faint, having turned whiter than she thought possible. His eyes were full of pain - more than she had seen for a long, long time. He had looked the same way when he’d begged her to kill him.

Gently she put a hand on his arm, and he almost startled.

“Why ‘Coco’? Do you know?” she asked, trying to get him to come out of the walls that were surrounding him, and he swallowed.

“When... when we play ‘Crash Bandicoot’ I am Crash and she is Coco... the brainy, ass-kicking sister...”

His voice trailed off, as Illyria chatted away, sounding so un-Illlyria like that it was downright creepy.

“...See I have some friends who have this huge enormous system that’s crashed, full of really sensitive information and that kinda thing,” she waved a hand in demonstration, “and the girl who set it up has gone missing and their only go-to guy with half a clue is at DragonCon and is totally incommunicado. By the way - are there any reports up yet?” She listened for a moment, then giggled.

“Oh I knew he’d make a fool of himself - it’s just typical, isn’t it? Anyway, I think it might be some super virus or other that’s infected the system and I remembered how you’d been working on that special programme of yours... yes, exactly. Could you send that to me pretty please, and I’ll see what I can do?”

Turning her head, she looked around. “Does anyone have a laptop that’s not infected that I could borrow? That would be super!”

After a moment one of the slayers brought one, but weird-Illlyria was now laughing at something the
guy at the other end of the line had said.

“Oh no, not telling you that. Told you I am in Secret Ops and you’ll never find me.”

She tilted her head, listening, and then smiled secretively. “Hey - you know I’m not just a genius Marty - I’m divine! Anyway, thank you so, so much, it really would have taken forever to work this out all by myself. Would love to chat, but I better get on with fixing this and anyway this isn’t my cell - bye!”

Flicking open the laptop she began typing, and then began quickly swapping back and forth between the main console and the laptop, now and again relocating some cables, muttering to herself. Everyone just observed silently, unsure what to do. Spike however had wrapped his arms around himself defensively, a black shadow with such a haunted expression that Buffy wanted to shake him as his eyes followed ‘Coco’ as though hypnotised.

Then suddenly the screens sprang back to life, a collective gasp rising from the audience.

Illyria stood up, closed her eyes for a moment, and then she was all leather-clad and otherworldly again. Turning those unsettling blue irises on Giles, she gave what might pass for a smile.

“Your prayer has been answered and a miracle achieved. You may pay me homage now in whichever way you see fit.”

Giles clearly didn’t know how to respond to this, looking rather flummoxed, but as he began to speak, Spike suddenly moved.

In a flash his fist connected with Illyria’s chin, sending her sprawling to the floor. She looked up, face murderous, but he clearly wasn’t bothered, as he started yelling.

“Don’t you fucking dare do that again! Ever! Do you hear me?”

For a long moment Illyria stared at him in silence, and Buffy thought that they were probably all waiting for her to begin eviscerating him.

Instead she slowly tilted her head, studying him.

“You grieve for her still?”

Spike made a sound that sounded like strangled laughter, face a mosaic of conflicting emotions.

“Of course I still grieve for her. I will always grieve for her. You destroyed her - burnt up everything she ever was, leaving only the shell you’re wearing. That shadow you can put on is less than nothing. So Do. Not. Do. It. Again. Understood!”

The god was carefully standing up, a dangerous looking gleam in her eyes as she stepped closer.

“You wish you could have saved her. After all this time, after everything I do for you - still you wish for her.”

Spike met her eyes and smiled cruelly. “Hurts, does it? But you’re wrong. I don’t want her. Too late for that. You want to know what I wish? I wish she had died before you got to her. Hell I’d have snapped her neck myself if I’d known—”

He swallowed painfully, then looked her straight in the eye, deadly serious. “Killing her? That guilt I could have lived with. What you did - that will always haunt me.”
Suddenly he looked around, apparently registering their audience for the first time. He shook his head. “I can’t-”

Abruptly he turned on his heel and walked off. Buffy ran after him, catching him in the doorway, but he just shook his head again.

“Sorry Love, but... I just... just need some time alone, OK?”

She nodded mutely and then watched him disappear down the hallway.

For a moment she considered what to do, but then walked the opposite way, towards the bedroom they always kept ready for her. Not that she thought she’d be able to sleep - despite having been up for nearly 24 hours now - but she too needed some space to herself.

Why was it so difficult, she thought as she closed the door behind her and leaned against it tiredly.

She’d determinedly made an effort to talk more, to involve him in her life again, to find out about his life... And yet there were still giant swathes of stuff that were just a closed book, as today had so amply illustrated. What exactly had Fred meant to him? What had happened in that year he’d spent with Angel at Wolfram and Hart? He’d given her the basic outline of course, but there was so much she didn’t know, and he refused to talk.

Slowly she walked over to the window and looked out, taking in the bright late summer day outside. It seemed ridiculous that the weather could be so beautiful. London was supposed to be full of fog and rain, wasn’t it? Perfect for brooding and being miserable...

Sitting down on the bed she sighed and admitted to herself that the problem wasn’t just her or Spike... it was the third person in their relationship: Angel. He was her past, but Spike’s present - and she knew that a lot of Spike’s silence was due to the other vampire. They all tiptoed around the issue, pretending that they were all OK with it - which they were. Sort of. But the way all their individual histories were intertwined made everything complicated and she didn’t know how to approach it. If only she could find some way in... some way of uncovering something of all the stuff the two vampires never talked about - like Fred.

She couldn’t remember the last time he’d lost it like that... and she didn’t know what to do or how to deal with him.

At least the computer systems were up and running again. Although the fact that this was the most cheering thing she could think of was depressing in itself. There was still the apocalypse hanging over them, which really made her boyfriend trouble seem somewhat insignificant. She picked up the photo on the bedside table - the only personal item in the whole room, except for a few pieces of spare clothing in the wardrobe. It was one of those she’d taken during that first week when he’d arrived in Rome, and everything had been a bright and amazing whirlwind. And now... it felt like someone had pressed ‘pause’. She’d done what she could, but he still felt out of reach. Beautiful and smiling, like in the photo, and yet remote. Hidden behind glass.

A soft knock on the door tore her out of her thoughts, and a moment later it opened and Spike entered, an apologetic look on his face.

“Hey,” he said, closing the door behind him, and she smiled a little.

“Hey. How did you find me? Giles tell you where my room was?”

He shook his head. “Followed your scent.”
She nodded; and seeing that he still looked uncertain she patted the bed. “Come sit down. Unless you think the floor looks comfier...”

They really ought to get some better beds she thought - but then Giles would start talking about finances again, and that was a talk she could do without.

As he sat down, he shot her a rather shy look. “Sorry about-” he waved his hand in an attempt to describe what had happened, and she nodded.

“It’s OK... but you’re going to have to tell me what the deal is. You said that you’d have killed Fred yourself if you’d known what Illyria would do... what did she do?”

He sat still for a while, then quietly explained. “When Illyria rose, she... she burned up Fred’s soul. No heaven, or even hell, for her. Just - nothing. She’s gone. Completely.”

“Oh my god...” Buffy whispered, as she grasped why this tragedy had caused such a change.

“She was so sweet,” he continued, voice soft. “So kind and generous and friendly... An’ still she was as tough as nails. Survived five years in a hell dimension all by herself. If anyone ever deserved a happy ending...”

Silently Buffy took his hand and Spike let his head fall on her shoulder.

“Did you know that there’s a hole in the world? Goes right through. Not far from here, actually - it’s in the Cotswolds.”

And he’d done it again - changed the subject just when she’d finally gotten him to open up. Not that she didn’t understand it, but it made her so very frustrated.

Sighing deeply he let himself fall back onto the bed, before visibly wincing.

“Wait - are you hurt?” She made a motion towards his coat, but he waved her hand away.

“S nothing much - just flesh wounds. Last dimension we were in really didn’t like visitors. Think their arrows might have been poisoned, ‘cause it’s taking much longer to heal than it ought.”

“Arrows?” she asked, carefully laying a worried hand on his chest, and he smiled. “Don’t worry pet, our armour hasn’t let us down yet. Even got some old warlock to add some protection charms to it.”

Lifting a foot he studied his boots with mock tragedy written on his face.

“Wish he could’ve somehow fixed my boots too - this must be the third pair I’ve worn down. I can’t tell you how bloody boring it is to walk everywhere...” He turned his head a little and caught her eyes. “You know when we were at Wolfram and Hart Angel had a carpool with 12 cars. Nearly enough to make a man sell his soul, take my word... Wish I could have taken you out in the Viper - although the Camaro was very cool too - totally Nightrider. It was Charlie who knew about it of course - dunno how his head didn’t split open with all the info they crammed in...”

Buffy sat very, very still, listening. He so very rarely talked about his year in LA, that it might as well not have happened. And yet she knew that a lot of crucial things had happened to him there, but she only had the bare outlines, never any details. What had these friends been like? His eyes were calm and quiet now, his face relaxed. She wanted to follow the line of his cheekbone with her finger, to run her hands through his hair - a bit straggly and with roots showing as was usually the way when he’d been away. But the coat around him was the same as ever, if looking a bit dirty and with a few cuts here and there.
Then there was a knock at the door, and she tried not to grumble. He was finally talking, and now he got cut short again.

“Come in,” she called out, and a very new Slayer stuck her head around the door. Buffy didn’t remember her name, but the girl couldn’t be more than 15. Had she herself really been that young when she started out? Just a child...

Oh God, how could she fight an apocalypse leading children to their death?

“Mr Giles asked me to tell you that there’ll be a meeting in a few minutes...” it was possible that there was more to the message, but the girl had spied Spike and was doing her best to pretend that she wasn’t staring.

“Thank you,” Buffy replied, making sure the girl understood that this was her cue to leave, and after one last lingering glance the girl disappeared.

A little later Buffy was back in the main meeting room, where she discovered that a lot more slayers had arrived. Faith instantly spied her, and rushed over, a big grin on her face.

“B! How are you doing? I see you brought the eye candy this time!”

Smilingly she checked out Spike who smirked back.

“Good to see you too Faith.”

Buffy tried her very best not to glare. One of the biggest (and most welcome) surprises that the apocalypse had brought, had been the realisation that she could get along with Faith - even enjoy her company. It’d never be as it had once been, but maybe that was good... their intense bonding had been very exclusive. No, the key apparently was not to have Faith a part of her daily life - flirting with her boyfriends to choose a random example - but as an ally, or co-leader, or something. Someone she trusted, someone she could bounce ideas off and who didn’t hold back on the criticism, because she knew exactly what it was like out there.

“Hey,” she replied, quickly scanning the rest of the people in the room. “Where’s Kennedy?”

“She went to put our stuff away.”

Buffy bit her lip. “How - how is she doing?”

There was a moment’s pause as Faith considered. “Better. She’s still kinda hyper-cautious when it comes to civilians and triple kills everything, but I think she’s startin’ to begin to accept that maybe it wasn’t her fault. That probably this Beast thing would just have killed her too.”

Buffy nodded, relieved. It had been a strange role reversal - usually Faith took the dangerous girls, and Buffy the grieving or damaged ones, but Buffy hadn’t been able to face the pain in Kennedy’s eyes, the self-blame that the other Slayer carried around. So, much to Buffy’s relief, Faith had scooped her up as her latest travel companion.

The door opened again, this time revealing Wood and Kennedy, chatting amicably. But Wood looked up, and seeing Spike his eyes grew cold. Rather curtly he left Kennedy to talk to Giles, and Buffy turned to Spike wondering what to say and found Spike studying the other man musingly.

“Do you think he’d be pleased or pissed off if he knew that I’m no longer wearing the old coat?”

The implications of his words took a moment to sink in, and then her eyes widened.
“What?”

“Do you think he’d be pleased or pissed off? Probably pissed off I guess...”

“No, I heard you but - that’s a new coat?”

He turned to her, nodding. “The old one got blown up a few years ago... thanks to- well nevermind.”

“It’s a new coat and you never told me?”

He suddenly seemed to realise what she was saying and looked a little put out. “Are you sure? I think I told you... no, wait... does it matter?”

She stared at him, almost speechless. “Of course it matters. This is what I mean! You don’t talk! You never say. You never-”

She was interrupted by Giles addressing them all.

“Excuse me - but I think we are as many as we will be for now. If you could all make your way to the table, we have... a lot of things to talk through.”

She sighed deeply, and then realised that Spike had pulled out his cellphone.

“Look - you’re going to be busy, and I’m only distracting you. And you’ve got plenty of people you can rely on here. I’ll call you when I’m back next and we’ll do something proper, OK? Promise.”

He kissed her quickly and then left, phone already to his ear.

Heart sinking she walked over to the table and took her place. She knew he was right, but she still vowed to get him to talk - one way or another. She’d thought that they were... well good at communicating. Or better at least. And they were - she could read him like a book. Except where he’d glued the pages together.

And for now she had plenty to occupy her...

***

“Angel!”

Spike looked up, and saw a large group of demons slowly surrounding them - the leader only having eyes for Angel. And if Spike knew anything, he knew hatred and the glee of capturing an enemy. He turned to look at Angel, and clearly saw ‘oh fuck!’ painted all over his face.

As if the day hadn’t been difficult enough already.

What had been intended as a quick, pleasant visit to Buffy, had turned painful in other ways: Mostly of course Illyria with her Fred-impression, which still hurt almost too much to think about. He’d been so close to reaching out to touch her, to feel the reality of the lie... to beg her never to change back.

And what with losing it so badly, Buffy had again wanted him to talk to about that whole side of things, which was the last thing he wanted. What was there to say? Fred was gone - gone forever, gone for good, far more lost than even Willow. The acute loss had again made him wonder what would have happened if she hadn’t died... would Angel still have gone with his suicide plan or would they still be at W&H? Would... no, it didn’t do to dwell on it.

His wounds were still aching, he felt useless at not being able to help Buffy in any way with her
apocalypse, and finally, when he got back to Angel, he’d had to relate the Illyria-incident, which had led to a prolonged attempted third degree of the Goddess, trying to establish the extent of her double-life, and of course she’d been extremely unhelpful, refusing to explain a single thing. All of which had led to them not taking note of their surroundings and walking straight into this trap, and now being surrounded by demons who obviously held a grudge against Angel.

Slowly drawing his sword, Spike looked around. “Tell me Peaches, what exactly did you do to piss off these guys?”

Angel, own sword in hand, grimaced. “Well one of their princesses brought girls to our dimension to save them from being... mutilated. I helped her, and told that guy there to go back home.”

“And why are you now here, Angel?” the leader asked, smiling haughtily. “You should know better than to come to Oden Tal. I took my war from your soil, as you asked, so please explain: Why are you here? You cannot win - no matter what Jheira has promised you.”

“Look,” Angel was using his best calming voice, which probably wouldn’t work very well, Spike thought, seeing the sneer on the other’s face. “I didn’t come to fight. I didn’t know that this was your dimension, honestly. I haven’t seen Jheira in... years. Just let me go, and I promise I’ll not come back and try to overthrow your society, or whatever you’re worried about.”

The demon eyed him for a moment, then laughed. “A good try, but not good enough, vampire. Guards - take them!”

As the demons fell on them, Spike couldn’t help laughing. Finally things were looking up. “Tell me Angel,” he asked, as he smoothly avoided a deadly blow to his skull, “just how drop-dead gorgeous was she?”

“That’s... beside the point,” Angel answered, as he grimly punched a thickset, bullish demon, “what they do to their women in this dimension is unforgivable.”

Spike grinned. She must have been quite something, this Jheira. Then he heard Angel asking Illyria to get them out, and sighed. Overturning a society would have been fun, but that wasn’t their job. Christ, he was tired of leaving the good fight behind again and again.

As he leapt through the portal he felt an arrow pierce his shoulder, and angrily pulled it out as the cries of frustration from the other world abruptly disappeared.

Then he looked around, taking in the surroundings.

“Oh,” he said, surprised, and smiled.
They found themselves in a forest glade.

This in itself was not unusual, as they had trudged through many a forest in their travels so far: Dank, dingy forests overrun with spider webs and lichen; old forests where forgotten magic lay hidden in dark pools and fossilised trees; forests filled with ferns and other growing things, impossible to navigate; tall, foreboding forests, so silent it felt as if the air they didn’t breathe was bearing down on them, and every unpleasant alternative in between.

But this forest looked as if they’d stepped into a Disney movie.

Soft sunshine filtered through a light leaf cover, bird song surrounded them, the grass at their feet wafted in a gentle breeze - Angel half expected to see Bambi daintily stepping out, as a blue butterfly drowsily fluttered past, its colour and pattern so exquisite that he found himself quite simply watching it.

“Where are we?” he eventually asked - expecting it to be an illusion, or a holding dimension, or some place with deadly sunshine, or a heavenly dimension where they would be struck down by righteous lightning any second - but Illyria merely tilted her head, honing into goodness knew what, then did a swift nod.

“Our quest is certain here,” she said, but Spike frowned.

“That’s not what he asked. What’s the catch?”

“Catch?” Illyria repeated, and Spike gestured towards their surroundings.

“Just sayin’ it looks too good to be true. And it don’t…”

He hesitated.

“It don’t feel evil, y’know?”

“I sense power,” Illyria replied, with that patented long-suffering look she was getting very good at. “Old, but strong.”

Clearly feeling that she had over-shared to the point of molly-coddling she then set off walking, Angel and Spike cautiously following.
The sun didn’t make them combust. No freaky demons attacked. The forest kept being beautiful.

After a while they heard the sound of water - it swiftly grew louder, and soon they came to another clearing, except here a waterfall tumbled down some forty feet, landing in a perfect lake, surrounded by grass so green it looked almost edible.

“Screw it, I’m getting clean!” Spike announced, casually shedding clothing as he made his way to the lake. Angel had to agree that this was not a bad idea - they badly needed a break, and this was too good an opportunity to turn down.

Which was how he found himself lazily swimming in the lake a little later, the simple pleasure somehow more than he could explain.

Spike had - after ‘showering’ under the waterfall - laid down spread eagle on the grass, soaking up the sunshine. Angel idly wondered if they could actually get sunburned.

Diving down, he watched fish skimming in and out of the shadows, the water as clear as glass.

Maybe it was all a dream? If so, he hoped it was one he wouldn’t wake from for a long time.

Somewhere, at the back of his mind, there was the thought that he must have gotten over the trauma of having been dumped at the bottom of the ocean…

He knew there would be a catch (Pylea never forgotten), even if Illyria didn’t understand the concept, but right now he was beyond caring. A few minutes pure bliss…

(It was a lie. It was always a lie.)

The one time he had allowed himself to believe, his soul had been wrenched from him…

One moment there had been Buffy - young and beautiful and innocent, and if she could love him, then maybe he was worthy of being saved - the next moment (or so it had seemed) she had thrust a sword through his heart.

It was a lesson he’d not needed to learn twice.

Was that one of the reasons he had found it so difficult to move past Buffy? If she hadn’t symbolised redemption, might they just have drifted apart? He almost smiled. No, impossible. She was special, even outside of his own personal feelings…

The fish - silver scales glinting - shone like tiny beacons of light; as beautiful and elusive as his own hopes and dreams had once been.

When he returned to the surface, he saw that Spike had turned over and was now resting on his elbows, watching him with an amused look on his face.

“Been thinking Peaches, we look like the cover of some gay romance…”

Feeling too mellow to rise to the bait, Angel with lazy strokes made his way to the edge of the lake.

“Spike - do us a favour and keep your fantasies to yourself in future,” he said, as he, too, stretched out on the grass.

Bliss. Just for a few more moments.
It took a week before they discovered the catch.

The forest eventually gave way to grasslands, and after a while they came across grazing cattle, so they were expecting settlements of some kind. Seeing smoke in the distance, they altered their course, but began to get worried as they saw no signs of life as they got nearer.

The reason soon became obvious - the smoke was not from the homesteads’ chimneys, but from the homesteads themselves burning. The village had been sacked and torched, the streets littered with the dead - from children to the elderly, no one had been spared. The inhabitants had been demons - simple farmers from what they could tell, their clothing rough with a minimum of decorations. Their skin was grey and mottled, and they had two short, blunt horns. Not a species any of them particularly recognised - not that it mattered now.

They walked in silence, taking in the devastation but unsure what to do - if anything. It looked like simple, wanton destruction, and the dead could not speak.

More by accident than by design they eventually ended up in the village square, where they saw that the tall pole in the middle had a warrior tied to it, beaten and bloodied. Except to their surprise the warrior stirred, slowly lifting his head.

“Christ,” Spike muttered, rushing forward to cut the ropes and then trying to support the body that collapsed in his arms.

“Angel - water?” he asked, and after a swift search Angel found a water pail that was still half-full.

Water - and a bit of the scotch from Spike’s hip flask - restored the warrior enough to sit up and speak, and they discovered she was female.

She related what had happened in a low monotone, sentences short and clipped, no emotion on her face. It was depressingly familiar.

“They came with no warning. Wanted ‘taxes’. We are poor, we have no money. We offered heirlooms, grain, anything we had. They spat at us. Burned our barns. Then - they took the young, the beautiful. As slaves for their Lord. We tried to fight. In return they murdered us. I am the warrior of the village, but they were too many. They overpowered me. Tied me up. Made me watch. They killed my mother, my father, my brother. Took my sister. I watched the blood of my family, my friends, everyone I know water the soil. Then they left.”

Illyria stood to one side, immobile and her face never betraying any emotion, Spike swore quietly under his breath, but Angel leaned forward.

“Who were ‘they’?”

“Hired soldiers. Scum in service of our new ‘Lord’. We lived in peace for years untold. But then he came… We don’t know where from. Terror grew. The traders told of henchmen, barbarians who would plunder and rape on their master’s orders. But we thought we were safe. That we were too insignificant for them to notice. We were wrong.”

She stared ahead, and Angel wished he could offer words of comfort. Except he knew the other side far too well. They destroyed quite simply because they could. He wasn’t sure how to explain that.

The warrior’s name was Venka. They spent a few days in the village, helping her to get her strength back, and assembling a funeral pyre.
It was heartbreaking work - especially gathering up the children - but Angel worked with quiet, grim determination, unable to forget those who had been caught in the crossfire of his own plans. As innocent as these, and equally mourned. It seemed somehow fitting that he should be here, helping. Spike noticed how he kept working, long after Spike had settled down to eat and rest. But Angel shot him a single look, and Spike merely nodded, absentmindedly playing with the charm around his neck.

Whoever this new overlord was, Angel hated him already. He seemed to be a recent phenomenon, seemingly appearing out of nowhere, and Angel couldn’t make sense of it.

Warlords didn’t rise up out of nothing, henchmen and militia couldn’t be summoned out of thin air. He paused. Well, maybe they could… Or they could come from another dimension. Had this Kustos (as he was named) come like Illyria, but with an army?

The place - quiet, beautiful, peaceful - had been ripe for invasion, as unprepared as the native Americans had been for the Europeans. Venka told them that her role had been mostly honorary, sword skills and fighting handed down as an archaic tradition.

“Always women?” Spike asked, and she nodded. “Men are physically stronger, needed in the fields, working. Women are more supple, better at the swiftness of movement.”

Spike’s eyes seemed to glow in the evening dusk.

“Bloody well need to introduce you to my girlfriend…”

Venka abruptly looked away, and Spike opened his mouth then closed it again.

She’d not mentioned a lover, but any sort of reminder of other people’s families was clearly painful. Angel wished that he was better at reaching out, that he could do something to support her in her grief - on the other hand, her stoic nature might not lend itself well to offers of sympathy. He hoped the physical work they were doing would help, or at least lend her some closure.

***

The third evening they lit the pyre.

Grateful that he didn’t need to breathe, Angel watched the flames leap up, consuming straw, wood and bodies, wishing he didn’t remember other fires, wishing they’d been wrong about there being ‘a catch’.

As the fire grew more intense, the flames reaching into the dark sky, obscuring the stars, the vampires moved back, but Venka stood still, as unmoving as Illyria, even as the heat began to crisp the edges of her hair and clothing.

Not until morning dawned did the fire burn down, a monument of death and ash that made Angel shiver. He saw Venka unsheathe her knife, then carefully cut her palm before stepping forward, the blood falling into the still glowing embers.

And then she spoke:

“I shall not rest until my blood kin has been avenged. I shall not rest until my vengeance is complete and my foe is at my feet. May my blood turn to ash and my bones to cinders if I ever steer from my path.”

Illyria cocked her head, and spoke for the first time in several days.
“I like her.”

***

After five more days of walking, they caught the horses.

Riding sped up their travel considerably, which was a relief. The main issue turned out to be convincing Illyria; they had presumed she’d be happy to have a steed - surely it would be better than walking - but she didn’t think the horse was worthy to carry her. It took Spike to lose his temper and yell that he was riding, and if she wanted to be left behind, fine, so be it. If Kustos had any unicorns he’d send her one, presuming a unicorn would be fit for her royal arse?

Venka had been puzzled by the exchange, asking if Illyria were some kind of queen?

Spike had leapt onto his horse (he was surprisingly adept at riding bareback, and merely grinned wickedly when Angel mentioned it, making Angel suspect some kind of unsavoury tale), before drawling a reply:

“Oh she’s a God King no less - one of the Old Ones. But don’t let that bother you Venka, she has plenty of worshippers. Our job is different.”

Venka had turned to Illyria, a sudden strange gleam in her eyes:

“If you are a god, could you save my village?”

Illyria looked struck by something - pain or sadness, the tiniest flicker of emotion, gone so quickly Angel thought he had imagined it.

“My true splendour would outshine the sun and hide the stars. But I have lost the power to restore life, to alter the world and walk through time as befits my nature. I merely live for vengeance against those who so muted me.”

Whatever Venka had hoped for, this seemed to satisfy her.

The grasslands had scattered greenery, occasional picturesque streams and endless blue skies, and misty mountains in the distance, like something out of a fantasy novel.

But the grasslands also appeared to be more or less endless. From what Venka had heard from passing traders, Lord Kustos had set up his home at the foot of the distant mountains, and they began wondering about the best way to confront him. Illyria wanted to march through the doors and demand an audience, but Angel was leaning more towards stealth. Although maybe both? With Illyria as a decoy…

Somehow their own quest and Venka’s vengeance had become intertwined, although how Kustos could throw light on the Dead Key was a mystery Angel tried not to dwell on. Maybe he’d built his castle on top of some ancient treasure trove?

Food had become another problem, until they spotted the flock of antelope-like animals. Spike perked up, practically licking his lips.

“So, how fast d’you reckon our horses can run?”

“What do you mean?” Angel asked, as Venka and Illyria slowed their steeds beside them.

“I mean, it’s huntin’ time!” Spike grinned, letting his vamp face out. “C’mon Angel, let your inner
Angel hesitated, then glanced at Illyria and Venka.

“We will herd them towards you, OK?”

“Letting me have all the fun? Well, I’m not about to complain,” Spike replied, and moments later their plan was in motion.

Angel hadn’t quite known how Spike would approach the situation, but marvelled as he leaped from horseback to bolting animal, fangs in its throat even as it crashed to the ground, its herd-mates fleeing in terror all around.

Venka galloped up to Angel, and momentarily he was worried that she’d be disgusted at the sight of such primitive vampire feeding.

Instead - after watching Spike silently for a minute - she turned to Angel:

“He is a great hunter, as well as a warrior. Tell me - why are you here? Why do you help me? What is this world to you?”

She had so far not asked any questions, and Angel thought she had probably been in shock. They had explained who they were, in basic terms, but he had expected this day.

“Look, let’s tie up the horses and get a fire going. There’ll be plenty of meat on that animal for you, and while it cooks we can tell you our story?”

She studied him with those guarded, haunted eyes, and nodded.

As evening fell, the stars twinkling above them like so many magical fairy tales, he tried to curate their story into something she could both understand and accept.

She did more than that - she managed to grasp the underlying unspoken issues, as ever displaying her characteristic bluntness.

“You know these evils well. What did you lose to make you fight thus?”

Her question left Angel silenced, and the oddness of the situation suddenly hit home. They never made friends on their travels. Had never before trusted anyone enough for them to even ask such a question.

Spike half-smiled, throwing another twig on the fire.

“Let me explain... No, there is too much. Let me sum up.”

He stopped, shooting Angel an odd glance that Angel couldn’t work out, before asking (with a hint of exasperation):

“Seriously? You didn’t get that reference?”

“What do you mean?” Angel asked, by now deeply puzzled, and Spike shook his head.

“Movie marathon when we get back, mate. No discussion.”

“What is this?” Venka asked, looking even more confused, and Spike chuckled.
“Nevermind him. But in answer to your question… it’s complicated. We lost friends, family, all that jazz, but mostly - we used to be on the other side. We’d kill for sport, much like the henchmen of what’s-his-face - Kustos. So we’re trying to make up for that. Trying to make the world a better place, because we can. Using our powers for good.”

Angel almost held his lack of breath as her eyes moved from one to the other, but eventually she nodded.

“I understand. Like the Tale of Kizrath that we teach our children; how she faced the sea serpent of Drok’kheen to atone for killing her brother, and how she brought back the Gem or Ortan to heal the sky where the serpent had torn it during their battle.”

Spike tilted his head, smiling, too charming by half.

“Kizrath… That name sounds familiar, for some reason. Go on Venka, give us a proper heroic tale.”

Sitting up straight she took a deep breath, and then began speaking in a delightful near sing-song, familiar from how storytellers of old would relay their tales. Angel stretched out, looking up at the sky, and allowed himself to be swept up in the ancient legend. Somehow this place made such adventures and heroics seem more possible than ridiculous, his usual cynicism refusing to engage.

***

Over the coming days, as their target slowly drew nearer, they continued to discuss plans and scenarios, generally vetoing Illyria’s impatience - by now she wanted to simply bulldoze through and kill Kustos outright. It was an appealing idea, they had to give her that, but there were too many variables, and Angel figured they could do with knowing more before they struck.

Stealth or infiltration seemed the best approach, as he had thought from the start, but maybe a disguise could work? Spike went through a whole list of possibilities, all cribbed from various movie plots, and Angel had to admit that some of them sounded pretty good.

Unfortunately all potential plans were ruined when they tried to get an overview of Kustos’ fortress. They had taken a sharp turn to the right, into the lower ridges of the mountains, then climbed up onto a ledge to get a better look.

The fortress - like everything else - looked like it had been beamed in from some kind of fantasy movie. It was squat in the way of medieval castles, and as appeared to be equally impenetrable. It was surrounded by a moat, and Angel counted at least ten towers around the outer walls, added to which the inner keep was set well back, in the middle of a large courtyard.

And then there were the guards (from their vantage point tiny black moving dots), which would presumably all be well-armed and well-trained.

No, there was no way to attack, stealth it’d have to be.

Making their way back down to the grasslands, they were deep in discussion trying to hammer out a workable plan, when suddenly they found themselves surrounded by a large group of the overlord’s henchmen, seemingly to appearing out of nowhere. The horses whinnied, upset, and Angel wondered at what they should do - they were heavily outnumbered, but maybe if Illyria could create a portal…

The troupe was made up of M’Fashnik demons, and instantly this told Angel more than they could have guessed - M’Fashniks were a mercenary species, meaning they were hired soldiers, not loyal followers.
And they could maybe be bought.

They were all clad in well-fitting uniforms, black tunics worn over chain mail, and (of course) heavily armed.

The leader of the troupe rode forward, a sneer on his yellow-y green face:

“You are the poachers - don’t deny it!”

“The what-now?” Spike asked, and the leader turned to him.

“All wildlife belongs to Lord Kustos. Therefore, any killing is treason and punishable by death!”

“The hell?” Spike shot back. “Who does this Kustos think he is? Prince John?”

Turning to Angel he added: “Please tell me that at least you got that? Or is Robin Hood too esoteric for you?”

“Shut up Spike,” Angel snapped, noting Venka and Illyria’s silence with gratitude. They’d have to approach this with more than allusions to outlaws, but at that point the leader held up his hand.

“Fire!”

For a split-second Angel dismissed this as a fool’s errand, as their armour would protect them from any arrows, but then a tiny dart struck his neck, and he only had time to grit out “Illyria-” before darkness claimed him.

***

When he woke, he found himself in a dark stone cell, chained to the wall. The flickering of a torch somewhere further down the dank corridor was the only source of light, for which he was almost grateful. He tried very carefully not to look at the corners of the tiny cell.

Unfortunately it seemed that his jailer wasn’t stupid. The cell was small, and he was its only inhabitant. No way to talk to any of the others, presuming they had been captured too… He tried calling out, but the echo of his own voice was all the response he got in return.

Why hadn’t he thought ahead, agreed on some kind of procedure if they got split up?

When the jailer eventually came past, he tried calling out again - eventually realising that the old demon, clad in clothing so ancient and filthy it was impossible to tell what colour it had once been, was stone deaf.

After another interminable wait, three soldiers finally arrived. They clamped him in further chains (thick, heavy and enchanted, going by the inscriptions on the cuffs) and without any explanations brought him before Lord Kustos.

The upper part of the castle (in keeping with the fairy tale approach) was well apportioned and attractively decorated, finely woven tapestries covering the walls and - to his surprise - it looked as if the place was lit by gas.

He lost his thread of thought as he was then shown into a handsome, medium sized chamber, with a table in the middle. The wall to his right was plain and unadorned, but along the other three were tall beautiful vases, musical instruments, and statues that made the art connoisseur in Angel curious as to their origin.
His ‘host’ was seated in an ornate chair, and for a moment they merely looked at each other, Angel trying to get the measure of his adversary.

Lord Kustos was tall, his height evident even though he was seated, and very old. His pale green face was lined, his head as bald as an egg, and his hands - although heavy veined - had long elegant fingers. The eyes that studied Angel were as shrewd as any he’d seen. He wore a simple black silk robe, and the general impression was of a cultured older gentleman. It was not what Angel had expected.

“Apologies,” Kustos eventually said, voice ancient, but clear. “The chains are merely a precaution. Once you know who I am, I know you wouldn’t dream of harming me.”

“That’s a bold claim,” Angel replied, flexing against the metal. “I am usually very keen on harming people who cause wanton murder.”

Kustos tilted his head, a soft rasping laughter escaping him. “Ah. Ah ah ah ah. And do you self-flagellate every day? Oh yes, I know who you are… Angelus. A most impressive record you hold - and you have many admirers still. I remember the tales, long ago now. Yes, I remember… Good times. Good times. And now… you have a price on your head. Such a shame. I hoped - maybe you would join this old man for a final meal?”

“I didn’t realise you were at death’s door,” Angel quipped. “I would be happy to speed that up for you.”

“Oh no no. It is you, I am afraid, who will no longer be requiring sustenance. Wolfram and Hart are so very keen to get hold of you, and it seemed a nice gesture on my part. After everything they have done for me…”

Angel’s eyes narrowed at this. “Who are you?” he asked sharply. “One of their customers?”

Kustos shook his head, sighing. “I see the tales were true. Very dangerous, but not so clever. I am The Keeper of Secrets - you may have heard of me?”

Memories skipping through the past, Angel fastened on the demon bar where they had met the Four Horsemen - their ancient sources of knowledge talking of ‘The Keeper of Secrets’, a creature who contained all of Wolfram and Hart’s darkest and most precious information.

“But-” he almost stumbled over the words, “but they said you had retired…”

“And so I have. Wolfram and Hart set this dimension aside for me to enjoy in my old age. Isn’t it beautiful? And it has some very delicious young women - my very favourite species; and quite docile after a few simple spells…”

He reached out and rang a bell, and a few seconds later a young female demon, like Venka in appearance but wearing a fraction of the clothing, entered, bringing a tray with two ornate golden cups and a tall carafe.

“Will there be anything else my Lord?” she asked, eyes downcast, and he waved her away.

“That will be all my dear.”

Turning to Angel, he smiled. “Charming, don’t you think?”

Angel gritted his teeth.
“I don’t think you want to know what I’m thinking right now…”

Lord Kustos reached out, held up one of the cups.

“Such craftsmanship. You know, these were made by the Ramulka-ha clan in their heyday. Impossibly rare. And now you are plotting whether or not you could strangle me with your chains. You still don’t understand… I know who you are, and what you are seeking. You want to know about the Dead Key. You want to know if it can be completed. If it can be brought back to life. If you can succeed. I am The Keeper of Secrets. I know.”

As Angel, stunned, let this information sink in, Kustos raised the cup in a mock greeting, and then drank.

“And now he sees it. Oh, the things I could tell you. Such a shame Wolfram and Hart will take you away and you will never have the opportunity to find out all the secrets I… contain.”

“But-” Angel began, mind spinning madly, and Kustos nodded.

“Will you have a last meal with me? I will let them unchain you… Although I should probably point out that trying to torture me would do nothing, the secrets that reside in me can not so easily be obtained.”

Hesitating for only a second, Angel then nodded.

“Deal.”

Kustos inclined his head.

“I knew you would prove to be a reasonable young man. Guards? Undo the shackles, and bring my guest a chair.”

And thus, moments later, Angel found himself sipping some of the most exquisite blood he had ever tasted, across from a man he despised.

Having worked at Wolfram and Hart helped. He could do this. He just needed to somehow make Kustos spill enough information…

“So, the Dead Key,” he said, and Kustos eyed him calmly.

“It was made to undo the power of the Wolf, the Ram and the Hart - why should I tell you anything?”

“It’ll pass the time until I get taken away to prison?” he replied lightly, and Kustos took a contemplative sip of his drink.

“Very nice idea, but I am not a fool.”

“Just- confirm a few things?”

He didn’t know what to do, knew that he needed a plan - and quickly - but could do nothing except play it by ear.

“Like what?”

“The Key - can it be brought back to life?”
Kustos smiled, and Angel knew that he was right.

“How?” he asked, breathless, and Kustos took a slow sip of his cup.

“Well, that is a… complicated question. Although for you-”

At that moment the oddly empty wall to the right seemed to shatter, then vanish entirely, as Illyria, Spike and Venka burst through, falling on Kustos with a collective roar.

“No!” Angel yelled, as he saw Illyria pin the ancient demon’s hands in place behind the chair, Spike grabbing hold of his head and holding it back as Venka unsheathed a knife and - as Angel leapt across the table in a last futile attempt at stopping the intervention - plunged it into his chest with a roar fit for a lion.

Spike and Illyria released the dead body, then Venka calmly decapitated the corpse, before kicking over the chair.

“My vengeance is complete. My soul can now rest.”

“You are fucking magnificent!” Spike exclaimed, and Illyria’s eyes seemed to glow:

“I wish for you to be my sworn knight. Will you join our quest?"

Angel wanted to punch all three of them into another dimension.

“You morons! He was The Keeper of Secrets! He could have told us everything we needed to know, except now…”

He raised his hands, unable to express the infinite frustration and futility that was overwhelming him.

“I can’t believe you killed him. He was just about to-”

Oddly they didn’t seem too concerned. Spike raised an eyebrow and looked almost smug.

“Listen, we saw the whole thing. This here-” he waved towards where the wall had disappeared, “was like a one way mirror thing. Watched him sweet talk you into eating out of his hand and fall right into Wolfram & Hart’s trap.”

“Five minutes! You couldn’t have waited five minutes?”

For some reason, Spike was now almost chuckling.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head - he’ll still spill plenty of his secrets. Quite literally…”

And as Angel watched, confused, Venka smiled for the first time he had ever seen, then knelt down, undid the kimono, and cut Kustos open from chin to groin.

“Well, would you look at that…” Spike said, biting his bottom lip with a smirk as wide as when he’d killed his first Slayer.

In between bloody entrails lay countless treasures - enchanted globes, magic rings, small oilcloth bags (protecting goodness knew what)… And a piece of the Dead Key.
October 2005

Nina stepped back, lowering her brush and critically surveying the canvas in front of her. Then she took another step, and another.

It was done.

Unsure how to feel, she put down the brush in the pot with the other brushes, before fetching a table and picking up the other two parts of her triptych which had been relegated to a corner.

Setting them on the table, leaning them against the partition wall, more or less on a line with the final part, she then studied all three together. Leah, in the partition next to her, had stuck her head around the thin wall, waiting.

“Is it finished?”

Nina nodded; feeling both drained and happy, lost and complete.

The news spread, and her fellow students appeared, curious and congratulatory.

“Are you gonna tell us what it is now?” Leah asked, eyebrow raised. Nina had been uncharacteristically coy about her painting (the first of her final pieces), and the rest of the year group had been watching her work with great interest and many questions.

“Fine,” she relented, somehow feeling more confident now it was in front of her. The first panel was dark, almost black, with deep red gashes, and a looming red light layered through the black. The middle panel was an explosion of brightness – reds and white and black, with bursts of green, a staggering, disoriented mass of impressions. The final panel was calm; white, black, green and red in horizontal stripes, a stable counterpoint to the chaos of the previous two.

“It’s called ‘Monster’,” she explained slowly, choosing her words with great care. “The first panel shows the birth – it’s dark and painful, like being ripped or torn. The second is… learning to live, or growing; the world is scary, attacking the monster and the monster lashes out in return. It can’t help being what it is, and is both terrified and dangerous. The last panel represents peace; the monster learns to live in the world, finds a balance so it can co-exist with the other creatures.”

“Wow,” someone said, and she smiled nervously, feeling far too naked as she laid her work bare,
even as none of them could guess at how personal the paintings were. Even the colours were symbolic, although she wasn’t about to explain what they meant. The black was night time, the white the moon; the red stood for blood, and the green… the green was the world, trees and life and growing things, and yet also the garnish they’d used when she’d been served up as dinner. A world which both pulled her closer, yet also rejected what she had become. And finding the balance was the key.

She thought she might do a sculpture next, carefully weighted globes, maybe metal, or possibly magnets – repelling each other, but through that keeping equilibrium.

It was still only shadows and shapes in her mind, but she knew what she wanted to say.

To be honest she wasn’t sure what she would have done without art. She’d always been figurative in her works before, but her new life seemed to only express itself abstractly. She’d see posters of picturesque wolves beneath a serene moon, and they felt sterilised, pointless. Reality was visceral; blood and sinews and flesh; heightened smell, touch, sound; pain. A ferocity that was mostly dormant, but never gone. The urge to feel bones snap, and meat tear.

She couldn’t express it in words, but in art she could reach for imagery that could communicate her new world.

The teachers noticed, and were pleased.

“I don’t know what happened Nina, but it’s very impressive. You were a solid student before, but the sudden depth and originality of your recent work is outstanding.”

She’d smile, unsure how to take the compliment, and reluctant to discuss it in further detail. She could discuss the works themselves, but not what lay behind and underneath. Some speculated that it was her mysterious new boyfriend, and she supposed there was some truth in that. Could still remember with crystal clarity the moment when he’d looked at her – really looked, caring for no other reason than she existed – and said ‘I am a monster too’. It had made all the difference.

It was the fact that in this new world which was slowly becoming hers – she was not alone. Angel had saved her physically, yes, but more importantly he had given her hope. Had shown her that it was possible to be more than just a monster. That it could be part of you, without defining you.

And she did her best to return the favour, even as she often wondered how much of a difference she made. He’d been the big CEO — now he was more like a terrorist, at least according to himself. But he was still a champion, no matter what he said, fighting a foe she could barely comprehend.

She could now more clearly see how he was driven by guilt… Especially since she had recently started delving into his history, trying to find out more about the man she had fallen in love with.

Then her phone started buzzing. Seeing Buffy’s name, she swiftly excused herself.

“Is everything OK?” she asked, heart abruptly beating and worry shooting through her in bursts, and there was an odd hesitation on the other end of the line.

“Yes,” Buffy replied eventually. “I mean, as far as I know, and apart from the approaching apocalypse, but- Sorry, I’m doing this all wrong. I wanted to ask – I’m going to be in LA next week, could we maybe meet up?”

“Sure. Are they back then?” Nina replied, and there was that odd hesitation again.

“I don’t think so. It’s… you I would like to talk to. Like… I’ll explain. Don’t worry, it’s just me and
my issues. Nothing to do with you, I just… need your… perspective?”

This was only marginally reassuring.

They arranged to meet the following Tuesday, at the Hyperion, and on the day Nina found herself restlessly pacing the foyer. She couldn’t imagine what Buffy might want to ask her, and the different possibilities spun out in myriad different directions. All her extra senses, usually half-dormant at this point in the moon’s cycle, seemed more finely honed, and she sensed Buffy’s presence before the Slayer even opened the door.

Buffy was petite and flawless, as always seemed to be the case, yet it seemed to Nina that beneath the bright smile there was deep exhaustion. It reminded her of Angel, that determination to be OK, to just power through.

After some small talk, catching up and trying to pretend that everything was fine, Buffy took a deep breath, almost literally squaring her shoulders.

“Right, I… don’t really know what I’m even asking. But you’re the only one that was there. Except for Harmony I guess, but… no. Not going there.”

Nina wasn’t sure what she meant, and the confusion must have shown on her face. Buffy bit her lip.

“Look, I don’t know how much you know about Spike and me. Or even Angel and me. But there were – are – a lot of issues. And we’re trying to move on, to build something new, to leave the badness behind. But…”

Her voice trailed off, and Nina almost felt unable to breathe. But then Buffy continued, and none of Nina’s unspoken fears came true. (She liked Buffy a lot - but she wasn’t about to discuss her relationship with Angel… and certainly not Buffy’s.)

“This is… kind of personal. If… you’re not comfortable just say. I wouldn’t even ask, except – you might be the only person who knows. And my best friend has disappeared, and I just – I just need someone to talk to. Usually I’d talk to Spike, but he’s part of the problem. No, it’s not a problem, it’s just- complicated. And I’m already babbling. Sorry?”

“Hey, it’s nice to have someone to talk to who doesn’t freak out when I mention the wolf thing. Not that I have told anyone, but…”

She almost added something about not knowing how she would have coped at all if Angel hadn’t saved her, but caught herself in time, changing course.

“I imagine telling my sister, but how do you even bring it up?”

Buffy half-smiled.

“My advice would be to try, any which way. My mother found out I was a Slayer at… the worst possible time. I ended up running away from home.” She stopped, seemingly lost to the distance of time. “I’m not sure I know what that is anymore. I keep moving, I keep travelling – I have a flat in Rome, but that was never home, not really. And Spike-”

She closed her eyes, burying her head in her hands momentarily.

“Spike was- Spike was the guy who was always there. To begin with I hated him, obviously, and he was endlessly annoying - and evil - but I never had to hold back. And then he got a chip and he fell in love and it got really, really, really messy, and god, I have no idea how we ever recovered. No
that’s not true, he got his soul back, but then… He acts so confident, but a lot of it is bravado. I’m still not sure he really believes that I want to do this long term. And it’s hard – the way he’s hardly ever here- which you must feel too?”

Nina nodded.

“But that’s not really the issue. I mean, it’s an issue, a big factor, but it’s that… he doesn’t talk about what they do. Or what happened at W&H. And it’s… Look, Angel was always mysterious, y’know? Big tall handsome stranger, and he’d appear and disappear and he never talked much. But Spike is Mr Oversharer once you get him going. And I don’t know how to deal with it. With him not talking, I mean. Like – what happened that year? When he was a ghost and Angel the CEO? I know Fred died, and have seen some of the fallout, but there was just this massive shift… They say they are trying to undo the power of W&H, but what does that even mean? They find a magic key and all the lawyers die? I want to help, but they just keep shutting me out. And sure, I have my hands full with all the baby Slayers and the new apocalypse, and maybe I’m just being resentful because Spike’s not there to support me, but…”

Her voice trailed off and she spread her palms.

“I don’t even know what I’m actually asking. But something happened in that year. Maybe they don’t even realise how much they changed. And I can’t ask what it was, because I don’t know what to ask about… Do you have any idea what I’m even talking about? Am I making any sense?”

Nina worried her lip, pondering. She thought she knew what Buffy meant, remembered how the happy, confident team she had first gotten to know had turned darker and grimmer as the year went on. After Fred…

“I think it was two-fold. Fred’s death was a major turning point. Wesley tried to kill Gunn; they all - they were just devastated. They did everything they could, but it wasn’t enough. And then I think… They ran out of options? Like, there was no way to get out of the deal with W&H. Except what Angel did in the end, burning down the building while they were still inside - that’s how Angel described it to me once. But I don’t know any details.”

She stopped to think.

“There was Eve. She was Angel’s… contact to the Senior Partners? Or something like that. But she changed sides, something about a boyfriend, and she was helping Angel at the end. Creeped me out a bit, if I’m honest - she was always very confident and… condescending? She looked human, but… she could have been anything underneath. I know how that sounds, coming from a werewolf, but if she’d turned out to be some sort of thousand year old witch I’d not be surprised.”

“Eve?” Buffy asked, “Do you know what happened to her? Did she die too?”

Nina shook her head.

“No idea. But... She seemed the type to always have a plan. And she knew… everything.”

“And she helped Angel…” Buffy continued, thoughtfully. “Well, she could turn out useful. If we can find her of course…”

Before she could ask further questions there was a sudden commotion from upstairs. They looked at each other, and Buffy pulled a knife from her pretty purse.

Then Illyria appeared at the top of the stairs, before slowly and stiffly descending, her always immobile face somehow looking particularly pissed-off.
“Lyria! Lyria, come back! We fr’got to pay!”

The voice was Spike’s, and Illyria with exaggerated slowness turned and walked back up, Nina and Buffy on her heels.

They found the vampires in Angel’s room, surrounded by several crates full of dusty bottles. Illyria was opening a portal, something dark and dingy on the other side, and Spike was digging his hand into a roughly woven sack, bringing out a handful of golden coins, carelessly throwing them through.

“Sorry ‘bout that, this should settle it!” he yelled, then took a few rather wobbly steps back and sank into the sofa next to Angel, who wordlessly handed him a bottle.

“Fanks mate,” Spike said, as Illyria turned to leave the room once more.

Since the god seemed the most rational person there, Buffy tried to question her.

“What happened? Where have you been?”

“They are celebrating,” Illyria replied coldly.

“So you did well?” Buffy asked, and Illyria studied her. “Yes,” she eventually said, then left again.

“Twas fucking brilliant!” Spike called out, raising a bottle. “And yours truly nailed it!”

“And now you are trying to see how much alcohol you can drink before poisoning yourselves?” Buffy said, pointedly, and Spike grinned, lifting his bottle in a mock salute.

“Just watch us!”

“Actually-“ Angel interrupted. “How did you know? Don’t think I ever asked… It was a hell of a risk…”

Spike tried to study him, obviously having problems focussing.

“You never seen Fifth Element?”

Angel shook his head, and Spike’s head slowly swivelled, pointing at Nina.

“Wolf girl! Get ‘im to watch some movies, yeah? S’shockin’ how out of touch he is with popular culture!”

“I’m in touch with the- the cool kids,” Angel protested. “And you haven’t answered the question.”

“He kept going on about how all t’secrets were in him? Sometimes literal is the way to go mate.”

Angel blinked, looking quite adorably confused. Nina had never seen him drunk before, and although she wasn’t sure she was keen on the development, she certainly allowed herself to appreciate a moment of Angel being less guarded than normal.

Buffy, on the other hand, was far more practical:

“Look – where have you been, what did you do?”

Spike smiled widely, twirling a bottle between his fingers.
“Well, yours truly saved the most beautiful dimension you’ve ever seen from a horrible ogre!”

Angel shot him a wry look.

“Are you talking about the dimension, or about Venka?”

“Look, she was bloody amazin’, but I’m spoken for, aren’t I?”

“Who is this?” Buffy asked, a little too quickly, and Spike happily elaborated, explaining how they’d come across a sacked village and had saved the half-dead young warrior.

“Bloody brilliant fighter she was – you’d like her, the protectors of the village were always female. And stop lookin’ at me like that. I liked her yeah, but I wasn’t hanging over her the way Angel was over her sister.”

“I wasn’t… hanging over her,” Angel rebutted grumpily, but Spike merely raised an eyebrow, and then mimed, over-exaggerating:

“‘Oh Raavi, that is so interesting, oh Raavi, please tell me more about what you think about restructuring society on a grassroots level, oh Raavi, how are you so capable?’ Like a little lapdog…”

“That girl had seen her been family murdered before her eyes, then kidnapped, enslaved, raped and mind-controlled as a concubine, and she still managed to retain her sense of self, educating herself in secret from Kustos’ library. And now she’s busy leading and restoring her world with her sister’s help; she was inspirational. But if all you can focus on was her pretty face, then all the more fool you. Don’t judge me by your standards, Spike.”

“I’m just saying, she was very cute.”

Nina felt like she ought to say something – was she jealous? She felt like she ought to be…

At this point Spike suddenly started laughing, eyes moving from Buffy’s face to Nina’s, and he elbowed Angel.

“Look at ‘em. Hundred years plus, and nothin’s changed – our women are pissed off!”

“Go on, what were they like, these fabulous women you went ga-ga over?” Buffy asked coldly.

“Um, to look at?” Angel replied. At Buffy’s confirmation, he tilted his head. “Bout Nina’s height I guess. Two horns-“

“Oh they were demons?” Buffy cut in, and Spike raised an eyebrow.

“We’re all demons underneath, pet,” he drawled.

Buffy’s reaction to this was to look as if he’d slapped her, before abruptly turning on her heel and leaving, as Spike (slowly) seemed to realise he’d put his foot in his mouth exceedingly thoroughly.

“Buffy!” he called, trying to get up, but Angel’s arm shot out surprisingly fast for someone so drunk, and held him down.

“Didn’t you see her face? Just leave it.”

“But-“
“Trust me.”

Nina didn’t follow Buffy immediately. Spike’s words had impacted her too, but in a very different way. It was as if someone had described the last panel of her triptych back at her – beneath all ran the blood lust, the desire to tear and maul and devour… She swallowed, staring at Spike like he’d unwittingly read her mind, blurted out truths that were private, secret.

Maybe that’s why Buffy had left? She should probably follow.

Smiling vaguely at the vampires she followed Buffy, finding her in the foyer, looking like she’d had all the wind knocked out of her.

“Buffy?” she asked, worried, and the other looked up at her, the exhaustion she’d held at bay now clearly visible.

“This apocalypse that’s coming… Not theirs-“ she waved a hand dismissively, “-but the one due next month… I don’t know how to stop it. It’s foretold as The Arrival of Talnor, the Beast Master. And he will bring an army of beasts – and probably, possibly, the texts are vague, he will be able to control all beasts in this dimension. And it’s starting already. Rodents chewing through our databases, a tiger inexplicably getting out of a zoo, targeting Slayers, swarms of wasps attacking a coven; a hundred things like that, each one small, but when you look at the whole picture… How do you fight that?”

Nina didn’t know what to say, and Buffy didn’t seem to need an answer, carrying on almost immediately.

“So that was bad enough. But then we found another text, which said that… that this Beast Master might be able to control demons too. It’s something about the particular translation of a specific word, all very complicated. But… I don’t know if you are aware, but Slayers are ‘Imbued with the strength of the demon’ so in theory…”

Her voice trailed off, and she studied her hands.

“We are this world’s protectors. What happens if we become weapons? If they use us to kill…”

Nina understood far too well. Knew the fear of the wolf taking charge, of not being safe, and coming far, far too close to killing her family…

“Me too, I’m guessing,” she said softly; sudden, familiar fear shooting through her, and Buffy looked up, then nodded.

“Yeah, all those of us who are demons underneath…”

“But can’t you- isn’t there something-”

“We’re working on it,” Buffy replied. “Been looking for months. We’ll find something. We always do.”

But the words sounded rehearsed, hollow.

“Can’t Illyria… something? She’s a god…”

Nina’s voice trailed off, at Buffy’s resigned look.

“Oh yeah. She’d be more than happy to lend us a few hell armies. Because clearly that’s what the
situation needs – more demons.”

For a long moment silence reigned.

Eventually Nina tried to break the tension.

“Feel like maybe getting drunk is a good idea…”

Buffy quirked a corner of her mouth.

“You may have a point… I can’t remember the last time.”

So they trudged back upstairs, got the surprised vampires to make room for them, and tried to work out who had the better stamina for drinking - a Slayer or a werewolf.

Nina thought of her painting, and smiled. This was balance.

***

The next morning was full of horrible hangover. Nina’s head felt as if it was somehow crammed with nasty stabby knives, forcing her to leave a still comatose Angel in the bed as she went searching for painkillers.

In the kitchen she found Spike - and even he looked a bit worse for wear, which was oddly reassuring.

“Morning, pet,” he said, then gestured towards the cupboard on her right.

“Drugs are in there, if that’s what you’re wanting.”

“Thanks,” she said, grabbing a glass of water at the same time.

The journey back up the stairs seemed like too much work, so she took a seat across from Spike, waiting for the stabby knives to settle down. Spike - to her surprise - got her a mug of coffee, which seemed to muffle her head a bit.

After a while her brain seemed to reboot, and she recalled his words the previous night. She hesitated, but then thought, what the hell. If Buffy could pour out her worries to someone who was not quite a friend, then so could she.

“Spike, can I -”

Damn, this was difficult. How could she word this?

“Yes?” He was looking at her, curious, eyebrow raised.

“You and Angel, you go way back, right? And recently, I have been reading about his past…”

Spike pulled back a little, a barely visible shake of the head.

“Not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I know, but I just - I need to know who he is. Who he was. And all the murdering and terror, well, I expected that. He’s never tried to whitewash his past - or his present - in any way. But I just… feel small? Does that make sense? I’m just so ordinary, how do I even fit? Like, there was Darla of course, and Buffy who is already legendary and then Cordelia… Fred told me a good bit - how she
was a Seer, and a warrior, and became a higher being—"

Spike held up a hand.

“I’m going to stop you right there. Look, having been around all these ladies…”

He paused, twirled the bloodstained cup in his hands, before shooting her a candid look.

“Well. Darla was a bitch. Buffy… Too complicated. But he went evil and she sent him to hell - not that she and I are much better, but y’know. Hella complicated. And Cordelia - Cordelia was a cheerleader, OK? Queen of her High School, nothin’ on her mind except shoes and hair. So don’t you go thinkin’ you’re not good enough, cause hell knows, no one starts out special. Heck, Darla was a working girl, and as for yours truly…” he chuckled. “Well I was fuckin’ pathetic when Dru found me.”

She hesitated, but then couldn’t help asking:

“And Drusilla? Was she ordinary too, once?”

At her question he went completely still, and when he answered his tone of voice had changed; it was quiet, almost distant. She had a distinct impression that she’d accidentally crossed an invisible line.

“Drusilla was the worst thing he ever did. His masterpiece. And no, she was never ordinary.”

Abruptly he stood, and her suspicions were confirmed - she’d overstepped a boundary.

“Spike, I’m sorry—“

He studied her, then shook his head.

“Not your fault.”

A beat, then he leaned forward, studying her with those piercing blue eyes:

“But here’s the thing. If you wonder why you, what you mean to him, just remember this: He saved you. I was there, I remember – he had the whole of Wolfram & Hart focussed on only you, to find you, and to help you. And he succeeded, pretty much. Everyone else that he cares about was corrupted or killed or destroyed through his contact with him. But you, he saved. I know it sounds like a bloody cliché – the pretty blonde bird saved by the tall dark handsome hero, but since you’ve done a bit of digging, you’ll know how rarely that actually happens. And you can give him that. The knowledge that he can make a difference for the better. And I reckon that most days, that’s what keeps him going. And nobody else can give him that.”

A ghostly smile.

“You’re like the opposite of Dru. I’d say that makes you just about as perfect for him as possible.”
“Spike – catch!”

He caught the magic stick through pure instinct (it had a fancy name, but he hadn’t been paying attention) and adroitly climbed to the top of the derelict temple, watching Angel and Illyria fight the wraith-like protectors far below, their strange off-key keening almost like tinnitus, and equally unpleasant. When killed, they seemed to evaporate, but left inky smudges on the dead air. Spike idly wondered if it was actual ink, and if it could be washed off.

The roof of the temple was in surprisingly good nick he noticed, considering how long it had been empty. It had belonged to one of Illyria’s now long-dead rivals and was an impressive structure in its own way, but Spike had long since lost the ability to be awed… Now it was merely yet another defiled and broken remnant of a glorious past, like so many, many others.

Soon bored with observing the fight he laid down, staring up into the murky ochre sky. It reminded him of the smog that regularly enveloped London in back in the day…

What was Buffy doing, he wondered. He was sure they had been wandering about for several months by now, but Illyria had merely done a little shrug when he asked how long they’d been. Had they missed the apocalypse? Would they return home to find that their world had been reduced to yet another pile of rubble? Was she even still alive? The ‘real’ world felt almost like a place he’d made up, a story to comfort him in the long dark nights, with an impossibly beautiful and powerful lover… He turned the magic stick over in his hands, the intricate pattern and mystic writing mesmerising. It had been created for the head-priest millennia ago, and if the wraiths got hold of it they’d break it, something to be avoided at all costs as it was needed in order to access the sacred texts inside the temple.

Sacred texts - like the bleeding Shanshu. One day he’d become human and marry Buffy? It was ridiculous; a fantasy or chimera… Reality was dead worlds and a never-ending dance with danger.

“Spike! The Wand of Mizzuin?”

He was torn out of his musings by Angel’s angry bark, and slowly got to his feet before making his way over to the edge. Realising that the battle was over he leapt down the 40-odd feet of temple
facade, and handed over the wand without a word. Angel studied him for a moment, but then strode off to perform whatever magic spell was needed in order to unlock the inner sanctum.

Walking over to one of the wraith remnants still hanging in the air, Spike cautiously reached out, but had his hand kicked away before he could touch the odd smear. It looked not unlike a splash of graffiti painted onto nothing.

“It will poison you, turn you into one of them!” Illyria snapped, like a mother chastising a child playing with a sharp knife.

“Keep your hair on,” he muttered and slumped down against the wall, idly throwing pebbles at the smudges instead, tearing tiny holes in the oddly viscous substance.

He was somewhere beyond bored, but didn’t know what the word might be to describe his current state of mind.

After the euphoria of finding another piece of the Key, there had followed the inevitable slump. They were used to it by now, but this time Angel had decided that they ought to find out more about the Dead Key itself – who had made it, how to use it, what it actually did – something which turned out to be even more mind-numbingly impossible than finding the pieces themselves.

After all, a magical bit of rock could be hidden anywhere, but knowledge (rare, priceless, too dangerous to record) could only be found amongst creatures like the Raven, or The Keeper of Secrets – either hidden or lost or dead. Illyria’s ‘contacts’ from back in the day (such as they were) turned out useless. Known enemies of Wolfram & Hart could – if they were lucky – confirm what they already knew, but so far they never had new information. Most of the time they turned out to be dead.

Time was blurring, places and dimensions bleeding together, and Spike wanted nothing more than to just rest. How long had they been doing this overall? How long would they continue? How long could they? He tried to remember where they had been before they arrived here, forcing himself to dredge up memories that he’d never made any effort to retain; there had been the endless frozen sand dimension, and before that the dimension of the million tiny spiders, before that the dimension with the angry birds, and before that the dimension of rotting armies where a war had destroyed everything – victors and the defeated alike – and before that… His mind went blank.

Eventually Angel appeared in front of him. Spike glanced up, but seeing that clearly the other had been unsuccessful (yet again) he closed his eyes, wondering how hard the ground might be - he was tired, but looking for a comfy place to sleep seemed like too much effort.

Then Angel kicked him.

When he didn’t react, Angel kicked him again.

“Get up, we’re going home. This isn’t working.”

Something like a tiny ray of hope appeared in Spike’s mind.

“Oh thank fuck,” he breathed, waiting for Angel to hold out a hand before attempting to get to his feet. Could lethargy be a medical condition?

But then a moment later the Hyperion folded itself around them, and he felt like an invisible burden instantly lifted. And if he tried really hard, he could pretend that it wouldn’t return. If he could just deceive himself to believe that they could stay, he might be OK. He should probably call Buffy, but he couldn’t face it just yet. He wanted to feel more himself… If she needed support, she could do
without him moaning about his feelings. Or lack thereof.

After what might have been the longest shower in his life (the spiders of two dimensions ago had been very very tiny and very very multitudinous, and he wanted to make sure they were gone, all of them, gone for good), a thorough touch-up of this roots, and then a rest in a proper bed for the first time in countless months, he decided to go out for some blood and smokes. (They still had a good stash left of the booze they’d purchased previously, which pleased him. Tonight he would get so drunk that he’d not be sober for a week. If Angel had a problem with that, well he literally couldn’t care less.)

There was a little place just down from the hotel, and he pulled on a dark top with a hood, never looking up and blending in perfectly with all the shadows of the night - it was a risk going out, but dammit, they’d survived on rodents the size of beetles for the past few weeks, and he needed a good meal. Besides, Illyria had gone out to wherever she went, and she sure as hell wasn’t going to be bringing blood back.

But as he returned to the hotel, pockets bulging, he found his steps slowing. By the wall was a bundle of black, a beggar by the looks of it, with a dark shawl over their head… He took a few more steps, his senses and instincts suddenly screaming at him. Surely it couldn’t be…

Stepping forwards and reaching out, trying to stop his hand from trembling, he carefully pulled back the shawl, taking a sharp, unneeded breath at the sight that greeted him. Beautiful features marred by dried blood and dark bruises, hair matted and dirty, consciousness a bare sliver – enough for her to abruptly reach out, grasp his wrist, but nothing more.

Without thinking he picked her up, too light by half, his beautiful princess…

The motion seemed to stir something in her. Her eyes fluttered, and she whispered, so quietly he could barely catch it, even with his enhanced hearing.

“In my father’s house are many rooms… but none for me.”

He knew the Bible verse she was quoting – or misquoting, rather. And why.

“Shush,” he reassured her, as if he could protect her from all the ills of the world.

Angel was in the lobby, surrounded by swords and axes (he was doing a check on all their weapons and sharpening them, for reasons that escaped Spike entirely), staring at Spike with undiluted astonishment as he entered with Dru cradled in his arms.

“What the hell-”

“She’s hurt,” Spike cut him off, but Angel physically blocked his path, incredulous.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“She needs help,” Spike reiterated. “She was just sitting by the wall outside…”

Angel closed his eyes, a big black monolith of mounting anger.

“Spike. This? Is a trap. She is a trap. You think it’s a coincidence that she was there, right on our doorstep? They know they can’t get in here, but now you have literally carried them over the threshold. I can’t conceive of how you could be so stupid…”

“Look mate, you can keep talking, but I’m going to take her upstairs and find her a bed,” Spike
replied.

“I can’t let you do that,” Angel said, and Spike tilted his head, studying his grandsire, wondering how Angel could be so fantastically blinkered.

“As if you wouldn’t – didn’t – do the same for Darla,” he finally replied, holding Angel’s eyes, and after a long moment Angel acquiesced.

“Fine,” he muttered, but as he didn’t move Spike had to walk around him. What he hadn’t said, but what hung over them, was how Spike was always the one to pick up the broken pieces from what Angel had destroyed. If anyone deserved Angel’s help, it was Dru, trap or no.

He found a room on the second floor and made Dru as comfortable as he could. It was like being in a time warp, from back when he’d first decided to set off for Sunnydale after she had been attacked by that mob. Her condition wasn’t much better now.

He cleaned her wounds, getting rid of the dirt as best he could, and fed her all the blood he’d just fetched for himself and Angel. As she fell asleep (proper sleep, not the half comatose exhaustion of earlier) he started on her hair, untangling it strand by strand, the work soothing and familiar, and somewhere, deep inside, was a feeling of home that he didn’t know how to quantify.

(There were seven messages on his phone from Buffy. He turned it off.)

Angel came by after a while, standing immobile in the doorway. Spike ignored him, focussing on a particularly resistant knot, and it could have been a hundred years ago… The silence hung in the room, unbroken, until Angel cleared his throat and curtly asked Spike to let him know when she woke up.

It took hours to untangle the hair, but it kept him occupied, the perfect way to stop thinking. Once he was done, he had to face what he was doing.

‘I was a lucky bloke, to even touch such a dark beauty…’

He remembered their last encounter vividly. Ready to kill her at Buffy’s word. For a mere crumb – for the promise that maybe, someday, he might have a chance.

He’d been given his chance, and more besides. Buffy was a phone call – a portal – away. He could be by her side in a heartbeat. And yet he was sitting beside his dark princess, her hair like a black wave across the pillow, her face pale and bruised.

He could stake her now, a single, simple motion, and the world would be a better place. And yet he didn’t move. Dru was monster and victim, mother and child, and the one they had all abandoned. Even him. Choosing the hard path of light and goodness before he even knew it himself.

When she finally stirred, he never needed to call Angel. The other vampire was in the room before her eyes had even opened.

“My boys,” she whispered, “So full of light, so full of darkness…” Her eyes lingered over Angel, who did his best to appear unaffected. A small smile on her face:

“Is Daddy home?”

Ignoring her question, Angel spoke.

“Who did this to you?”
“Slayers,” she spat, eyes lighting up with ire. “Nasty, sneaky slayers. So many now, too many, we fall, shadows and ashes…”

Trying to raise herself, she turned to Spike, speaking directly to him for the first time. “All ensnared, all lost, the golden girls take all the dark princes. Destroying what was mine…”

Wrapping her slender arms around herself, she started rocking, back and forth, back and forth, like a demented doll.

“Breaking my boys, breaking my toys, all gone and lost forever, poor Miss Edith will never have another supper, smashed and shattered…”

Appalled, Spike reached out, grabbed hold of her, forcing her to look at him.

“They broke Miss Edith?”

“Smash, smash, shards all over the floor, all the king’s horses and all the king’s men, couldn’t…”

Her voice wavered and broke, tears filling her eyes, and Spike without thinking pulled her into his arms, gently rocking her as she sobbed. He knew this, the childlike heart of her, the ways to calm her grief.

“Shh Princess. Shh. Hey, listen. Maybe not all the king’s horses or all the king’s men, but remember who can put Miss Edith back together again?”

She stilled in his arms, searching his face, trusting and hopeful, and hell, would he have to kill her? Could he let her go?

For now, he pushed the painful conundrum out of his mind, smiling softly as he began speaking, the cadence of the words easily moulding themselves to the familiar script in his mind. He’d even had to get a VHS tape once and set up a TV so she could watch the show on endless repeat.

“Once upon a time,” he began, “not so long ago, there was a little girl called Emily. Emily had a shop…”

As he spoke more details came back to him. Emily said her special rhyme, and Bagpuss the toy cat woke up and had a look at the broken Miss Edith. He improvised a story on the spot about Miss Edith spending a night dancing with some fairies, and then the mice set to work gluing Miss Edith back together and cleaning her pretty dress before setting her out in the window so passers-by could see her, and hopefully her owner would find her again.

“Can we go to Emily’s shop?” Dru asked, enchanted, and Spike chuckled.

“Of course Princess. But you have to get better first… Have a rest now, Angel and I will look after you.”

She easily slipped back into sleep and he quietly left her side.

Once outside her room, Angel spoke, clearly thrown.

“What… was that?”

Spike shot him a look.

“You not familiar with Bagpuss?”
The other shook his head, and Spike sighed. “You missed out. Quality TV that. Children’s’ show, obviously.”

“Look Spike-“

“I know. What you gonna do? Go in there and dust her?”

He held Angel’s eyes until the other looked away.

“We can’t let her leave,” Angel eventually mumbled.

“Well go in there and finish it then, big hero,” Spike countered. “I need a rest.”

He turned on his heel and walked up to his room, resisting the urge to add: ‘You killed her once already, you’ll know the drill.’

***

The next few days Spike’s whole world narrowed down to just Dru. It was clear neither of them knew what to do with her, so Spike did what he’d always done.

If she were a spy, or a mole, she didn’t let on (and might not be aware, that was the rub… With Dru, anything was possible).

On the fourth day, however, she reached out and laid her hand on his coat over his heart.

“You carry a Key. But it is broken. Dead. Like me.”

Her eyes grew distant: “The Wolf, the Ram, the Hart… they are like spiders, their web ensnares realms upon realms; they cover this world, clinging, clinging, dragging everything into the dark.”

“But the Key, love…” he used the endearment without thinking, caught up in her visions and the questions that had carried their quest for ages now. “Can we fix the Key? How do we bring it to life? How do we use it?”

Months they’d spent trudging around, pointlessly trying to find out any information, but here was a possible answer…

(Or maybe he was playing into the enemy’s hands. But fuck it, he hadn’t lived this long by playing it safe.)

He reached into his pocket and brought out the oddly shaped lump. It was heavier now, but not much larger, and looked not unlike that moon rock Angel had gotten Nina for Christmas.

Cautiously she touched it, but abruptly pulled back as if scorched, screaming. Screaming, like he’d never heard.

“Dru? Dru! What is it, what can you see? Dru, please-“

The scream seemed to cut right through him, on and on and on, until her voice eventually gave out. He found himself frozen in wordless terror, knowing he should move, should… something, but the whole world seemed to be howling, his ears ringing, like something primal had been unleashed.

And then she spoke.

“The blood,” she whispered, looking straight through him. “The blood on the scroll. It damns you, a
prophecy split in two, The Dead Key will tear all asunder, bringing you down, down – down into the dark and the pain – deeper and deeper, never ending…"

Retreating further she moved away from him, curling up and keening to herself. Alarmed, he finally moved and tossed the Key aside, trying to pull her towards him, to comfort her somehow, even as his own mind was whirling. What had she seen? What was lying ahead? He was wary of the whole Shanshu thing anyway, and he trusted Dru’s Sight a darn sight more than dusty prophecies, but this was alarming on a whole new level. He wasn’t doing it for a prize, but whatever it was that Dru could see was frightening in ways he couldn’t even articulate.

It seemed to take forever to calm her down, the whole world shrinking down to the two of them, the turmoil ebbing out bit by bit, the bone-deep terror (his future?) binding them together. When she was finally still she was resting against him, her face buried in his neck, her body flush against his own, and it was familiar and primal and something he should not have allowed to happen. He should walk away. He should unentangle himself.

But he could still hear her scream echoing in his ears, the pure naked fear in her eyes imprinted on him, and when he felt her face change he allowed the past to claim him, surrendering to the bite the way he had so many years ago, pain and pleasure rushing in and burying everything else.

***

Angel had heard the scream.

Had rushed with unnatural speed to the door to Dru’s room, and then hesitated. Had stood still, listening, unsure. After all, what could he do?

Spike seemed to be calming her down, so he walked away, ending up in the kitchen, restless and unhappy. They should have been away days ago, but were stuck in limbo thanks to Dru.

They should have left her – staked her immediately – should have… something. But guilt stayed his hand, even though the blood of every one of her victims was on his hands too.

He wished he could undo the damage, but no one – not Bagpuss the Cat (whatever that was), nor all the king’s horses and all the king’s men could put Dru back together again.

He dragged a hand across his face, wondering if the universe would ever stop reminding him of all his sins.

He should have called Nina, except what could he have told her? He was lucky it wasn’t a full moon, or she’d have turned up…

They could call Buffy of course – Buffy would have no qualms about staking Dru, he was sure of that, but Spike… Fuck, why was it all so complicated?

When Spike finally showed up, Angel was deep in thought and it took a second for him to register the other’s presence.

Spike rarely seemed to do anything quietly. Now however he practically slunk through the kitchen door. Angel looked up, and all thoughts were blown away.

Staring at Spike’s neck, there was only one thing to ask (even if the answer was there right in front of his eyes):

“You let her bite you?”
Spike didn’t meet his eyes, just sort of slowly folded himself down into a chair, studied his hands.

“I didn’t mean to- it just-”

A beat, then he buried his head in his hands.

“Oh hell, who am I kidding, I wanted it…”

Looking up, he looked into the distance, eyes lost: “Angel, what do we do?”

‘Start by not letting her bite you!’ was on the tip of Angel’s tongue, as was ‘Not bringing her into the hotel in the first place!’ but neither seemed the thing, considering how Spike clearly knew he’d screwed up. Besides it was too late now…

Angel cleared his throat.

“I should kick your ass from here till next Tuesday, but that wouldn’t help. Besides, I think you’re well aware what a colossal idiot you are.”

Spike didn’t answer. This in itself was a cause for worry - Spike always had an opinion, was always pushing back, except recently…

“Look, what happened? I heard the screaming.”

“She- she sensed the Key. So I showed her, but when she touched it she- she freaked out.”

A brief glance, Spike’s eyes deadly serious and solemn.

“She saw something. Said how, how - our destiny was divided, how the Key would tear everything apart, how there would only be the dark and the pain… Angel. What the hell are we doing?”

“Trying to stop the apocalypse,” Angel replied, staunchly. This they knew.

“Yeah but remember all this crap about becoming real a boy?” Spike shook his head. “There was none of that. She just screamed. I’ve never seen her like that. Ever. Angel, what are we doing?”

“Whatever we have to. Spike – we are not stopping now!”

“I know. But you didn’t see her. Angel, we’re f*cked. I’m just telling you. This story ain’t going to have a happy ending.”

There was a hopelessness to him that Angel recognised… And suddenly he understood the bite. Remembered far too clearly his own feelings of helplessness when Holland had shown him the ‘reality’ of the world, ‘The Home Office’. What he had done afterwards.

If anyone had ever told him that Spike would be the one to understand he would probably have broken something, laughing. But here, now…

“Spike, I’ve been trying to work things out. Not just Dru, but… why are we still alive? We’ve got a few neat spells working for us, but if they wanted rid of us all they’d have to do is jump us outside the gates with a flamethrower. The reason they haven’t, is the prophecy. They need us alive to fulfil our part. What happens afterwards…”

He spread his hands.

“Not up to us. But we are getting close to something if they used Dru to…”
His voice trailed off, as he became aware that she was there, in the doorway.

Spike turned, then inhaled sharply.

She was exquisite, as always, the bruises and cuts healed, her simple, dark dress outlining her against the dim daylight that filtered through shuttered windows, black hair tumbling over her shoulders. Bewitching, captivating, the way she’d always been, from the very first time he had seen her.

But all that was secondary. In her hands she held the Dead Key, and her eyes were as shrewd and calculating as he had ever seen.

“This is why I was sent. They saved me from the slayers, told me to find a Dead Key, that I would know it… That it would sing to me of terror and fear.”

She tilted her head, as if listening.

“It doesn’t sing, it screams. Screams of your suffering.”

Angel realised that he had jumped to his feet as Spike’s chair fell to the ground, clattering in the sudden silence.

Smiling, eyes dark with secrets, she reached down into her cleavage, brought out a simple golden ring.

“And they gave me this.”

No need to ask who ‘they’ were. Nor what the ring was. He’d held a Band of Blacknil once, knew what this meant.

Where the hell was Illyria when you needed her?

(That had been his only solution - to outsource the execution. He hated himself for thinking it, but he wasn’t sure he could go through with… He’d brought her into a world of pain and destruction, could he take her out of it also? He ought to, but.)

Raising her eyes, Dru looked straight at him.

“See you in the Home Office, Daddy…”

But instead of putting the ring on her finger she turned on her heel, half-running, half-dancing away from them.

It took a second, then they set off in pursuit, Spike in front, Angel on his heels, until they came to the front door.

They expected her to stop, except she pushed the doors open, dancing out into the deadly sunshine…

“Dru!” Spike yelled, and would have followed her if Angel hadn’t grabbed hold of him, holding him back.

(Momentary memories almost froze him – this, the safety of the sunshine, was where Connor had run to after he returned from the Quor’Toth, Angel’s friends holding him back…)

And still she didn’t use the ring.

Instead she turned, smoke already shimmering around her - the Dead Key in one hand, the Band of
Blacknil in the other.

And then – she laughed, bright and shimmering and happy. Like she suddenly knew the answer to a wonderful secret:

“I can see how it ends!”

But even as she spoke fire blossomed, tiny flames growing, growing, growing, before enveloping her completely, as they watched, helpless and paralysed.

In mere moments she vanished from their lives, a flaming statue disintegrating before their eyes, her laughter somehow still ringing in their ears, even after she was gone.

Chapter End Notes

And this is THE Drusilla vid:

Ghost of the Rose

It's old so the quality is sadly not great, but it's still my favourite.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

**Ghost of the Rose**

It is the best Dru vid I have ever seen. It's also the perfect encapsulation of Spike's state of mind (which is useful to be aware of before going into this chapter).

Angel knew he should let go of Spike, but instead he tightened his hold, Spike seeming to lean into the embrace, rather than straining against it.

‘He’s the only one I have left’, Angel realised. His whole vampire family dust and ashes, their deaths imprinted on his mind, impossible to purge.

Why did Wolfram & Hart always do this? Why did they use his family against him? Why did he have to watch, and remember?

He let his face fall down against Spike’s neck (scent, blood, it called to them both) and felt the other go motionless in his arms.

He could have this. Right here, right now, he knew this was his. A bond deeper than any other, he knew Spike would yield, just like he had yielded to Dru. Knew Spike’s weak points better than his own (knew exactly why Buffy loved him…) Knew that this would be added to their long list of secrets, never spoken of, only theirs.

(We’re all demons underneath. He could feel the tug, the urge to reclaim and reseal their bond, blood calling to blood.)

For the infinity of a non-existent heartbeat he hesitated, a single push enough to send him over the edge — then he stepped back, both literally and metaphorically, feeling more worn out than he had in months.

Spike swayed at having his support removed without warning, then turned, both of them ignoring the ashes blowing in the sunshine; the Key and the ring glinting invitingly at them, but of no importance in this moment…
“Angel-” Spike said, somewhere between a statement and a question, but Angel shook his head.

“Go see Buffy,” he replied curtly, taking another step backwards.

Spike watched him, eyes dark and cheeks moist with tears, then looked away and swallowed, shaking his head.

Why was he so unable to help others, Angel wondered. Why did he only bring destruction? Why was he as helpless in the face of Spike’s grief, as he had been in Dru’s pain? Why was the only comfort he could offer a betrayal of others?

He sighed, wishing he had the right words.

“Spike, listen-”

“Can’t we just go away?” Spike cut in, voice thick with emotion and briefly meeting his eyes. “Go see Venka, see how they’re getting on, just have a – a break? Away from… all this.”

He gestured towards the sunshine and death, and Angel wanted nothing more than to say yes. But he knew what it’d mean. What he’d be running from.

“Not until you’ve seen Buffy.”

A beat, then Spike slumped down against the wall in defeat, seemingly acquiescent. Or at least, no longer argumentative, remaining motionless and silent and staring into nothingness. The listlessness was another worry – Angel had noticed it growing over the past several months, but not known what to do, and still didn’t. He hoped Buffy might be able to break through.

Half an hour later Illyria showed up from goodness knew where. It was a relief to deal with someone so utterly unemotional, her only question being where in the world Buffy was likely to be.

Since Spike had to all intents and purposes gone catatonic, Angel ended up calling Giles. He didn’t want to speak to Buffy, and if he hadn’t been feeling so wretched, he’d probably have appreciated the irony of forcing Spike and Buffy to deal with the heap of issues that had now piled up. Goodness knew what this would do to their relationship, but hiding wouldn’t do any good.

(His own and Spike’s issues… well, they would just have to stay buried. They knew how to live with them. But Buffy deserved better.)

***

Buffy – still jet-lagged from her latest journey – was trying to have an afternoon nap in her small room in the Council Headquarters, when there was a knock at the door.

The room was simple – spartan, even – a bed, an armchair and a wardrobe, the latter filled with a collection of eclectic clothing, as she would switch outfits when stopping by. She kept meaning to add a personal touch, a few pictures or something, but never seemed to have the energy. And it was only a place to crash, her flat in Rome was ‘home’… nevermind the fact that she hadn’t been there in months.

Half-awake, and confused as to who it could be, she called “Come in”, only to see the door slowly open to reveal Spike.

In an instant she stumbled to her feet, wondering if maybe she was dreaming. He’d not called (in so very long) – oh god he was actually back, he was alive, he was–
She had been ready to throw herself into his arms, except something was off.

She stopped halfway across the small space between them, studying him more closely and slowly suppressing the euphoria and the instinct to wrap her arms around him.

Why was he hovering, as if embarrassed or uncertain? Why had he knocked? Why did he look…

Why did he look like that?

Superficially he seemed fine – he’d done his roots, and looked generally clean and his clothes were fresh and not full of months’ worth of accumulated dirt – and yet the look on his face was one she hadn’t seen in years. She carefully took another step forwards, renewed worry shooting through her.

“Spike, what happened?”

And still he didn’t meet her eyes. Where had they been? She’d been scared they’d been lost for good.

After a moment he finally spoke.

“Dru died.”

She took a quick breath, gratitude and relief flooding her.

“Oh thank god.”

He looked up then, his expression as if he’d been slapped.

“God had nothin’ to do with it! She–”

He stopped, pressed his lips together as he looked away, something that might be a sob escaping him.

Slowly it dawned on her that he was upset – grieving – crying over the evil bitch who-

Unbidden, she was transported back to a week ago.

A small Slayer patrol in Latvia – only three of them – had come across Drusilla. They hadn’t known who she was, and had at first thought she was a slightly simple young woman, playing with an old fashioned doll. They soon learned differently…

Lina Jansone had been the first to approach. 16 years old, newly called and kindhearted, she had wanted to warn the pretty lady that she was in a bad neighbourhood.

She hadn’t stood a chance.

The other two had been a credit to their calling and their training, nearly getting the better of Drusilla in what had by all accounts been a vicious fight – until Dru had vanished into thin air.

Buffy had come as soon as she could, had stood by Lina’s body in the morgue only a few days ago; fighting flashbacks to her mother’s death, Kendra’s murder, and her own demise at The Master’s hands. So young. So scared. And darkness closing so very quickly.

She had not been able to find any words to console the parents, except swearing that she would avenge their daughter’s death.
Deep breath, and she was back in the room, searching for words and coming up blank.

She was… thankful for the news of Dru’s death. Every Slayer group had been on high alert, every Wicca and Watcher attempting locator spells, but Dru might as well have vanished off the face off the earth. Somehow that had been more alarming than anything else. Like an evil Jack-in-the-box that could pop out anywhere.

And still she needed to say something.

“I’m sorry, but she murdered one of my girls. If you want sympathy…”

Her voice trailed off, and she lifted her hand in an empty gesture. What the hell now?

She’d thought he might be dead or lost, had missed him so much she’d felt hollow with longing, been carrying the weight of an apocalypse on her shoulders without her best friend, or her lover… It had been three months since she had last seen him – three months that had felt like years.

And now he returned just to cry over his evil bitch ex who had somehow (fortuitously) finally met a dusty end?

No explanation, not even asking how she had been…

He half-opened his mouth, hesitated, then shook his head as he swallowed painfully.

“This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have come.”

She shook her head, too disappointed and upset to be polite:

“Why did you?”

She was the very last person to offer him any kind of comfort in this scenario. Why wasn’t he in a bar somewhere drowning his sorrows? That’s what guys did, wasn’t it?

“I don’t know,” he eventually answered. “Angel made me.”

For a moment she was literally lost for words.

“I don’t understand… Anything. Where have you been, why would Angel-”

She took a step back, shaking her head. It was too much.

As if admitting defeat he sank down into the armchair, avoiding her eyes.

“I don’t know. I guess-”

He fell silent, and she took a further step back, sitting down on the bed, waiting. This was not the reunion she had expected.

“I loved her,” he finally said. “Properly loved her. I don’t know – I don’t know what to do with that. I watched her burn, and she-”

He seemed to be speaking to himself, reaching up and cradling the back of his neck, then holding her eyes.

“I let her bite me. Before that. I didn’t know she’d go for a walk in the sunshine, I just- she was-“
He let his hand fall, and for the first time she noticed the fresh bite mark… It was like a kick in the solar plexus, winding her. She knew what that meant.

“I fucked up, love, but the things she said… She saw my future, and- I’m scared.”

She also knew that look in his eyes. Knew the brutal honesty they carried which was borne out by the words that followed:

“Oh, who am I trying to kid. I’m bloody terrified. And she was there. ’S not an excuse, just a fact. She knew about pain, about suffering, about being in hell and never ever getting out… I know you only saw a monster. But she was a young girl, and Angel destroyed her, piece by piece…”

A beat, then he abruptly turned the tables.

“Do you love Angel?”

The question came out of the left field, and before she could answer, he asked a follow-up:

“Did you still love him after he lost his soul?”

“That’s not-”

“It’s exactly the same thing!”

Her jaw dropped.

“Except I didn’t go around and let him bite me out of pity!”

“He was your boyfriend for a few years. She was my life for a century. She made me!”

“I killed him.” Her voice was shaking with emotion, hands balling into fists. “I was seventeen years old and I loved him more than I thought it was possible to love another person – and I ran a sword through his chest, while you skipped out the back door with Dru. Don’t you bloody dare tell me about watching the person you love die…”

There was a moment as they quite simply stared at each other, and she wanted nothing more than to land a good punch, work it all out with fists and violence (and then sex, knowing them; angry, furious sex that could break a building), but 1) they were in the Watcher’s Council and 2) it wouldn’t actually solve anything, would it?

Not that it came to that. Instead he closed his eyes, softly shaking his head.

“Fuck Buffy, I’m such a mess,” he said, with a hopelessness that gave her pause. She hadn’t seen him like this since… Since they’d been fighting The First. “What the hell do you see in me? I had a sex robot made of you, Angel at least just stuck to simple torture and mind-fuckery.”

And suddenly she realised what this was – this was having a relationship with Spike. Complicated, messy, difficult. Angel withdrew, tried to do the right thing no matter the cost. But Spike – as he had once told her – followed his blood. And that led to a whole host of other problems. And they hadn’t had much time… There had been the initial week the previous September, and then that week over Christmas. In between there had been ‘dates’, and random meet-ups. Spike dropping in and out of her life, but none of the day-to-day issues that came with most relationships. And a week for her could easily be a month or two for him.

Instead they had this – the weight of their history, his bloody past sinking its claws into him, the mess
of a century plus of murder and dysfunctional relationships that were impossible to untangle. And right now…

“Spike,” she said, aiming for a firmness she didn’t feel. “What happened? From the start.”

This hadn’t come out of nowhere, this was something more than just Drusilla. It had been three months for her, how long had it been for him? Slowly he started speaking, almost emotionless as he relayed returning from seemingly endless travels and finding Dru, bringing her into the hotel, caring for her, and then showing her the Dead Key:

“She saw the future… and she was terrified. I may… not quite have dreamed about the house in the suburbs with a white picket fence, but I thought, y’know, maybe… maybe it’d turn out alright, big shiny prophecy and all that. But she just screamed… I thought she’d never stop. And it’s not like I’m doing this just for a reward, but eternal torment is not really something one looks forward to…”

He wasn’t looking at her anymore, eyes haunted.

“Back when I was first a ghost, I’d… ‘disappear’. No warning, but suddenly the world would fade away and all there’d be was pain. And I never knew if I’d be able to get back. But the worst thing… I was alone. Forever. And the rest of the time I just lived in fear. Could almost feel the flames licking around my feet. I’ve tried to forget it, but…”

His head fell down as he studied his hands, voice now almost a whisper, as if quoting something.

“The soul that blesses you... damns you to suffer… forever.”

Buffy swallowed, unsure what to do or say. She’d wanted to know, but this… At least she now understood why he had never talked about it.

A sudden bittersweet smile then flashed across his face, as he finally caught her eyes again.

“Angel had it right. Told me the prophecy was bull; that he never escaped from hell, all he got was a reprieve. Guess I’ve just been an idiot for hoping otherwise.”

“Spike-”

He shook his head.

“Nothin’ you can do love. I really am going to burn. Just like her.”

What he would have said next she never found out, as there was a soft knock on the door, and Willow apologetically stuck her head in through the narrow opening she had created.

“Hey Buffy, you awake? I heard voices…”

A beat, as she registered Spike’s presence then did an awkward little wave.

“Um, hi Spike. I, um, I’ll just be going, sorry to interrupt…”

She swiftly closed the door, leaving Spike to stare at it dumbly.

“Hang on…”

Turning to Buffy, his eyes were all questions.

“That was Willow. But she was missing, like missing missing. How…?”
She quirked an eyebrow, trying to aim for light hearted, despite wishing to yell. He’d never even asked.

“Not been keeping track? The apocalypse was in November. It’s January now.”

“Oh.”

(‘You missed the apocalypse, Christmas, everything!’ she wanted to say, but this was not the time. The whole Dru and ‘I-am-going-to-burn’ issues were higher on the agenda.)

But he didn’t pick up on what he’d been talking about before, instead seeming to gather himself and actually looking at her for the first time.

“I think we promised to help…”

His voice trailed off, eyes suddenly narrowing: “Huhn. Knew they were up to something, but should have figured it out. As bad as each other, those two.”

“I’m sorry?” she asked, feeling the conversation was disappearing away from her, and he shook his head.

“Nevermind. Glad the world is still here. Was it… bad?”

She shrugged. Bad was relative.

“It all worked out. After a fashion…”

Noticing the way her voice trailed off, he leaned forward.

“Buffy? What happened?”

“Well, there were some mistranslations. And Willow…” She bit her lip, wondering how to explain, then sighed.

“It’s easier if I show you.”
Willow looked up from the computer as she sensed Buffy and Spike approach.

Slayer, vampire. Heartbeat, no heartbeat. Prey/predator, but which was which…

She blinked, took a deep breath. It was still difficult, all these new senses. Hopefully Kennedy would come round soon… Her human side felt so overwhelmed most of the time, she could do with a kite string.

“Willow — I thought it’d be easier to show Spike, rather than try to explain?”

Willow nodded, feeling the air currents change as she did so.

“Sure. We’re- I mean, I’m- Sorry, do you want to do the talking thing?”

Instinctively she reached out, felt the reassuring touch of rough hide under her palm.

Buffy did that nervous smile they had all perfected now, and somewhere at the back of Willow’s mind was the worry that they’d never adjust to her. Them.

“Right,” Buffy began, “please let me introduce you to Talnor, the Beast Master.”

Willow saw how Spike pursed his lips, eyeing the three heads and six legs, the fantastical horns, the faces both terrible and hideous…

“It’s a bit… small?” he eventually offered, and Willow almost laughed:

“It was a lot bigger when I found it. Massive, actually. But I-”

Couldn’t resist? Was drawn to its power? Felt something I had never felt before? Became ensnared in a thrall I wouldn’t break even if I could? Finally understood what all the ancient texts had been saying?

It was all of the above, and more. Something beyond words. Something mystical, magical and ancient that was hers, all hers, and no one else’s.

She felt Talnor nudging her hand, and she scratched a tiny chin, smile deepening.

“This was in the desert,” Buffy continued, seeing as Willow wasn’t going to finish her sentence. “It’s
where she disappeared to. Went into some pocket dimension as far as we have been able to work out. Didn’t return until the day of the Apocalypse…”

She hesitated, and Willow knew why.

A Slayer army assembled to save the world — they had been well-prepared, their powers and their magic focussed on Talnor whilst merely holding the beasts at bay, rightly assuming that if Talnor fell, its hordes would lose focus.

Except when the Beast and its multitude arrived as foretold, Willow was on its neck, leading the charge.

Willow had never been able to work out how long she had spent with Talnor. It felt like forever, or no time at all. She had been drawn to it, instinctively, and found so much more than expected. Wisdom, blood thirst, loyalty, an awareness of life — living, breathing, pulsing — beneath her skin, all around her, and a vision that left her staggered in its simplicity and beauty.

She had in that instant grasped the truth beyond and behind the ancient writings she had struggled to translate. How ‘Talnor, the Beast Master’ wasn’t just the creature itself. Talnor was of course Talnor, but ‘beast master’ was more complex. It wasn’t until she had arrived that the whole had been completed. Talnor was powerful, and bore within it ties to all living creatures; but it had no capacity for planning, no understanding of time, living purely by instinct. It knew it was the appointed time, knew that she was the one to unlock the events that needed to unfold and had welcomed her. If she had been forced to explain it, she would have said that Talnor was the ‘Beast’, and she the ‘Master’ — or maybe (going with that old metaphor of Xander’s) that Talnor was the power and she was the control; but the bond ran so deep that saying which part was Willow, and what was Talnor, was a moot point.

They just were.

And she had known nothing except this fact, and that they had a purpose, that they would bring about paradise.

It wasn’t until she looked up from where she was leading the charge and saw the Slayer army — heard Buffy screaming her name, saw Kennedy’s face, shocked and fearful — that she had found Willow again; had managed to use her power to halt the battle, to stop what she realised was (from a human point of view) an apocalypse, and not a brutal but necessary return to the world that had once been. (She still dreamt of that vision, waking to sharp disappointment and wishing she could just leave — run away and never look back, be free.)

It had been wildly disorienting. She had tried to describe it as what an astronaut probably felt like, returning to Earth and once more being bound by gravity after being weightless.

She knew they didn’t really trust her, and wasn’t even sure if they should. She had managed to help the Slayers, and save Talnor from their onslaught, even if she had wanted to blast them all to hell for daring to hurt it. Changing its size had been the only thing she could think of to allow it to stay with her, to make it seem as if it was safe. She had felt like she was being torn in two — forcing Talnor to submit to her will, halting the army and sending it back had almost broken her. Thanks to the hive mind she had felt every cut, every injury, every death; and forcing them all to stop, retreat, and to go back, had drained her to such an extent that had she not been bonded to Talnor and drawing on its strength, she didn’t think she would have survived.

They had come for it — Slayers, with shiny weapons and death in their eyes. Buffy raising the Scythe to deliver the first, fatal blow and Willow with one, final exertion had simply focussed on
saving Talnor — there wasn’t time for anything clever, nor had she had the strength. She had turned it small, and then curled around it protectively, listening as they debated their fate and ready to die rather than let them hurt Talnor again.

It looked like a toy from a fantasy movie now, the size of a handbag dog, and she was beginning to adjust to somehow being human and Talnor, to see everything in duplicate, to have senses that extended so very far beyond what she was used to. (She could reach out with magic of course, but this was physical, taste and touch and smell and instinct, and she sometimes wondered if this was how Oz had felt.)

Realising she had zoned out again, she tried to pay attention. She idly wondered where Spike had been all this time. She knew Buffy had been upset that he’d missed Christmas, but hadn’t quite been able to focus further than her own issues. How did you navigate everyday life when bonded to a hell beast? There was no handbook.

To her surprise, Spike reacted to the tale by reaching out and patting Talnor’s heads.

“Well, it’s a cutie, I can see why you were smitten,” he smiled, before laughing as Talnor tried to bite his fingers.

“You think it’s… cute?” Buffy asked, as he crouched down to study it at eye level and it walked to the edge of the desk, poking at him with one of its heads.

“Met a lot of hell beasties over the last few years. You quickly learn to figure out which ones might be friendly, and which ones want to eat you.”

Looking up he continued, the transition so smooth Willow almost didn’t notice the barely there change in topic, despite the quick, penetrating look he shot her.

“Speaking of friendly — how forthcoming is your new little pal?”

She hesitated, unsure where he was going with it.

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve tried to find out more information about this Dead Key of ours, and come up with sod all. And your little pocket monster here seems like the kinda creature we have been looking for. I’m guessing he’s old and full of ancient little bits of info, all hidden away in dusty corners?”

She nodded, wondering if he guessed how the ‘real’ world seemed like smoke and mirrors, insubstantial compared to the endless ages Talnor contained… She had been hesitant to explore, knowing that a girl could easily lose herself (again). But this was for a good cause, right?

“What do you need to know?” she asked, and he explained about ‘the Dead Key’ — she had vague memories about their quest, but had never been particularly interested. Now, however, her curiosity was awakened. And Spike didn’t seem fazed at all by Talnor, no hint of the unease and nervousness everyone else displayed.

“Hang on,” she said, closing her eyes and delving down; like falling, softly, softly, nothingness around her and Talnor’s mind stretching out, eon upon eon, but she had a lodestone, keywords that she repeated like a mantra.

“Wolf, Ram, Hart, Dead Key. Wolf, Ram, Hart, Dead Key. Wolf, Ram, Hart, Dead Key. Wolf, Ram, Hart, Dead Key. Wolf, Ram, Hart, Dead- Oh.”
She allowed herself a moment to absorb the information before resurfacing, and then had to spend another few minutes trying to translate what she had seen into words.

“There is a… place. A special, magic place where they were going to use the Key. Like. Like a lock? But one that would unlock Wolfram & Hart’s power. Undo it. Unbind it. I don’t know. The magics are… old, like - like Dawn’s Keyness?”

“You didn’t happen to see where this place is?” Spike asked, and she hesitated.

“They… Wolfram & Hart, that is - they found it. And… moved it? It’s-”

She frowned, tried to capture she shape of what she had experienced.

“It’s in the Home Office?” She looked up. “I don’t know what that means.”

Spike shrugged.

“It rings a bell. Can’t place it, but Angel probably knows. Anything else?”

A sudden growl from Talnor, as it headbutted one of Spike’s fingers.

“It says- don’t go,” she translated, a sudden chill welling up inside. “There is a price to pay, a reason no one has ever-”

Abruptly she stood, the chair falling to the floor behind her, as she stumbled backwards, the imagery in her head suddenly unfolding further and further.

“Stop, stop! Talnor, I don’t want to see-”

_Pain, pain, pain, an endless scream in her head that wouldn’t stop._

She gasped as Talnor somehow muted the vision, her hands clutched in her hair, and Buffy beside her, holding her up, calling her name.

“Willow — Willow are you OK? Willow! What happened?”

She felt winded, and was dimly aware of others surrounding them. Library. They were in the Library. Tables, chairs, books, computers. _Talnor_. Talnor, studying her calmly, as she tried to grasp what had happened.

(Talnor lived in the now, could not grasp the horror of eternity.)

Eventually she managed to speak.

“It was… a warning. Like… setting off a tripwire. You look for information and they — they embedded a taste of the punishment. I’ve never-”

“I have,” Spike said, tonelessly, then looked past her and met Buffy’s eyes.

“It’s exactly the same as Dru. Except Dru was worse, I don’t think she could turn it off.”

“Dru?” Willow asked. “You mean Drusilla?” She could feel cogs turning, trying to remember why the name had been relevant recently. Her head was so full of other… And the echo of the pain was still reverberating through her.

“No wait, didn’t she attack some Slayers a few weeks ago? Or last week… I get time muddled.”
A silence followed, then Spike stood up, voice oddly toneless when he replied.

“Dru’s dead. Thank you Willow.”

“Don’t mention it.”

She felt exhausted. Why couldn’t she just run away? Why was life so difficult? Talnor licked her hand, and she wanted green pastures and fresh water.

***

Spike made his way back to Buffy’s room on autopilot. Buffy caught up with him when he was nearly there, having obviously wanted to make sure Willow was OK.

She didn’t speak until the door was closed.

“Spike…”

His ears were still ringing with Willow’s scream, which was overlaying Dru’s… The terror which was already in his bones now felt like frost boring down and down and down; permafrost encasing him. No escape. No escape anywhere. Dimension after dimension after dimension of ruins and death, and it would claim him too.

“Do you understand now?” he asked — although it was almost more of an accusation — willing her to see how the despair had driven him into Dru’s arms. (Fear and guilt were a horrible combination, and if he could do nothing about the former, he wanted rid of the latter, if at all possible.)

“We can fix it,” she replied, fierce determination practically shining out of her. “There must be a way.”

He opened his mouth, but she held up a hand. “Look, you already burned up once saving the world, and you’re here, good as new. So whatever this Key will do, we can fix that too!”

For a long moment he merely stared at her, then sank down onto the bed, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

“Buffy — that amulet came from Wolfram and Hart. This what they do. Controlling an’ – an’ manipulating everything from below. Pulling all the strings. We are going to destroy all that. Trust me, if we pull this off, I’m toast.”

“But there is a prophecy, you said so. You defeat them, you get to be human.”

He felt strange, it was usually the other way around — him propping up the hero, not undermining them.

“And how many prophecies have you subverted over the years? Hell, there’s Willow’s lil’ hell beastie that was supposed to run amok, and now it’s a witch’s lapdog. And before you start talking about the Powers that Screw, then the reason Angel ended up as CEO of Evil Inc was because he took down one of them. One of the Powers, yes. She wanted to get a little closer to humanity and such, it was a hell of a mess apparently. So believe me — I don’t get out of this one.”

“Well, I’ll be the judge of that.”

Her arms were folded, mouth a straight line. All Slayer, all woman, all confidence, and he could not have loved her more.
But still he shook his head, the sense of doom continually encroaching. Like the dimension of continual night, without even a single star in the sky…

“Appreciate the sentiment love, but considering I just cheated on you, you may want to think twice before tryin’ to save me. It’s my choice, don’t ruin it by trying to stop it.”

He knew her reaction; the hyper focus on what could be done, excluding all personal issues. Part coping mechanism, part survival strategy — except this time, the personal and the mission were intrinsically linked. And it wasn’t like he was an innocent…

No, he realised — he was a pawn; about to be sacrificed so a bigger game could be won.

But he had placed himself on the board, and trying to move him out of harm’s way was a fool’s errand.

He laid back on the bed, closing his eyes. He was so tired. Except all he could see was Dru, burning and laughing…

(Why had she laughed? It didn’t make sense. Nothing made sense. Why couldn’t he just rest?)

There was a pause, and he idly wondered what Buffy was thinking. Then…

“I’m calling Angel,” she said, and he half-opened his eyes, and did a little shrug.

“Fine. Knock yourself out.”

He felt like a tennis ball, lobbed back and forth between them. And oh, it wasn’t like Angel was going to help… No, he remembered that conversation much too clearly still, despite the many years separating then and now.

Angel, whispering in his ear: ‘You think any of it matters? The things we did. The lives we destroyed. That's all that's ever gonna count. So, yeah, surprise. You're going to hell. We both are.’

He’d not understood.

‘Then why even bother?’ he’d asked. ‘Try to do the right thing, make a difference…’

And in response words he’d not quite grasped at the time, but something he clung to in this moment, like a life raft.

‘What else are we gonna do?’

They had focussed on their task for years, travelling so very far, gone to so many places, for this one purpose. And yet, here he was again, back in the exact same spot:

‘So that's it, then. I really am going to burn.’

No happily ever after. Buffy deserved it, but did he?

He almost laughed at the thought. No, Buffy would get no help from Angel that was for sure…

Angel; holding him, his teeth within a heartbeat of changing to fangs, to pierce his skin where it was still raw from Dru’s onslaught…

Why hadn’t Angel done it?
He should be appalled, but he’d wanted it. Wanted to… *mourn*? If that was the right word.

No — he had wanted to share the pain.

And it wasn’t something he could explain to Buffy.

She’d understand the impulse, he knew that, but…

First off it would dredge up far too many painful memories of their own dysfunctional past, when her pain and his darkness had nearly dragged them both under, and second…

Second there was the actual issue of wanting to throw himself into Angel’s arms. And *that* was something he could not give voice to. Something he could barely admit to himself.

Dru — Sire, Mistress, Beloved — those ties could be explained to and almost understood by a human. But the layers and intricacies of vampire family dynamics, the bonds of blood… No; no words, no human equivalent existed. What they’d had, the four of them — depraved, evil, destructive, yes, but *family*. And *theirs*.

Curling up, allowing the reality of the loss to sink into him, the tears that he had kept back finally broke through…

‘And I wonder... *what possible catastrophe came crashing down from heaven and brought this dashing stranger to tears?*’

“You did Love”, he whispered. His dark Princess. How had they ended up like this…

***

Angel answered his cell, heart sinking. He’d expected it to be Spike, but *Buffy*… What had happened?

Much to his relief, she didn’t yell about Dru, or Spike letting Dru bite him or any of the myriad issues immediately crowding his head. Instead, she was all business.

“Angel. We need to talk. I realise last time I was kinda wrapped up in my own apocalypse, but since it’s done — and you’re back — I want to help you.”

Her words surprised him to such an extent that momentarily he could barely articulate a response.

“Buffy, look-”

“No buts. I’m getting Giles and the others together, you will come here and we will talk. Understood?”

Tiredly Angel pinched the bridge of his nose. There was no way to avoid the issues.

“*Buffy*. Did you talk to Spike, did he explain about Dru?”

A pause, and when she replied her voice was tight and clipped.

“Yes he told me, but that’s not- Look, it’s her vision that’s important.”

“And the fact that she was *sent* by Wolfram and Hart. It’s not safe-”

Something that might be a snort of laughter, he couldn’t quite figure it out.
“Look, we have a hell beastie now to protect us, should the need arise, so can you make it over here? Maybe in an hour’s time?”

Hell beastie? Angel wondered, but then nodded.

“Fine. I’ll be there.”

She hung up and Angel took a deep unneeded breath. He’d avoided her, and been quite successful in doing so, that one evening apart. And then they’d all been drunk, and no one had talked shop. But he’d known of her apocalypse, known that Spike had foolishly promised to help, and he and Illyria had carefully dragged out their travels even further than necessary, to keep Spike away. They couldn’t risk him getting himself killed.

If Buffy had worked it out, she seemed determined to ignore it.

Illyria had taken it a bit far — it was the middle of January now, they’d missed Christmas as well as the apocalypse. He should probably call Nina…

Picking up the Dead Key, which he had retrieved from the garden once the sun had disappeared behind a cloud, he turned it over, felt the dust under his fingers and didn’t quite know how to continue. His saint whom he had turned into a demon. Exquisite, deadly; his masterpiece.

“I hope you are at peace now,” he finally whispered.

Looking up, he realised he was being watched by Illyria.

“More grief. Will this never cease?”

He almost laughed at the absurdity.

“Well, we’re going to the Watcher’s Council, where I’m sure they’re all thrilled that she’s dead.”

She did her patented head tilt.

“Why the Council? The Slayers cannot aid us.”

“I know. But Buffy…” He sighed. “I don’t know what she’s thinking, but I don’t have the energy to argue with her right now. Might as well go along, maybe they have some new knowledge.”

There was a pause as Illyria studied him. Large blue eyes that didn’t blink, and yet he felt as if she was expecting something from him.

“Do you not see it?”

Now he was beyond confused.

“See what?”

*Impatience.* It was definitely impatience she was exhibiting.

In three steps she was standing in front of him, picking the Dead Key out of his hand, holding it up in front of his eyes.

“It is complete. Your vampire offspring must have have been in possession of the final piece and completed it for us. Possibly she stole it? However she did it, she was double crossing our enemies.”
As Angel’s jaw dropped, one of Illyria’s rare smiles appeared.

“Do not grieve. She sacrificed herself for you, she is worthy of great honour. Let us fetch Spike, and then we shall use the ring to enter the realm of the Wolf, the Ram and the Hart — and defeat them.”
January 2006

It was as close to a real war council as was possible in the circumstances.

Buffy, Giles, Andrew and Willow were waiting for Angel as he and Illyria arrived, the Council’s large oak-panelled meeting room and long table dwarfing them. For the briefest moment he flashed back to the last time he’d been in an official gathering like this — the meeting with The Circle of the Black Thorn. That had been ten years ago, Illyria had informed him. (Ten years? He’d lost track completely somewhere after three, so he couldn’t say if she was exaggerating or not.) It all seemed strange and civilised, this genteel get together to discuss strategy — not that they hadn’t spent more than enough time negotiating on their travels, but he couldn’t end this discussion with a well-timed beheading if it didn’t go his way. No, he had to remember his year of being the CEO of an evil law firm in order to stick to the script… Which (if he was honest) tickled his sense of irony.

Andrew, much to Angel’s surprise, no longer looked like a human spaniel, but instead sported a nice new haircut and was dressed in a rather fetching brown pinstripe suit, with a matching brown patterned tie. The change of clothing seemed to signal a change in attitude as well, since there was none of the previous fawning and the young man merely nodded a hello before taking a seat, pen poised over a brand new notebook.

Willow looked… quiet. She gave him a swift, almost shy smile, but didn’t say anything, instead focussing on her new ‘pet’. Buffy had given him a quick run-through of Willow’s story and under different circumstances Angel might have been intrigued, but he didn’t think it could help their current situation.

Giles greeted him politely, shaking his hand and welcoming him to the Council (again), saying how pleased he was that their previous research had obviously yielded results. Angel had to remind himself that for Giles, it had only been about a year and a half since they’d met…

“Where’s Spike?” he asked, and Buffy hesitated momentarily.

“He’s resting. He seemed to need it. Emotional… upheaval and all that.”

“Right,” Angel said, taking a seat and studying the faces around him, knowing that Illyria would be standing slightly behind him. Watching, assessing. She had — after her initial scepticism — been keen to attend the big pow wow, without revealing why. Although it might have been the fact that he
had mentioned the new hell beast.

Whatever the reason, he was grateful. He wanted to do this properly. When he’d taken down The Circle of the Black Thorn he hadn’t had any contingency plans, and he didn’t want a similar fallout this time round. Could do without reading another few thousand obituaries. (Not that he had any expectation of surviving, but the fewer casualties, the better.)

“Look, we want to help with this apocalypse of yours,” Buffy began, but Angel shook his head.

“It’s not an apocalypse. Well... It is and it isn’t. No big armies, no hell mouths. It’s what’s ticking along underneath, all day every day, the world going to hell without anyone noticing. Nothing flashy, just man’s inhumanity towards man. Helped by Wolfram and Hart. We want to stop them.”

“Fine,” Buffy replied. “My point is this Key of yours. Apparently - whoever uses it... Something bad happens.”

“That’s an understatement,” Willow said drily, and Angel found himself struck by the tone of her voice, turning to her and studying her more carefully than he had so far. There was something behind her words that he couldn’t put his finger on, almost as if she took it personally.

“What do you know?”

“Not anything more than you, but I... we...”

She filled everyone in on what had happened, having somehow shared a similar vision to the one Dru had experienced, and Angel listening silently as he studied the miniature monstrosity that was nibbling from a plate of raw meat in front of Willow. It had fared better than any other creature that had tried to defeat Buffy, which was impressive in itself.

“So,” Buffy concluded, “We need to find a way to stop it, or to save Spike, or to-”

“Hang on,” Angel said slowly. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not letting him get sucked into hell, that’s what I mean.”

A long pause as they watched each other; Giles, Willow and Andrew keeping quiet, for which Angel was grateful. Not that Buffy needed back-up, she was plenty forceful on her own. Then Angel slowly shook his head.

“You sent me to hell, to save the world.” As he saw her prepare to shoot back, he added: “Although that’s beside the point. This? Isn’t your call.”

“It’s not yours either. Or yours.”

She aimed the last words at Illyria, then continued talking to Angel. “You have this whole mission thing going on, your personal vendettas, and I get that, but...”

“But what?” he interrupted. “We should just agree to ignore this one? Throw away ten years’ worth of travelling and fighting to piece together an impossible key? There is a prophecy, remember, he might even become a real boy by the end of it!”

She eyed him levelly.

“You don’t sound convinced.”

He was so tired. So very very exhausted. Grief wearing him down, but he couldn’t show it... And
He understood her, knew why she was digging her heels in. Big shiny happy future, the possibility of something impossible; and to see it snatched away wasn’t just painful, it was like a deliberate, malicious attack. Remembered the one golden day when he’d been human… But dreams and harsh reality were sadly ‘unmixy things’ as she’d probably have put it when she was sixteen.

He could still see the sixteen-year-old girl in the woman across the table; the passion, the determination to win. And knew he was doomed to be an obstacle. Still remembered how she’d looked at him that night in Rome, the disbelief at what he’d become (what he’d always been, even if he had tried to fight for a better self).

But he had stopped believing in miracles so very long ago; could pinpoint the exact point in time — the moment when he’d cut his son’s throat in order to save him.

“I’m not. And not just because I signed it away. It’s because I know how these things work-”

“And I don’t? Angel, we can be smart about this. Try to find out as much as we can-”

“How?” he asked, letting his frustration shine through. This was not why he’d come. “We have literally spent months trying to find out anything more about how this thing is supposed to work, in places older than anything this world can offer, and nothing. I would much prefer not to go in blind, but we don’t have a choice. And we don’t have any more time.”

Buffy’s stubbornness was now almost like a physical thing, as she folded her arms.

“What, you don’t have time to discuss this any further, you need to go to three hundred more dimensions-”

“No. The Key is complete. We’re going now. This is it.”

***

He watched from the doorway, having managed to sneak in unseen — vampire stealth a handy addition to their heated dialogue.

He’d almost given himself away when Angel had said the Key was complete, instead gripping the doorframe so tightly he had been in danger of causing it to splinter. The sudden rush of emotions at first almost choked him, but undeniably the overwhelming feeling was one of relief. No more waiting, no more endless travels. Whatever came next — eternal pain or shiny prophecy — it’d be soon.

Listening for a few moments more, he eventually decided to join in — especially as things were clearly coming to a head. Sauntering in, swagger in every step and a smirk on his face, he looked around at the small assembly:

“Right, so, considering that I’m the one to do the bloody job, may I have a word?”

They all turned to him, Buffy’s eyes widening.

“Spike-”

“Listen pet, you can twist it any way you like, but I’m the Frodo in this scenario, off to throw the thingamabob into the volcano, with…” he hesitated, eyes trailing over his fellow travellers, “Aragorn and Gandalf.”

Surprising them all Illyria cut in, clearly offended:
“I am no *wizard*. I am akin to Ilúvatar — or possibly one of the Valar; a creator, not a servant doing magic tricks.”

Silence reigned over the table as they all stared at her, flummoxed, and even Spike was trying to work out where this had come from.

Feeling benevolent enough to enlighten them, she added:

“I like *The Silmarillion*.”

At this Andrew breathed a soft “Oh, my god,” and Illyria did one of her rare smiles.

“A follower? Here? This day is unexpected.”

Spike shook his head.

“Bring it up at the book club, yeah Blue? Right now, would someone mind telling me how the Key is suddenly complete? Not complaining, just curious.”

“It seems Dru had the final piece,” Angel said quietly, and Spike took a sharp breath.

No wonder she had laughed.

Then he saw Angel straighten up, and knew exactly what was coming.

“Look, the reason I came wasn’t to argue whether or not we are doing this thing. We are going, that’s not up for discussion. The point is — what happens if we are successful?”

Buffy opened her mouth, but Angel cut her off.

“No, *not* whether Spike goes to hell or whether he gets a heartbeat. If we do this, *all* of Wolfram & Hart’s strings will be cut. There will be a power vacuum.”

Giles, who had been silent until now, leaned forwards.

“And you are suggesting we fill it?”

“Maybe not *fill* it. But you could police it. Make sure that all the lowlives that are going to surge forwards, all the battles that have been laid on ice because of Wolfram & Hart’s contracts which might now re-ignite, are aware that if they start up, the Slayers will be ready to keep them in line.”

“Hm…”

Giles shot Buffy a long look, and she nodded, almost imperceptibly, but it was Giles who responded.

“We’ve been thinking along these lines recently. It’ll be chaos.”

“But surely the Council is used to pulling strings?” Angel asked, still every inch the CEO. Spike recognised this, the way the other forced down all emotion in order to focus on the task at hand. Him and Buffy, too similar by half. Which led to a whole host of uncomfortable associations, so he expertly ignored them.

“Illyria helped you with your computer troubles… last summer? She said you operate on a global scale, rapid response teams all over the world. I don’t think this is beyond you.”

Spike found it hard to hide a smile. The old fella was good at this.
“I may have given the wrong impression,” Giles said with as much patience as he could muster. “We have already been looking into how they operate, trying to anticipate the largest fault lines and fallouts if you should pull this thing off.”

Angel shot Spike a surprised look, then focussed on Giles again.

“How?”

Again that quick glance at Buffy, and Spike wondered what they were up to. Not that he particularly cared — he trusted them to be smart. If they had a plan for controlling the fallout, that was great. All he was bothered about right now was his own part.

“It’s somewhat confidential I’m afraid,” Giles replied, and then Illyria surprised them all for the second time.

“I can help,” she stated, and slowly everyone turned to look at her.

“If this is another offer of hell armies…” Angel eventually said, clearly trying to find a way not to offend her, but Illyria merely glared at him.

“My army is… virtual. It lives in stealth, but my followers have multiplied, gaining in power and influence.”

“Hang on,” Buffy said, “Do you mean that thing when you fixed all the computers?” Illyria inclined her head.

“Indeed. I offered you but a small glimpse into what I could do.”

“I don’t understand,” Willow said, and Illyria almost rolled her eyes.

“You may know me better as ‘Coco the Divine’.”

At this, Andrew literally slammed his hand on the table, making them all jump.

“You are kidding! You are Coco?”

He was looking at Illyria as if she had just revealed herself to be a magical unicorn.

“You doubt me?”

“No but, but- guys I have tried to tell you this, but you never listen. Coco came out of nowhere about a year ago, and just… It’s like - like… this secret society? She only takes the best. Sorta like the Freemasons or, or - no that sounds all wrong, it’s…”

Illyria cut in.

“I searched for my worshippers. Bade them teach me how to interact in this new world. Then reached out, finding more. Learned how to wield power with a machine and words. Tell me… Andrew, are you one of mine?”

He swallowed nervously, glancing round the table, before firmly nodding.

“I am.”

“Christ almighty Andrew!” Giles exploded. “And how long have you been going behind our back?”
“It’s not going behind your back! I just got a chance to be part of the biggest network there is! I didn’t know it was her, but anyway she’s not evil and I can help more now, see? And, and, I’m only one out of however many thousand, not like Willow who mind-merged with an actual hell beast!”

“Hey!” Willow shot back. “That was uncalled for.”

Spike had met Angel’s eyes, silently. So this was what she’d been up to. It didn’t surprise them - if anything it was surprisingly low key and stealthy. It was… sneaky.

Sighing, Angel shrugged at Spike and turned to Illyria, voice too light by half.

“So, you are offering your services to the Council? That’s very noble of you.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied, so deadpan that Spike almost blinked in confusion. Was it a joke? Or was it an attempt at a joke, in order to cover up her actual plans? What were her plans? Had she aided them, only to help herself step into the power vacuum, under cover of the Council?

“Willow,” Giles then said, having gotten himself under control. “Could you take Andrew and Illyria somewhere with a computer and look into what… any of it means?”

Willow opened her mouth, stopped, then nodded.

“Okay.” Scooping up Talnor, she did her best ‘Friendly-Willow-smile’ as she studied Illyria.

“Let’s see what you’ve got, your highness-”

Talnor growled, and Willow stopped, then nodded slowly.

“Although maybe you and Talnor need a little catch-up session first. It’s… not sure about you.”

They left the room, Andrew rushing to open the door for ‘her highness’, and Angel looked to Giles.

“Nicely done. Get your tame hell beast to sound out the hell god.”

Giles did a little self-deprecating smile.

“That’s the idea. Let’s hope it doesn’t blow up in their faces. So, Wolfram & Hart - what can you tell us?”

***

Willow felt at an odd remove.

Talnor and Illyria had sized each other up much like two cats, watching and almost circling, until Illyria eventually reached out a leather-covered hand and touched the middle of Talnor’s heads, the two of them performing some kind of silent internal battle; Willow felt it, but stayed out of the fray. Eventually they came to an understanding, as their aims didn’t overlap or infringe on each other, and Willow drew a quiet sigh of relief. A battle would have been… unfortunate.

But then Illyria’s eyes snapped up, fixing Willow with their bright blue intensity and not letting go.

“You see me,” she said; a statement, not a question, and Willow nodded, suddenly swallowing.

“Yes. Yes I see you.”

She’d helped to transfer Dawn’s key-ness to Illyria some years ago, so had gotten a glimpse of what
lay behind the impassive surface of Illyria’s shell, but through Talnor she could see Illyria’s true form. How she strained against the confines of her tiny world, like an all-powerful genie trapped in a lamp. And more than that, she understood how Illyria felt — the ache for a lost world, the loneliness of living amongst humans who could never understand what she could see, the depth and breath of reality that unfolded all around them, and that none of them even knew existed…

Willow didn’t need to speak any of it out loud. Illyria knew. And Willow didn’t know what to do with the fact of a hell god suddenly being someone she could relate to, possibly even sympathise with.

Thankfully it wasn’t up to her to interrogate Illyria as Andrew did most of the talking, excitedly fawning over ‘his’ Old One and exclaiming about how amazing she was. Willow thought drily that he didn’t know the half of it.

“How did you even learn all this?” Andrew asked, eyes widening as Illyria showed what she had been up to. Willow found herself curious as to the answer — ancient demons were as a rule not good with technology, especially not ones who had been asleep for untold aeons, having woken in the modern world only a few years previously.

And this was not working out how to use a mobile phone — it was in-depth coding, managing a vast online network of sources and followers and assets. Illyria looked almost pitying as she studied her newest acolyte.

“I am a god, inhabiting the body of a genius. I quickly discovered that sneakiness is the way of this world, and if I were to affect it, I would have to learn.” She stopped, tilting her head. “In hindsight I did not give my Qwa'ha Xahn enough credit for his choice of vessel.”

“You are… amazing,” Andrew said, literally awestruck, and Willow decided to ignore him in favour of focusing on what Illyria was actually showing them on the computer.

According to Illyria, she had reached out to her remaining followers, and from that built a whole network, recruiting from people like… Andrew. Smart, tech-savvy, but often on the outside; in love with magical narratives and stories, looking for meaning and belonging. Many had already dabbed in the occult — much like The Trio, back in the day — but Illyria had taken all that energy and obsessiveness, usually wasted on conspiracy theories or sci-fi shows or gaming or any of the thousand of other ways which gifted people found to squander their free time and money on, and focussed it, using the lure of insider information and access to a wider network for those who committed more deeply. It almost ran itself, people recruiting friends or acquaintances, a web constantly expanding, like a fractal.

“How… how did you even think of this?” Willow asked, horrified and impressed in equal measures.

“I am a God. I know how to make people worship me,” Illyria replied, with unmistakable smugness. “And studying your world, I saw how humans wish for belonging above all else — they must all have a tribe; a political party or football team or righteous cause to support. What I have done is nothing different from the Freemasons, as Andrew noted. Being on the inside, knowing you are on the winning side, that you and your fellow disciples are on the right path, together — this is what humanity is made of. I went into this world— she waved at the computer, “-and found lost souls, crying out for guidance and surety in a world that is falling apart.”

Her head turned, large blue eyes once more watching Willow with unnerving intensity.

“I can give them something real, something pure. All the gods left this realm too long ago, it is ripe to be plucked. I am merely giving them what they crave, what they… deserve.”
Willow wasn’t quite sure how to respond. You couldn’t tell an actual god that they were a megalomaniac… Especially not when you needed their help. Or possibly had to try to stop them. (Especially not when you had almost brought about an apocalypse yourself. Twice.)

“Also, she has the best BitTorrent, and her spoiler feed is unrivalled,” Andrew added.

“Right,” Willow said, wondering if it really was possible to stop a techno-savvy god. This was a million miles from TV evangelists.

***

Later

Buffy and Spike had gone off somewhere to say goodbye, and Illyria had taken Angel to see Nina and Connor.

Closing the door, Giles turned to Willow, pointedly ignoring Andrew.

“So. What can you tell me?”

As Willow laid out what Illyria had told them, Giles leaned forwards, resting his chin on his hands. It had been a long day already, and this wasn’t helping. An unpredictable hell god who was busy setting up a dedicated online following was something he could have done without on several levels.

“So she can help?” he eventually asked, and Willow nodded.

“Yup. Willing and able. And…” she hesitated. “She could be extremely useful. We have a physical presence of course because of all the Slayers, and the Council still have contacts everywhere, but this is… current. And online. An untapped source. Well, she’s tapped it… These people could monitor so many things - hacking and tracking and disabling, all the stuff that goes on behind the scenes, the stuff that isn’t strictly magical, just business.”

He sat for a long moment, prevaricating, weighing it all up in his head.

“Why did she tell us? She must know that if she tries anything, we will take her out?”

Willow hesitated for a long moment.

“She… doesn’t think in those terms.”

“What do you mean?” Giles asked — maybe a bit too quickly, but he hadn’t missed the way Willow had reached out for Talnor, and couldn’t help wondering if there was more to it somehow.

“She is a god,” Willow replied thoughtfully. “She is just… trying to fulfil her purpose, which is to be worshipped.”

Glancing at Andrew, Giles felt compelled to let his sarcasm shine through.

“Well that sounds harmless enough.”

“How to explain it…” Willow mused, then carefully continued. Giles wondered if the happy spontaneity would ever return, the ‘new’ Willow was very different from the one they’d lost.

“Like — she’s not interested in chaos,” Willow began. “If she wanted chaos, she could have brought through her hell armies from that other dimension. But she’s too smart for that. She has spent a good while just studying and learning — partly because she didn’t have a choice, but she’s taken on board
how important it is to master the tools of this world… I’d say she wants to help us keep things ticking over, stopping things from falling apart if they manage to pull this Key thing off, and then…”

She spread her hands.

“I don’t know. Maybe she wants to slowly take over. From below, bit like what Wolfram & Hart did? It’s not… malicious in the sense humans would see it, she genuinely believes that the world will be better off as her subjects. Whatever that entails.”

He sighed, having noted how Willow constantly referred to ‘humans’ as if she was no longer part of the species. It worried him, and he was still wondering how to tackle it. Presuming he could…

“Charming. Well, I guess we don’t have any options at the moment except working with her. Especially given her little spy on the inside…”

Glancing at Andrew, he saw the young man’s face harden in anger as Andrew began speaking, voice harsh and without a shred of his usual buoyancy:

“Unbelievable,” he said, slowly shaking his head. “How long have I been working with you? And still you think I’ll go off following anything new that turns up, like some kind of pathetic magpie, enchanted by shiny things. As if I didn’t pay a price already for falling for the lies The First fed me — why do you think I would ever be that stupid again?”

Giles found himself a little taken aback.

“Well, you said you were a follower…”

“As of her spoiler feed, and a chat forum on movie releases, which had all the best BNFs—”

As Giles felt his mind blanking out, Willow whispered: “Big Name Fans.”

He nodded, although the words didn’t mean anything.

“And so, I figured it might be useful for me to pretend to be on her side? If she thinks I’m a loyal follower, she might tell me more than she’d tell the rest of you. I’m undercover, and you just— You just think I’m still the same guy who killed his best friend—”

He broke off, emotional, and Giles struggled to give voice to both his relief and also to formulate some kind of apology.

“Andrew. I am sorry if we judged you too swiftly. You just seemed very… eager…”

“I am quite a good actor,” he retorted stiffly. “And if you will excuse me, I now need to read up on all her mythology so I can get even better at pretending to love her. At least I have a date tonight.”

He stood, obviously intending to sweep from the room, but Willow reached out and grasped hold of his sleeve.

“A date?”

Andrew looked both pleased and secretive, whilst cramming as much disdain into his voice as humanly possible:

“Yes, a date. Did you think I wore my brand new cosplay suit for the sake of this meeting?”

Willow shook her head.
“No, but — with whom?”

He sniffed.

“You won’t know him. His name is Richard and he works at Forbidden Planet. Now, please excuse me.”

And he continued his interrupted sweeping out, as Giles and Willow could only stare after him.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Giles eventually said, and Willow almost laughed.

“Aw, he’s growing up. It’s so cute.”

Taking off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose, Giles eventually looked up. He was terribly pleased to see her interacting with something other than Talnor, and when he spoke his voice was infused with quiet humour:

“Well it’s nice that at least one person in this place seems to manage to get the famous work/life balance right...”

But Willow didn’t take the bait, instead her face return to a more sombre look, and she let her hand glide over Talnor’s back.

“Look, Giles... I realise that I’m still not 100%, and I don’t know if I ever will be. But there seems to be a component missing in all the issues we have discussed. Wolfram & Hart are a law firm. Shouldn’t we be looking at... lawyer-y things?”

He found it impossible to hide a smile. Too smart by half, as always. He’d missed her immensely, and was grateful that — all the changes aside — Willow still seemed to be in there somewhere.

“We... have found something for that, don’t worry.”

***

It was raining.

Buffy stood by a window, looking out over a grey, cold, wintry London, unsure what to do. This was the big moment — there should be a teary, romantic goodbye, but she was angry and upset and wasn’t sure how to reconcile her conflicted emotions with the fact that he might go off to get himself killed saving the world (again).

Spike didn’t speak; just watched her silently, which was almost worse.

They should go to her room, should... something. Instead they were in a dull corridor, the occasional Slayer or Watcher appearing, studying them with curiosity, and then pretending to go somewhere else.

Except for old Roger Wyndam-Pryce who of course had to go have a quick word with Spike.

She glared, but didn’t intervene. Wasn’t quite sure she trusted herself.

Illyria had opened up a portal for Angel to California and left with him, leaving Spike to yell after her ineffectually. Buffy didn’t know what he was going to ask her to do (maybe take them to the Hyperion?), and didn’t particularly care. It’d just be a different set of corridors. It was all too much — Dru, the Key, the leaving. She wanted to put a pause on everything.
She missed Willow; Willow who was right there of course, and who might one day be back to her old self, but for the moment was distant and other and not good for Buffy unburdening herself.

Missed Xander, who was happily preoccupied with his new girlfriend and generally busy flitting around the world, Mr Surprisingly Competent and Capable.

She observed Dawn from a distance, her happy university life and hap-hazard dating, and tried to remember if she had ever been that carefree herself.

They’d all spent Christmas in the Council, and it had almost — almost — been like old times.

She sighed — she missed Sunnydale, missed knowing every street and every stone, even missed the Hellmouth. The apocalypse had kept her so busy that she’d hardly noticed how lonely she had become… There had been a mantra in her head, a certainty that when Spike came back everything would be OK. Because it had to be. Because he was the one who always came back…

And now, here she was, about to lose her (second) vampire lover for the second time. What sort of ridiculous trick was life playing on her?

She had felt the narrative slipping away, but resolutely called for a big meeting; they had resources and power and smarts and were goddamn experts at subverting prophecies and ancient evils. She hadn’t been surprised at Angel being an obstacle, that was sort of par for the course. But Spike… Spike was hers. Spike was the guy who was always, always, in her corner.

Obviously Dru and the whole vision thing had shaken him, but he’d waltzed into the meeting like nothing was amiss, and she had almost wilted in relief — except he had then proceeded to be Angel’s smart-arse-y loyal little sidekick-slash-Mini Me, hellbent on throwing himself on the proverbial sword.

She’d wanted to reach across the table, shaking him: ‘Do you want to die? Did you develop a death-wish on all your travels? Don’t you care about me? How dare you talk about dying like it’s nothing, like you aren’t leaving me again.’

Her face hardened, watching the raindrops running down the window. Why wouldn’t he fight for a solution? Why was he taking Angel’s side? Why was he suddenly more difficult to talk to than Willow, lost in the mind of an ancient creature? (Willow who would probably do pretty much anything to stay with Talnor. Why would Spike not even entertain the notion—)

Except then Illyria re-appeared, interrupting her maudlin musings, and Spike’s head snapped up.

“Right so, here goes. I was saving this up for later, but since there may not be a later… Come on love.”

Grabbing her hand, Buffy followed through sheer surprise.

“Now then Blue, one last trip~”

He leaned forwards, whispering something in Illyria’s ear. Her reaction was hard to gauge at first, but then a hard, dangerous look came over her face and she raised her arm, a portal unwinding and widening from her fingertips.

“What is it?” Buffy asked, both intrigued and alarmed.

Spike pursed his lips speculatively.
“Early birthday present?”
Buffy marvelled at the beautiful vista on the other side of the portal Illyria had created: green grass bathed in sunshine with trees in full bloom swaying in a gentle breeze, a picturesque river in the distance. She wondered where in the world it might be… Somewhere in the southern hemisphere, surely. Did Australia look like that? Maybe South America? It didn’t strike her as Africa. She couldn’t see any landmarks to either confirm or deny her swift theories. Wait — New Zealand?

And then in the blink of an eye Spike jumped through, straight into the bright sunlight.

If it was possible to suffer a triple heart attack at her age, she would have had one on the there and then. As it was, Buffy was frozen to the spot, staring at him. He was very solid still, grinning and holding out his hand. “Come on luv, it’s nice and warm here!”

Slowly, her brain in free fall, she walked the few steps across the floor and then through the portal. Seconds later Illyria was beside her, studying the surroundings intently.

“The shell has… memories of this place. Most of them are lost to me, but...” A look came over her face, worryingly similar to the one on Dawn’s face when she spoke of ice cream. “I will enjoy this retribution.”

Spike held up a hand. “Now don’t come back with a load of villagers brandishing pitchforks, OK?”

She let her eyes travel over them with disdain.

“As you wish.”

Then she turned on her heel and set off alone across the meadow they were standing in, as Spike scratched his head.

“Never know if she quotes stuff deliberately…”

“Spike! Where is this? What are we doing here?”

He looked at her, then shrugged.

“To be honest, I don’t know. Well, the place is called Pylea, it’s the hell dimension Angel found Fred in. Knew it had a sun of the non-flammable variety and such, so seemed a nice idea. That’s all.”
Slowly she shook her head.

“That’s all? I… don’t understand. Why did we come here?”

He fell silent, then gestured at the landscape.

“Look, this has been my life for… years. Stepping from world to world, never knowing where I am. I tried to explain it once, but thought I might show you. Also I thought we could… try to have a break, away from everything? Like, if this is the end, then at least it can be somewhere pretty? Not in London in January.”

‘If this is the end…’

She felt like she couldn’t breathe. Too much had happened in the past few hours- She almost staggered. How had it only been a few hours? She was a maelstrom of conflicting emotions, too many to count. (She had tried, to no avail.) And there was very little she could do about any of them…

Except one.

With practiced ease her fist flew forwards and connected with his face — not hard enough to break anything or make his nose bleed (she had this down to a fine art), just enough to stun him so he wouldn’t see the next part coming.

As he cried out in surprise she made her move, cramming every square inch of power her body possessed into the heel of her foot, a single, deadly movement aimed squarely at his groin.

The kick made him fold in half very satisfyingly, then collapse on the ground with a soundless scream.

She waited until the initial impact had ebbed out enough for him to open his eyes and look up at her, the pain making his eyes water, and she tilted her head, studying him.

“That’s for Dru,” she observed coolly, and something like a smile appeared on his face.

“Thanks,” he croaked out. “S’appreciated.”

Then he groaned loudly, curling up, and she nodded.

“You’re welcome.”

Taking a few steps back, she seated herself on a fallen tree and just watched him.

It was stupid, but she felt better. They should probably have done it properly, talked through all the issues, but there wasn’t time, and this was exceedingly satisfying, if she was honest.

Damn Drusilla — except she was happily dead and gone, and whatever pleasure she had brought Spike, Buffy had hopefully at least equalled in pain. Although if she was completely honest with herself a good deal of it had been for his sudden Angel support — she wasn’t even sure what to call it, but his behaviour in the meeting had felt like a knife in the back. Bloody vampires.

A kick to the balls seemed quite a nice retaliation.

Watching him, she pondered how strange it was seeing him in sunlight… There had been that time when he’d had some ring back when he was evil — she couldn’t really remember it, she’d been too busy fighting him.
Why was he so infuriating? Why did he make her hurt so much?

After a few moments he slowly got to his feet, and with utmost care took the few steps over to the log she was sitting on, before lowering himself down next to her, closing his eyes against the pain.

“I’m presuming you weren’t planning on any kind of naked shenanigans, you’ve knocked me out of action for a week, minimum.”

“No, no plans of that sort,” she replied lightly.

He nodded, and for a long time they just sat there, the warm breeze playing with her hair and the sun caressing her skin. London — Europe — had been so cold and grey she had almost forgotten how wonderful the sun could be, as she closed her eyes and just soaked up the warmth.

When she eventually opened them again she glanced to her left, studying the way the sun played across his platinum hair, worn leather and his pale, pale skin.

Reaching out and taking his hand, she suddenly swallowed.

“I missed you,” she whispered, before leaning against him, feeling the solid reality against her cheek, her side, grasped in her hand… This was where he belonged, here, by her side. Always by her side.

In the dark, in the light — it didn’t matter she realised. Just the fact that he was there.

She felt him plant the lightest of kisses on the top of her head, and fought back tears:

“Don’t go.”

“Alright then,” he replied obligingly. “Shall we get ourselves a little shack by the river? Plant a garden, catch some fish? In the evening we can sit by the fireplace and you can darn my socks and I’ll whittle some spoons.”

She smiled despite herself, the image so outlandish and charming it felt more unreal than the sunshine they were bathed in.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “Let’s do that.”

How long they might have stayed there, silently side-by-side, was anyone’s guess.

As it happened, a demon interrupted their reverie.

It came out of the trees about thirty feet away, carrying an armful of firewood, and it was not the green skin nor the red eyes and horns that made Buffy think that maybe she had fallen asleep and was now dreaming; no, it was the fact that the demon was wearing a stylish purple suit and a blue silk shirt (a bit tattered it had to be said), and shoes that Buffy could have sworn she had seen in last year’s collections.

The demon stared at them, clearly as stunned as they were, and for many long seconds an incredulous silence stretched.

Then: “Lorne?” Spike asked, and Buffy turned, her surprise increasing as she saw a wide smile slowly spreading across his face, and the demon dropped the firewood he had been carrying and ran towards them.

“Spike?” he exclaimed. “By my mother’s beard, how are you here my wonderfully impossible peroxide prince?”
Buffy blinked, as Spike jumped to his feet and the demon scooped Spike up into a hug, the two of them laughing in delight, before Spike replied.

“We’re here for… a short break? Um, this is Buffy by the way… Lorne - Buffy, Buffy - Lorne. He used to work for Angel back in LA. Empath demon, can tell people’s future when they sing — so be careful about humming to yourself, got caught out quite a few times…”

“Oh the Buffy, say no more,” Lorne said, ignoring Spike’s little spiel and taking her hand as she got to her feet, still stunned. “Well this is a day of surprises. Very welcome ones, don’t get me wrong, I think I am happier right now than a struggling starlet being given a multi-picture deal…”

He stopped, looked from one to the other, sudden urgency on his face.

“You do have a way to get back, right?”

“Well that’s a long story — okay, I say that, it’s a rather tragic story about our very favourite hero, the noble Groosalugg, who was asked to come back here by certain factions — because of course they all fell out after they kicked him out — and he asked me to come along. Considering I was beginning to wonder whether I should just pickle myself in cocktails after… Angel’s big battle, I thought I might do some good. Well, that was a mistake. I won’t go into details. Let’s just say that my PR skills do not extend to running an election campaign in a hell dimension. And thus, here I am, living in a tiny shack in the woods like a latter-day Laura Ingalls trying to avoid my family — and anyone else for that matter — and praying for a day like today.”

Buffy hadn’t understood more than half of what he’d been saying (if she was being generous), but at least he seemed happy.

“Well, here we are!” Spike said, spreading his hands. Then paused, unsure, glancing at Buffy.

“Was I interrupting something my little love poppets?” Lorne asked, with more tact than Buffy would have expected. “Sorry, I just couldn’t believe my peepers for a moment there. Was worried you’d turn out to be a mirage…”

“Just a little daydream, I think,” Spike offered, and Buffy tried to smile.

“Yeah, something like that.”

Then she made an effort to pull herself together. If nothing else, they were helping this guy. Somehow that made things better — they might be royally screwed, personally, but something good would have come out of it.

And so they ended up back in Lorne’s little hut by the river, where he packed up his few belongings whilst entertaining them with outrageous stories from when he’d run a demon bar in LA, even singing them a few songs along the way.

At one point Spike joined in with one of the tunes, which caused Lorne to spin around in shock, staring at Spike in mute horror.

They all stood there, frozen, as Spike’s expression turned completely blank and Buffy wrapped her arms around herself.
Even the sunshine they were bathed in seemed to have gone cold.

Lorne glanced from one to the other, then swallowed and shook his head.

“Jiminy jeepers Blondiebear, what’s — what’s happening? What are you doing? You can’t—”

Spike, eyes dark and filled with that combination of silent horror and obstinate determination, cut him off.

“Save it. Don’t want to know. Or rather, I know it already. I’m still going.”

“You don’t understand. Spike listen to me—”

Spike didn’t answer, merely clenched his jaw, and Buffy realised she’d forgotten how dangerous he could look. There was a fury burning in his eyes that she hadn’t seen in a long time. A silent warning that whoever crossed him next would get their head ripped off.

She smiled tightly.

“He’s very stubborn. I said I’d help, or try to subvert it or… anything, but oh no, he’s hellbent on heroic self-sacrifice.”

“Because I have seen what they do!” Spike shot back, with sudden ferocity. “What they’re doing back home is bad enough, but the things we’ve witnessed – dimension after dimension; hundreds, thousands of them, sucked dry, used up and left to rot, it’s…” He shook his head, the anger on his face almost making her recoil. “They need to be stopped. And I can do that. I don’t fancy eternal damnation, but if that’s the price to pay for getting rid of them, I’d happily pay it twice over.”

The sudden vehemence gave her pause.

“You never really… mentioned this before,” she said cautiously. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe him, but it almost came out of the left field. It was what she’d been worrying about for months — the fact that they didn’t talk to each other. She had railed against their ‘personal vendettas’ but this was… somehow deeper.

“Dunno that I really… thought about it before,” he replied, obviously trying to clamp down on the sudden eruption. “It’s not like, a heroic thing, despite what it sounds like — for starters I’m still fucking terrified. But I can stop them; I might be the only one in the whole world who can. And I will, so help me god, consequences be damned.”

Looking up, he caught her eyes, before quietly adding:

“Sorry love.”

“Doesn’t matter now, does it?” she replied, unable to keep the hurt out of her voice, and he paused, tilting his head in that way which always cut her to the quick. Then he abruptly took hold of the leather strap around his neck and – half unwinding – pulled the whole thing over his head and held it out to her, the pendant twirling and twinkling in the sun.

“Here, have this. If I- If I don’t make it back, remember me as the guy who tried to do the right thing, even if he cocked it up a lot of the time. And it’s got a nice protection spell on it – seems to have worked for me pretty well, I’ve escaped major injury for best part of ten years.”

She took it automatically, eyes suddenly blurring.
“I’m not ready for you not to be there,” she whispered, feeling a chasm well up; the simple gesture somehow making the finality of the situation sink in properly.

Reaching out, he stroked her cheek.

“Likewise.”

Deep breath. She felt she had asked this question a thousand times already, without ever getting an answer:

“So why – why won’t you let me try to find a way out?”

In an instant the anger was back — he tried to reign it in, she could tell, but he had obviously reached some kind of breaking point as he spoke, holding up fingers as he spoke:

“But there isn’t one! One - the prophecy works as it should, hello humanity! Two - eternal hell for yours truly. Three - what? What exactly are you proposing Buffy? What could you possibly do? Willow magically teleports me out of Wolfram & Hart central before I go to hell? And we just… carry on like we are now? Is that what you want? This?”

He didn’t get further as she punched him again — not with any finesse or plan, her instantaneous fury forcing her hand, sending him crashing to the ground. And this time he was bleeding, hand held to his nose, staring up at her as she screamed at him:

“How dare you? How dare you suggest that what we have now isn’t enough? I love you. Exactly as you are, you stupid, annoying, screwed-up vampire. What the hell do you think this has been? That I was just waiting around for you to become ‘a real boy’? You absolute bastard! I went through all this crap once already with Angel and could never get past it — after everything we have been to each other, this is your reply?”

His eyes widened, and he swallowed, so shell-shocked it took him a few goes before he managed to speak.

“Christ Buffy, what the hell am I supposed to say to that?”

She shook her head, fighting the sobs that threatened to overpower her.

“Well, anything beats what you said last time.”

She knew she wouldn’t have to explain what she meant, the understanding in his eyes clear as the sunshine they were both bathed in. (Like last time. She should have known — he’d burn again.)

Faltering he got to his feet, a fuchsia handkerchief appearing out of nowhere and he took it without comment from the green hand they were both ignoring, and carefully wiped the blood off his face.

But all she could see was the light in his eyes, a breathless sort of joy that she didn’t quite know what to do with.

Eventually he spoke, words slow and precise, a strange sort of solemnity falling over the moment, the whole world falling away.

“I love you too, Buffy.”

A gentle breeze caught an escaped platinum curl, and she remembered the time she had found him in the school basement, hair a mess of brown curls and mind shot to pieces thanks to the soul; the soul
he had gotten for her.

He’d tried to cut out his heart…

And she had taken the man he had become, handed him a magical bauble and asked him to save the world.

Was it any wonder that this was who he now was?

“Better,” she replied, forcing down the tears as she finally accepted the reality in front of her. Then slowly she took the pendant, still clasped in her left hand, and wrapped the leather strap around her neck.

“And thank you for this. I’ll try to stay safe, even if you can’t.”

He smiled then, sunshine and wonder and gratitude in his eyes, then leaned forward and kissed her, so gently it was almost more like a caress.

“Always knew falling in love with the sun would be the end of me…”

They were brought back into the moment by Lorne, who was openly weeping.

“Oh kids, you’ll be the end of me too. If I still had my old contacts I could get the film rights to your story sold like that!”

Later, as the sun set and Illyria still hadn’t returned, Lorne roasted some fish on the small hearth which they chased down with what might be the worst beer Buffy had ever tasted.

“So far, so according to plan,” she remarked, leaning into Spike’s embrace, and felt him chuckle.

“Some fairy tale pet. Gonna start darning my socks soon?”

“Shut up,” she replied, the fire light dancing over the rough walls. She could pretend to be happy, just a for a tiny bit longer.

***

“Are you sure this isn’t a fairy tale?” Nina asked, looking out of the window.

Angel came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her middle.

“Positive. But we can pretend if you like?”

She smiled, leaning into him (so tall, so strong, so ridiculously handsome), studying the spectacular sunset that painted the landscape hues of pink-gold that she knew she’d never be able to capture, no matter how carefully she mixed her paint.

The whole day had been impossible that way… Angel turning up on her doorstep out of nowhere, eyes as sad and apologetic as a puppy’s, before whisking her away to what she still suspected might be Disney’s home world, courtesy of Illyria. First there had been a picnic in a sun-dappled meadow, and seeing Angel in the sunshine had been something she’d treasure forever. And not just because he’d made sure to get her to bring a camera.

After that they’d relocated to an actual castle, with a drawbridge and flags waving from turrets and a bustling market surrounding it, full of cheerful farmers selling produce and looking like so many extras from Technicolor movies, the fact that they were demons aside.
Better than all of it was Angel’s smile - she rarely saw him genuinely happy, but he practically beamed as he walked around, and when she asked him he could only shake his head in amazement:

“It worked. It actually worked. They did it, they healed their world.”

Of course she then had to meet the sisters Angel and Spike had talked of back in October, the women who had impressed ‘the boys’ so very considerably. They now lived in the castle, although all chores were carefully distributed and Nina wondered if this was what communism was supposed to have been, even the ‘leaders’ (although Venka and Raavi disliked those titles) helping with the washing and the potato peeling.

It seemed a truly wondrous place; the castle itself full of artwork, musical instruments and tapestries, and Nina could have stayed a month, easily. Apparently the people had decided to keep it intact, so it could be a showcase for beauty to take away the sting of the pain their evil overlord had brought.

Even more than the surroundings, Venka and Raavi proved fascinating people in their own right, and they spent hours talking, the sisters curious about the world of humans, and Nina equally curious about this world which seemed utterly fantastical to her.

Eventually there had been a dinner in the banqueting hall, after which they’d retired to their current bedroom. There was a large wooden chest, a four poster bed, and yet more beautiful tapestries…

Except now they were bathed in the glow of the setting sun, even as candles flickered around the room, half-shadows warring with the golden radiance. Nothing could be this perfect, it was unreal.

“Angel-” she said, abruptly turning and studying his face (such a strong face, so classically striking, and yet his eyes were more gentle than she had ever known), and he didn’t say a word, just pulled her closer, softly kissing her until she forgot about the sunset, forgot about the castle and the magic and everything else she had seen, and all that mattered was the man she loved and whose arms she never wanted to leave.

Later, spent and happy, a soft glow from the fireplace the only light in the room, she finally asked:

“So what happened? Don’t get me wrong, this has been the most amazing day of my life, but I’m not stupid.”

It took a while before he answered.

“It’s the end of the road. The Key is complete. I don’t know what happens next, but we’re unlikely to make it out alive.”

She had expected it, having seen him in this situation before — that determination, the single-minded focus. And yet, there was something else. Turning to him and raising herself on her elbow, she studied him.

“That doesn’t answer my question. Something happened, I can tell.”

There was a long, long pause as he didn’t answer and she waited. Patience was a virtue that paid off — or at least it was when it came to Angel.

“Dru died.”

Just two words, but she heard the strain in his voice; remembered Spike’s sudden silence, the question that had hit too close to home.
“Tell me about her,” she said softly.

If she was going to lose him, she wanted to know who he really was. And Dru was the key to that, she was certain of it.

“Are you sure?” the wonder in his voice caught something in her heart.

“Yes.”

And so she spent the last night with her beloved listening to the story of a monster, as silvery moonlight slowly moved across the room.

***

Connor looked up at the three-quarters moon, wondering whether to call his father.

The human one.

The human one who hadn’t died.

Had there been a moon in Quor’Toth? He couldn’t remember one.

He wondered what his father would say if he ever told the truth. If he called him right now and explained that earlier that day his ‘real’ father (a vampire) had stopped by to say goodbye because he was off on some suicidally dangerous mission to save the world. Again.

There was laughter coming from elsewhere in the dorms, the normal ruckus of university students. So unaware, so innocent, so oblivious to the dangerous reality all around them.

Safety was a lie, a thin veil that could be pulled back at any moment. Remembered the moment as if it were yesterday when he’d understood the truth of what he was and the world he inhabited. Felt the abhorrence that still lay deep in his bones, the endless, searingly painful scars from a childhood that had made him ‘the Destroyer’; destroying him too in the process.

(‘This whole fighting thing, I’m not... I’m not really sure it’s for me.’)

He hoped he wouldn’t have to step back through into the darkness, but if that day came…

Getting up he drew the curtains, hiding the moon from sight.

If that day came, he’d do what he had to. Just like his father. He could only hope it would never be necessary.

***

The great hall of the Watcher’s Council felt cold and stuffy after the sunshine they had indulged in. It had been late evening when they’d left Pylea, but Buffy got an impression of early morning — confirmed when one of the cleaning staff walked past with a bucket, giving them a perfunctory nod; most of them were related to Slayers or Watchers, or half-demons happy to get work where they wouldn’t have to hide who they were.

Lorne looked around, eyes scanning their surroundings.

“Where’s Angel?”

Illyria (who had registered neither surprise nor pleasure at seeing the green demon) gave a glare
which somehow looked like an eye-roll.

“I will go fetch him now. Since I will have to convey his girlfriend to her abode also, I may be a little while.”

As she vanished, Lorne turned to Spike.

“Listen Flash, about what I saw—”

“I know what you’re going to say mate, I’m still going.”

Lorne shook his head.

“If you’d seen it Chicken Licken, you wouldn’t dare move. Any of you.”

At that moment Giles stepped through the large front doors, pausing at the sight that greeted him.

Spike — grateful for the interruption — made the introductions, and Lorne apologised profusely for his dishevelled looks as Giles got that look in his eyes that meant he was busy calculating how to best utilise Lorne’s somewhat unique skill set.

As Giles started quizzing Lorne in depth (but not before Lorne had made Spike solemnly promise not to leave before listening to whatever vision he’d had), Buffy moved some distance away with Spike, wondering how to say their final goodbye.

Except then a portal opened immediately next to them, making them jump in surprise. Angel stepped up to the edge of the portal, saw Spike, and motioned for him to join them.

“Spike? Come through — Illyria has found an auspicious place for entering the Home Office.”

Now? Now? She wasn’t ready, would never-.

And then he was kissing her, his touch scalding, his mouth like a lifeline; (don’t go don’t go, don’t make me lose you again-)

Then he abruptly pulled away and turned to step through the portal.

( Maybe it was for the best, she wanted to scream and hold onto him forever. Last time there had been flaming hands…)

Except then Lorne’s voice rang out.

“Wait! Angel! I need to talk to you!”

Buffy witnessed the transformation as Angel’s eyes snapped up and met Lorne’s (through the open portal and across the hall), the surprise overlaid with… something else (guilt? shame?), before his whole face somehow slammed shut.

“Spike! Now!” he snapped, as Spike also looked from one to the other, then made his choice and jumped through.

A second later the portal winked out of existence as Lorne’s feet screeched on the floor, trying to reach it.

He turned, despair on his face, and Buffy frowned; despite everything glad to have something to focus on. Parts of her felt like they couldn’t breathe.
“What was that?” she asked. “The look on Angel’s face…”

“He — he probably thought I wanted to talk about what he had me do,” Lorne said, shaking his head, “But…”

He held out his hands, resigned, and Buffy glanced at Giles who was looking very confused as he walked up to them, figuring she should probably explain.

“Like we said — Lorne is an empath demon, he can read people when they sing, and yesterday Spike…”

Giles inclined his head.

“Ah yes. The endless screaming. That makes three.”

“Screaming?” Lorne repeated, confused. “There was no screaming.”

As if in slow motion they both turned to him.

“What… did you see?” Buffy eventually asked, and Lorne hesitated.

“Well munchkins, these things aren’t straightforward, but… there was a bright light, and- you know that tone you get on a phone when there’s an error? Not the beeping sound, just a long single note? That’s the nearest I can get. Like an error message, or a sort of cosmic whiteout? The future just… stops.”

“Which future?” Giles asked, and Lorne shot him a dark look.

“The world’s future. Have seen that before, funnily enough, but that time Angel saved the day. This time… I don’t know. But those three are involved.”

Giles sighed deeply, and studied Lorne.

“I think this gets my award for worst news before I have reached my desk. Let me get a cup of coffee and we will talk. Buffy-”

He hesitated, then continued, voice gentler.

“I guess you need a moment. Join us when you feel ready.”

She nodded in gratitude, and left them to it.

***

As days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, with no word or sign from the vampire champions, Buffy did her best to focus on her mission — she trained her Slayers around the world, created contingency plans on top of contingency plans, making sure that they would be ready if the call ever came.

And if she sometimes grasped the pendant around her neck so tightly her knuckles turned white, then her friends knew better than to ask questions.
The Home Office was simultaneously exactly and nothing like what any of them had expected.

Although it took a while before they could actually get there…

Spike had never given much thought to how they would actually accomplish their task; his job was to use the Dead Key, all this stuff about ‘the Home Office’ and magic rings he had left up to the experts (as it were).

To his surprise the ‘auspicious place’ turned out to be… Pylea. Not, apparently, because of the place itself, but because Illyria had tracked down a warlock with a long and well-documented feud with Wolfram and Hart who had hidden himself in that dimension — no one had noticed him, what with the burgeoning civil war. How exactly Illyria had found him was a bit of a mystery, but she wasn’t keen to share, just looked smug and imperious. There had probably been Plans B through to Z, all now discarded. Not that Spike cared…

By now he found himself almost light-hearted; the wait was over, it was finally time for action.

As they walked to the abandoned mine where the warlock had taken up residence, Angel explained (at some length) that the ring Dru had been in possession of was a ‘Band of Blacknill’, which — despite its very simple looks — was a powerful mystical ring that allowed the wearer to travel between dimensions. Angel had gotten hold of one some years previously — something about a review and Darla and a Senior Partner showing up and (incongruously) a glove. Spike, not really paying attention, was wondering what kind of glove, and by the time Angel clarified that it was actually a gauntlet Spike was having entirely too much fun imagining Angel fighting a demon whilst wearing an oven mitt.

The main point was that although the ring had been disenchanted, Illyria could — with the help of her beetle friend — ascertain where it had led. A bit like hacking a sat nav to find out where it had been programmed to go next. Unfortunately getting to a higher plane was not a simple matter, not even for a hell god, hence the need for magicks.

The warlock was charcoal black, with massive horns, and was dressed in robes so tattered and filthy that Spike was grateful that he didn’t have to breathe. Its name was something not unlike ‘Jozyxqe’,
and Spike nicknamed it that in his own mind, as he needed something to smile about, whilst the warlock cackled and muttered to itself as it arranged the long-winded and elaborate ritual that would transport them into the higher realm.

Upon arrival at the site Spike had sat himself down with his back against one of the rough stone walls beside the opening of the ancient mine, kicking away a human skull as he did so. The demons who had been in charge had used human slaves to do their mining at some point — centuries ago, from the look of the skull and other bones and the dilapidated state of the mine. Not that he could see much as the night was dark, and the only light came from Jozyxq'e's torches which were oozing acrid smoke and smelled like they were made from tallow.

“Human sacrifices much quicker this ritual would make,” Jozyxq'e said, as he daubed some more tar on the ground, completing the intricate design he'd been creating, and Illyria cocked her head.

“There are many humans in this realm,” she remarked, but Angel shook his head.

“Don’t start getting ideas your highness. And Yoda — we are trying to save people, not kill them. Keep with the programme.”

“My name is not ‘Yo-da’,” the warlock rebuffed, clearly offended, and Angel pinched the bridge of his nose.

“That was a joke. I'm... sorry. The point is, no human sacrifices, I don’t care how long we have to chant for.”

Jozyxq'e turned to Illyria, questioning, and she nodded.

“Yoda is a mighty warrior and wielder of magic in the world of the humans, his tale handed down for millennia. It was an odd choice of title for my Champion to use, but he meant no disrespect.”

Spike blinked at the fact of Illyria of all people (for a very loose definition of ‘people’) being the one to soothe ruffled feathers — nevermind knowing who Yoda was; although if she’d spent all her free time hanging out on the internet with gigantic nerds he wasn’t surprised some of it had rubbed off.

Jozyxq'e glowered, but went back to looking through old scrolls and books, warning them that the initial chanting would take most of the night:

“Opening access to higher realms fraught is, and hazardous. Very dangerous The Home Office is. No other warlock would this attempt make, remember!”

Then he thankfully started chanting, Illyria and Angel both folding their hands, observing him.

Their next remarks were very quiet, but Spike heard them, and smiled. Vampire hearing was very handy.

“Your remark. It was due to the odd structure of his sentences, yes? Yoda is very small and his colouring is green, so it cannot have been his physical appearance which spurred your words.”

A suppressed, but clearly pained sigh from Angel. “Yes. Yes that was the joke. He talks like Yoda.”

A slow head tilt from Illyria.

“The comparison was apt, but not worth the implied insult. You are not in Kansas anymore, vampire.”
Spike had to bite his knuckles to stop from laughing out loud, but the look on Angel’s face was worth it all. Sadly they then fell silent and Spike was left with his own thoughts to keep him company whilst the warlock warbled on in long-dead demon languages.

Thoughts that he wasn’t really able to process, if he was honest.

The chanting became distant, the night’s shadows faded away and all he could see was Buffy’s face in the sunshine, her words, angry and pained, screamed at him.

*Buffy loves me.*

It shouldn’t have been such a shock, she’d said it plenty, and he’d basked in it — and sometimes clung to the words, when other factors were unbalancing them.

And yet.

He’d always tried to be better, for her. To deserve her. To be someone worthy of her.

Hell, he’d set off to see her after the ghostliness had been sorted and just… *stopped.* And then turned back to LA (and Angel). The devil he knew (and who knew him) rather than the angel whom he loved with every fibre of his being, yet wasn’t sure he could offer anything.

‘*Chronic insecurity, thy name is Spike,*’ he thought wryly; and yet there was entirely too much truth in the statement. When they’d met again, in Rome, he’d held out the Shanshu to her, like a symbol of how he’d do better. He could be a proper hero, a real Champion.

Sure he’d saved the world already, and he’d rub Angel’s nose in it any day, but like he’d once said to Fred, he’d just… stood there, let the fire come. The Shanshu was somehow more important, something that had been Angel’s, now his, a *real* prophecy, something to bolster his claims to hero-ness.

Mostly though (if he was honest), it was the human part that he was hung up on. Scared of it, yes, but it’d be worth it for Buffy — to be a real man, not an undead creature of the night with a blood habit and a past with too many victims to count. To have his past washed clean…

It had been something to strive for, a journey towards becoming a better man (one he’d been on ever since realising he was in love with her), and the Shanshu was the last step.

Except then Buffy had gone and turned everything upside down.

*She loves me. Exactly as I am. Now. A mess. A vampire.*

And sure he’d always known he turned her on, that they had a special bond (sex and death and love and pain, the eternal Slayer/vampire dynamic), but he’d never suspected the state of affairs as something she was *happy* with as it was, as… *endgame.*

At this point Angel sat himself down next to him, breaking his train of thought.

“You OK?”

Spike shrugged.

“As OK as I can be, I guess.”

Angel nodded, and after a pause asked: “So did you…”
He stopped, obviously unable to think of a good way to finish the sentence, but Spike knew what he was asking.

“Yeah. Came here, as a matter of fact.”

“Well, Pylea. Not this particular bit of prime real estate — the pretty parts. Grass and sunshine and trees and that. Thought it’d be nice. Which I guess it was. ’S how we met Lorne.”

A slow nod from Angel.

“What did he want?”

“The same as everyone else. Heard me humming a ditty, saw my future, suddenly very eager to talk to us.”

“Figures,” Angel replied.

They sat in silence for a bit, fantastical shadows dancing around the landscape and up the walls, golden torchlight fighting against the night’s breeze.

“You?” Spike finally returned, and Angel smiled. A proper smile that reached his eyes. It was good to see, Spike reflected. They were both of them going to get hit with the very worst of what Wolfram and Hart could dish out as soon as all the chanting was over, and there would be no smiles then, that was for sure.

“Went to see Venka and Raavi.”

“How are they doing?”

There followed an account of what Angel had seen and the other things he had discussed with the sisters, and they managed to amiably skirt around all the issues they couldn’t talk about.

How long since Dru had died? It had been a sunny morning in LA, followed by a rainy afternoon in London, followed by best part of a day in Pylea… Maybe twenty four hours? Felt like so much longer. Felt like less. He could still hear her laughter. Her scream.

He’d drifted off again, and didn’t realise until Angel repeated a question and Spike looked at him blankly.

“Sorry, just… bit out of it, I guess. The past day…”

Their eyes met briefly, then Angel looked away, studying his hands.

“Yeah. I wish we could… that there was time for…”

His voice trailed off, and Spike studied the warlock, who was now waving his arms in the air along with the chanting. If it was for dramatic effect, or part of the ritual, was anyone’s guess. There were symbols all over the ground now, and painted onto the stone altar too.

“Me too,” he eventually replied.

But between the two of them, there really was nothing that could be said. They knew where they stood.
Settling down to an interminable wait, events suddenly accelerated.

Jozyxqe’s chanting had reached a fever pitch when without warning Illyria’s voice joined in.

As they looked up in surprise, they saw her slamming the warlock down onto the stone altar, before driving the sacrificial knife deep into his chest.

Jumping to their feet the world seemed to flicker around them, powerful magicks clearly at work.

As blood slowly began dripping off the altar, ruby-red drop by ruby-red drop hitting the ground, a shape began solidifying in the air, something tall and wooden and flat…

“It’s a door,” Spike said, somewhat superfluously, as Illyria’s smile practically lit up the darkness.

“Come!”

“But how-” Angel asked, as he stepped around the altar, and Illyria shrugged.

“He was right. A sacrifice greatly speeds up the ritual.”

A beat, then Angel shrugged as well, and stepped up to the now very solid wooden door, adorned with a small metal plate with the words ‘The Home Office’ neatly engraved.

“Well, here goes nothing,” he said, and pushed it open.

***

They were met with sleet.

The world of ‘the Home Office’ was murky grey, visibility non-existent, the ground consisting of jagged rocks, and whilst they were trying to get their bearings they were attacked by a pack of giant furry beasts with claws like knives and teeth like sharks.

The door had vanished as soon as they had stepped through it, so there was nothing for it but fight or be killed. And despite having fought together for so long that they barely had to think about it anymore, they didn’t seem able to get the upper hand. The beasts’ fur repelled any effort at stabbing, and even arrows seemed to bounce off before the crossbow was smashed.

How long the fought they couldn’t say; hours at the very least. Five, seven, nine? It seemed endless, and every time they managed to kill a beast two more would take its place. The rain had drenched them within minutes, making their clothing heavy and cumbersome, their boots like soggy puddles and it was impossible to get a good foothold on the uneven terrain.

The brute force was unexpected (they had presumed a web of deception and magicks), but it wasn’t until one of them sunk its teeth into Spike’s left shoulder and arm — even piercing the armour going by the cry of pain that escaped Spike’s lips — that Angel realised they might be in actual trouble. Managing to stab the creature in the eye he got Spike untangled from the lethal fangs, and they were forced to beat a retreat up the rock incline behind them. They had already been fighting for an interminable time, and he was beginning to tire, even as the monsters showed no sign of waning.

To his immense relief he spotted what looked like the opening of a cave through the gloom and the persistent half-frozen rain which was still falling down in heavy sheets.

Illyria defended the narrow mouth of the cave, and eventually the creatures gave up, disappearing into the darkness.
Spike had collapsed, and Angel realised that the other had also suffered several lacerations of his leg. Not that Angel hadn’t been hurt, but it was mostly surface wounds.

“What happened?” he asked, as he wrapped perfunctory bandages around Spike’s leg and upper left arm. They’d fought worse and for longer — not often, but it had happened. And Spike never slipped up like this.

“Guess I got sloppy,” he replied, inhaling sharply as Angel tightened a bandage. “Gave my amulet to Buffy — guess the protection spell was better than I thought, been keeping me safe…”

A pause as Angel took this on board.

“Well, here’s to hoping you don’t get yourself killed before using the Key,” he replied drily, and Spike shot him a sardonic look.

“Keep your hair on granddad, I’ll go down in flames yet,” he snorted, but didn’t complain when Angel gently moved him to a more upright position, making him lean his good shoulder against Angel’s side.

“Try to sleep while it heals,” Angel suggested, somewhat superfluously, and Spike merely nodded as he sank down, the pain on his face clear as day even though neither would mention it.

Angel half-wished they could build a small fire, except there was no wood, everything was wet, and it would undoubtedly attract the beasts again. He hoped Illyria would know where they needed to go, all their pent-up gung-ho attitude was flagging in the face of this grey nothingness.

For now there was nothing they could do except wait. He had a feeling that they were trapped here — if Illyria could have taken them away, she would have.

Eventually Spike succumbed to the blood loss and the pain and fell asleep — or possibly just lost consciousness — either way he sank further down against Angel’s side, and after a while Angel shifted him so he was lying down, his head in Angel’s lap.

Without meaning to, Angel gently stroked the bleached-blonde locks, unruly and dirtied from the battle. Let his finger follow the scar on Spike’s eyebrow, studied the exhaustion below the sleeping, bloodied features.

He’d looked just the same the night they’d… the night they’d let go of the past.

Spike in his bed, Spike in his arms. For one night only laying open their hearts and souls. Hands and lips that had so recently been used to hurt and injure, carefully soothing away the pain.

He couldn’t remember if they’d actually spoken. He didn’t think so… words had not been necessary. The walls had come back up again of course — along with the snark and the jibes. And yet… everything had been different. The hate, the pain, the anger, the guilt — gone. Mostly gone anyway. Forgiveness was a gift Angel never knew how to quantify, and he had never expected it from Spike.

They had never talked about it afterwards of course, never discussed what it all meant. Knew no one else would ever understand; that fighting to the death, then ending up in bed would be illogical to anyone else.

‘I’m going to lose him’ he thought. ‘He’ll shanshu and become mortal and die and leave me like everyone else.’
And with a start he realised that his feelings about the Shanshu had come 180 degrees.

Back when Spike had first re-appeared in his life he had felt like a usurper, come to steal Angel’s destiny. And even after he had signed it away he had probably subconsciously resented Spike for inadvertently taking something away from him. But now…

Now, he resented the Shanshu for taking Spike away from him.

For the merest fraction of a second he felt jealousy of Buffy choke him — Buffy who would get Spike by her side ‘forever’.

‘He was mine first!’ he felt like telling her, except that ‘mine’ was so fraught with complexity that the word tripped him up. ‘Mine’? Since when had Spike been his? Nothing was his, that was the first lesson he’d taught Spike; so why did he feel so possessive now? (And when had he stopped feeling possessive of Buffy? Shouldn’t he feel jealous of Spike? Or had he finally let go of the idea that she would ever be his?)

Or — was it the fear of loneliness hanging over him?

These past years…

Trying to evaluate the past decade (all the way back to when Spike had first turned up, incorporeal, yet unavoidable), Angel pondered the way they had re-established and re-defined the bonds from the past — Spike was deliberately annoying about 90% of the time, but Angel wasn’t sure he’d want him any other way. It helped them skirt around all the things they couldn’t give voice to. They understood each other too well, that was the problem. Like living shadows or walking reminders of the past — and the fact that no one else knew what it was like to be a vampire with a soul… They didn’t talk, but then what could they possibly say to encapsulate everything they were to each other? He knew Spike would always have his back and vice versa, no words necessary.

The realisation that he would lose this certainty made him (foolishly) wish they could stay here forever. Cold, in pain, with nothing but monsters and darkness surrounding them, but at least they were together…

Looking up, he saw that Illyria had vanished.

There was nothing he could do, he realised. Well, he could wake Spike, but the other needed the rest. If the big hairy beasts came back… well there wasn’t much they could do about that either. Maybe they should have borrowed that Talnor creature, but thinking it over then if it could have helped, Buffy would have been certain to use that to her advantage.

There was something about how this was panning out — the big departure, the big moment, and then… grey wetness and no real enemy to fight.

He should be frustrated but in truth he was grateful. This moment of quiet was unexpected, an odd grace note of contemplation. Not the beauty and wonder of that last day with Nina, but something darker, more painful. The ties of blood, and their past. A moment to reflect before destiny sank its claws into them once more.

Then abruptly Illyria appeared again, looking like she had that time when she’d returned from the dimension where she had found her army, water and light crackling around her slender frame.

“They are trying to play us for fools. Rise vampires. They shall meet their doom yet!”

A protest died on Angel’s lips and reluctantly he woke Spike, wincing in sympathy as the other
muffled a cry of pain.

“So, what are you saying?” he eventually asked after they had both gotten to their feet, and Illyria smiled, looking not unlike a wolf herself.

“This place is a glamour, a trap to delay us.”

“Well thanks for letting us know, I feel much better now,” Spike said drily, but Illyria either didn’t catch the tone, or she didn’t care. Instead, she appeared to rein the light in, closing her eyes and going dark and still, before reaching out and grasping hold of thin air.

And then as they watched the air seemed to scrunch up like a cloth, before she with a swift hard movement tore a rent in what looked like the fabric of reality.

“If they think I am so diminished I could not get through,” she muttered, before stepping through into the soft darkness on the other side.

Angel and Spike cautiously followed, but as the darkness receded Angel shook his head, feeling nausea rising at the sight that greeted them.

“Can we go back?”

Chapter End Notes

The idea that Spike and Angel’s ‘that one time’ was the night post-Destiny came from this fic, which is still one of my favourite things I have ever read, and pretty much my personal head canon:

Lament for the Dead
Wesley tilted his head.

“Not so happy to see us Angel? I can’t imagine why.”

“Christ,” Spike muttered, as Angel swallowed, before speaking carefully, remembering Lilah and wondering what else was waiting in the darkness that was surrounding them:

“Can you help at all?”

Gunn chuckled, except his eyes were like flint.

“I see he’s as thick-headed as ever. We’re here to stop you.”

“I don’t want to fight you,” Angel replied, even as he became aware that his chest was hurting; a dull, but slowly growing ache where the Circle of the Black Thorn had burned their mark, and Wesley snorted disdainfully.

“And I didn’t want to sign a binding contract under false pretences which is keeping me around even after death — and yet, here we are. Life’s a bitch and then you don’t die.”

As he spoke a sword materialised in his hands, and Gunn was now hefting a large axe.

Knowing that although Spike would fight as best as he could, his injuries would still be putting him at a disadvantage, Angel turned to Illyria and saw that she appeared to have frozen.

Oh multiple levels of crap. He should have known that Wolfram and Hart would know what her Achilles’ heel was…

He could sense other shadows outside the small circle of light they were standing in, and had no doubt that the attacks would just keep coming — they needed a different angle, a different kind of attack — and then Spike spoke.

“Saw your old man yesterday,” he drawled, and Wesley slowly turned his head, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“Did you now?”

“Told me — and I repeat, word for word: ‘Go take down those bloody bastards so my son can rest in
peace’.”

A pause as Wesley seemed to weigh this in his mind, before turning to Gunn.

“Do you want to tell them?”

Gunn shrugged.

“Might as well.”

Looking from Spike, to Illyria, before finally settling on Angel, Gunn spoke slowly and carefully.

“Listen. Y’all seem to be under the delusion that somehow we have been roped into this against our will. That you might be able to win us over to your side by tuggin’ at our heartstrings. Now let me explain something: We volunteered. You have made such a mess of your mission, you don’t even understand how screwed up it is!”

A beat, then he continued.

“So get this, Champions. We’re here to save the world from you.”

He wasn’t lying. It was possible he’d been lied to, but he definitely believed he was telling the truth.

“What do you mean?” Angel asked (partly to prolong the conversation, he needed to work out what to do, and quickly), but as he spoke the darkness receded a little and he saw who else was there with them…

Lindsey, Lilah, Holland Manners, Gavin Park, Knox, every lawyer and employee who had died — they were all there; calm, smiling, armed, and ready to kill.

He drew his sword, and got ready to sell his life as dearly as possible. Whatever the cost. Spike had to survive so he could use the Key…

“CEASE!”

The voice was Illyria’s, but with the violence and volume of a thunderstorm behind it.

The entire scene froze, their adversaries suddenly motionless mid-attack, and Angel and Spike slowly turned, not even daring to look at each other.

It was Illyria still, but above and around her a black shape towered, ephemeral arms or legs or tentacles stretching out and for long moments they could only stare in stunned silence.

“I AM ILLYRIA, GOD KING OF THE PRIMORDIUM. I WILL NOT FIGHT MINIONS! SHOW YOURSELVES!”

At her voice the people around them shattered, a million million shards exploding out into nothingness — Angel and Spike held up their arms in an attempt at shielding their faces, but slowly lowered them upon realising that there was no hail of glass-like shards hitting them. Had they never been real? What was this place? The dull ache in Angel’s chest was now more like a quiet burning sensation, and Angel wondered if it was due to being so close to the power centre of Wolfram and Hart…

He blinked at Spike, whose face then turned slack-jawed as he looked ahead at where the crowd of Wolfram and Hart employees had been.
Some distance away stood a wolf, a ram, and a hart.

It was impossible to say whether they were very large and far away, or ‘normal’ sized animals close by. The murky darkness all around them hadn’t changed, and Angel couldn’t say where the ‘light’ came from that they were standing in. It was more like night-vision… The darkness was everywhere, but only here was there anything to see.

Turning back to Illyria the immense black shape still surrounded her, and he remembered the images they had found of her in her original form. What this development meant, he couldn’t say. Was she no longer bound by her ‘shell’? He didn’t know much about higher realms…

As it was, she raised one of her hands, a small cold smile on her face, and snapped her fingers.

In an instant an enormous beast appeared, charging past them, and it was only as Angel tried to regain his balance that he realised that it was Talnor but in what must have been its original size, its three heads stretched out towards their adversaries, and for a few seconds his heart was in his mouth as he waited for the inevitable battle — except Talnor ran through them as if they were merely mirages, and then both Talnor and their adversaries dissolved into nothing.

“PARLOUR TRICKS,” Illyria sniffed. Her voice was quieter, but still with thunder at its back.

“So, um, what does any of this mean?” Spike asked, waving a hand towards their surroundings. “Like, what’s happening? What happened to Wesley and Gunn and the rest of the tag team, what happened to you?”

“NOTHING HAPPENED TO ME. BUT THIS PLACE ALLOWS YOU TO SEE MORE OF MY TRUE FORM.”

“And Wes and Gunn?” Angel repeated, and Illyria made a dismissive flick with her hand.

“UNIMPORTANT. GONE. EVERYTHING IS DISTRACTION UPON DECEPTION. THIS IS THE PLACE, BUT OUR GOAL IS HIDDEN…”

For a moment they stood there, uncertain what to do, as Illyria closed her eyes, the darkness around her growing denser, the shape more solid.

And then — she laughed.

Angel couldn’t remember her ever laughing before, and now, here, the sensation was approximately what a stone quarry would sound like if it could express mirth, the very ground seeming to shake at the sound as a fearsome smile broke out on her face and she threw her arms out as far as she could — and as she did so the darkness rolled away, further and further, leaving them in a place not unlike the white room, seemingly stretching out to infinity.

Except on the floor below their feet was a mystical circle, unfamiliar symbols black against the pale floor.

As Angel tried to take it in, feeling the sudden swell of power all around, a searing, immediate pain erupted in his head.

Along with the pain a host of images flashed through his mind, almost too fast to follow.

Trying to recover, the echo of the pain still reverberating, he realised that there was also a profound sense of déjà vu… Trying to concentrate, disoriented, he eventually managed to pin it down — it had been during their very first step into another dimension, Wolfram and Hart’s home world… he’d been asleep, had been woken by what he thought was a dream, hit his head on a rock.
Except it hadn’t been a dream, it had been a vision.

He had not understood — or remembered — at the time, but now…

Glancing sideways he saw Spike wince as he pulled the Dead key from his pocket, and the vision began to rearrange itself, the images slowly lining up with a finality that felt like the ultimate stab in the back.

They were trapped. Caught in a catch-22, set up by Wolfram and Hart (they always had a back-up plan, always, and this failsafe was as old as civilisation); and worst of all he’d signed it himself, happily so, thinking only of the immediate battle. How had he never expected this?

Dru had seen it, of course. No wonder she had laughed.

And Lord Kustos, The Keeper of Secrets — he had to have known. “The Key — can it be brought back to life?” Angel had asked, and Kustos had smiled: “Well, that is a… complicated question. Although for you-”

And Gunn, just now, “You have made such a mess of your mission, you don’t even understand how screwed up it is!”

He knew what he had to do, and there was no time — no time at all to explain anything to Spike.

(The pain in his chest was now like holy water poured into an open wound. Impossible to ignore, and almost making him bite his cheek to stop from crying out.)

“Hurry!” Illyria urged, the strain in her voice obvious. The dark shadow that had surrounded her was gone and she looked pale in the harsh light, her voice hollow. “I cannot sustain this place for long.”

But then Angel remembered his first friend, and realised that there might be time for one last message.

***

Clutching the Dead Key, Spike surveyed the nothing-place they were standing in, wondering what the hell he should do now.

Belatedly he acknowledged that Angel might have been right — knowing how to use the bloody thing would be rather useful, just about now. He’d half expected that blood would do the trick, but his hand was still half-covered in his own blood, and nothing. Cautiously he put the toe of his boot inside the mystical circle with the oddly familiar symbols, but still nothing.

Illyria was telling him to hurry up, but to do what? Or was the Key going to self-activate like the necklace had?

Then without warning Angel appeared in front of him, with a look on his face that Spike couldn’t quantify. Despair and longing and regret and other emotions too complex to name.

“Spike-” he said; then simply reached out, his hands on Spike’s face, pulling him close, their lips meeting halfway.

Not being the type to question a good thing thrown his way, Spike simply let himself get lost in the kiss — Angel was a hell of a good kisser, but that was almost beside the point. If this was to be their final goodbye then Spike would bloody well give it his everything. It was somehow fitting, this brief moment of bliss on the edge of destruction; a taste of passion and desire and darkness and all the...
things they never spoke of. An echo of that one night, now many years ago. The strange tenderness that existed beneath all the fights.

When they parted Angel didn’t let go, instead studying him with an intensity that made Spike falter. It looked like… something like love.

And then Angel finally spoke, voice on the cusp of breaking but with unmistakable gravity:

“Help the helpless.”

Before Spike could begin to formulate a response to the puzzling words, Angel reached out and plucked the Dead Key from his hand.

Instantly it began to not just glow, but to emit a light so bright that Spike was blinded. He’d only seen a light like it once before, when Glory had utilised Dawn’s Key properties to get back to her own world — it was that self same dimension-searing whiter-than-white blaze, and it seemed to hit him like a mack truck.

“LEAVE!” he heard Illyria yell, her voice distorted as the whole world seemed to tilt and collapse and a crushing weight bore down on him. He saw a portal opening, and the last thing he registered was a scream of pain that could only be Angel — a scream that didn’t seem to end; and as Illyria threw him through the tear she had created he caught a retina burning glimpse of Angel enveloped in fire.

And then he was somewhere in the human world, tarmac under his palms, the smell of petrol and the sound of cars in the distance, a night’s sky above him.

Unable to comprehend what had happened he tried to get up, but the pain from his mauled arm momentarily made him black out, and darkness claimed him.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

So, somehow this chapter turned out at almost 7000 words and I invented a new Slayer. Hope you enjoy. :)

London, Summer 2007

Twirling her stake lazily Buffy took in the six vampires surrounding her.

“Gee, you sure know how to make an American gal feel welcome.”

The graveyard was old and probably quite pretty in daylight… In the middle of the night, it was as comfortable a place as any Buffy could think of.

She should probably worry that hanging out with the dead was as close as she could get to feeling at home in London, but right now she was simply enjoying herself.

“Only the best for such a famous Slayer,” the leader drawled, in tones so like Spike’s she felt a familiar stab of longing. How much longer until they came back? It had been more than a year and a half… She felt the reassuring solid weight of the pendant on her chest, the token that said he had to come back.

Focus Buffy!

“Why thank you,” she replied. “And who might you be? Not that I really need to know your name in order to kill you, but my mother brought me up to be polite.”

“Don’t worry about my name pet — after tonight they’ll call me Slayer Killer!”

Bursting out laughing was probably not the wisest move she could have made, but the very idea that this little nobody could take her down was too funny.

Stepping forward, insulted, he tossed his hair back from his face, making the most of his six foot frame as he towered over her, his little gang drawing closer. His look was an unfortunate mishmash
of styles — the hair could have belonged to Jon Bon Jovi and the leather jacket wasn’t bad, but in combination with the ripped blue jeans and the converse it made him look like a boy who’d dressed up in order to intimidate the other kids on the block.

“Right lads, let’s see if we can teach this little Californian Princess some proper manners…”

Biting back the laughter still bubbling inside her, she mirrored his hair toss, smiling sweetly.

“Look Rambo, if I started telling you all the reasons I’m going to win, you’d get roasted by the morning sun. Mostly though, I just can’t allow that outfit to stay a part of this world.”

She seemed to have hit a sore spot and he threw himself at her, literally growling, her fist stopping him very effectively mid-jump. But before she could make a start on the minions, her cell phone buzzed.

“Hang on,” she said, holding up the stake and pulling out the cell with her left hand.

And froze.

The message was only two words long, but it changed everything.

‘CODE RED’

It had happened. They had done it. Wolfram and Hart were toast, and her Champions were… back. Right?

Without thinking she pressed the button to call the Council, her surroundings forgotten; except a kick to her head sent the cell flying and the last thing she heard before hitting the ground was the sound of her phone smashing against a gravestone.

***

Giles was woken by his mobile phone buzzing very loudly next to his ear. He disliked the thing immensely, but was forced to admit it was useful.

At the end of another long day at the Council he’d decided to bed down on the divan in the tiny room adjacent to his office, rather than try to get home. Once he’d answered his phone (and the message had filtered through to his brain), he became very grateful for that decision.

It was the Elder Priestess of the Devon Coven, and she only spoke four words: “The canary is dead.”

It took a second for the impact to hit, then he sat bolt upright.

“You sure?”

“No Rupert, I am calling you at 2 in the morning because I had a vague hunch. Yes I’m sure. And so will you be once you check.”

He flinched at the sarcasm, even as he tried to locate his glasses.

“Sorry, I was asleep… I meant to say thank you. I take it you have already-”

“Yes, we’ve begun our battles. Good luck with yours.”

“Thank you,” he said, and she hung up. Never one for chit-chat.
He took a second to just close his eyes, readying himself for the impossible avalanche of unending calamities that would undoubtedly unfold as Wolfram and Hart fell from their pedestal; then took a deep breath, got dressed and set off downstairs, phone to his ear and shouting to Ternisha, the head guard. He had hand-picked her to lead the night patrols — she was young, and had been involved with a girl gang in her native Bethnal Green before being called, but she was smart, capable, an incredible fighter and knew London like the back of her hand.

His first call was Andrew, who could pull all the strings to raise the alarm. Thankfully Andrew lived only ten minutes away (a mutual decision, they had become increasingly dependent on him) and showed up in no time at all, becoming a one-person whirlwind of organisation.

(For which Giles was grateful, he was not as young as he had once been.)

Office after office began lighting up, Slayers and staff pouring in, as news began to filter through from their contacts.

Everything from small skirmishes to declarations of renewals of old feuds, and it was like being at war. Except with the whole world as the battlefield…

But why wasn’t Buffy answering her phone? She’d gone out ‘patrolling’ as far as he could remember, but he couldn’t imagine any reason she wouldn’t have brought her phone. It had been (he checked his watch) an hour already — even if she’d been fighting, surely she’d have gotten the message by now?

Then someone called his name, and he saw a Slayer patrol stumble through the door, carrying something… Or rather someone.

Black clothing, blonde hair, bloodied face — for a split-second Giles thought it was Buffy, his heart almost stopping, but then his vision adjusted itself and he realised whom he was looking at.

“Bring him up to my office,” Giles said, guiding the Slayers who were carrying Spike’s inert form. “Where did you find him?”

“Out the back, Mr Giles,” Ternisha reported, “Can’t have been there long, we patrol the parameter regularly. Almost didn’t see him, being all in black and that.”

“Well, I am glad you did. A few more hours and he could have been immolated. Right, through here, put him down on the divan — thank you girls. Make sure to check extra hard in case we have any other fallen warriors appearing.”

Realising that this was their cue to leave the trio of Slayers reluctantly left (they were probably worried, Spike was obviously hurt), and Giles wondered what to do now. Buffy still hadn’t made contact, but if Spike was here, what of Angel and Illyria?

Fetching his secret bottle of single malt, he poured a generous measure and — after holding it under Spike’s nose did nothing — guided some down his throat.

As expected this produced a result.

Spike gasped, choked, and coughed — then scrambled to a sitting position, swearing in pain at some injury and staring about bewildered, before finally focussing on Giles.

“What the- Where the hell am I? What happened?”

“You are at the Watcher’s Council, London. One of our patrols found you outside a short while ago.
And I was hoping that you might be able to tell us what happened…”

But Spike merely stared at him, then slowly shook his head.

“I don’t… Angel-”

He stopped, staring into the distance, and then the door burst open, a frazzled-looking Andrew practically falling into the tiny room.

“Giles! We need you now! There is a… very important demon chieftain in the lobby with fifty heavily armed Groxlar Beasts-”

He broke off, stared at Spike, then blinked and focussed on Giles again.

“Demanding Buffy…”

“Right.” Where was she? Not that it mattered right now, he would just have to improvise. “Spike… Will you be OK? Is there anything we need to know?”

Spike looked at him for a long moment, like he wasn’t quite sure what words even were.

“The scream…”

Giles took a second, let Spike’s few words join up.

Holding up a hand to stall Andrew’s impatience he crouched down in front of Spike, caught his eyes.

“Did Angel sacrifice himself?”

“Should have been me…” Spike whispered, and Giles would be damned if Spike’s eyes didn’t seem to glisten with tears. “He just- I can still hear him…”

“And Illyria?”

Spike half-turned, as if expecting her to be next to him.

“I dunno. She-”

It was clear that Spike was in shock, and, deciding to deal with the immediate crisis first, Giles stood and gently patted Spike’s shoulder.

“No worries. Just take a moment, I’ll be back soon. Try to remember as much as possible.”

Striding out he quizzed Andrew on the chieftain’s objectives, of which apparently there were none, except for the demand to speak with Buffy.

And it had only been an hour…

Andrew had only omitted one detail, which was that the chieftain was female — and somewhat improbably named Maureen (a name Giles had never previously associated with seven foot tall warriors with purple scales), hailing from a strong matriarchy, and thus plain refusing to speak to any males. Or any lower-ranking females. She saw Buffy’s absence as proof that the head Slayer was afraid to face her, and this was as good as a declaration of war. Which wasn’t just bad because of the immediate bloodbath and disruption, but also because she represented one of Wolfram and Hart’s oldest clients, and if they got on her wrong side she’d take a whole swathe of their clients with her.
As a matter of fact she was one of their top priorities, but they had so far never been able to make contact, so had very little information.

Just as Giles was about to get one of the younger Slayers to pretend to be Buffy (he had called Faith, who was in America, and who had merely sworn at him in very colourful language and hung up), the front door inched open, and Willow sidled through, apologetic smile on her face.

“Sorry guys, I got a little delayed, there was a… thing. Like, a big green thing, with tentacles, it was eating people, I thought I should probably try to stop it… Turns out there was a Wolfram and Hart prison thing just down the road from me, and Talnor was hungry, so…”

Looking around at the fifty Groxlars surrounding her, her voice trailed off. Talnor, clutched in her right hand against her chest, growled quietly.

“Enough of the prattle! Attack!”

Maureen’s voice rang out coldly and sharply against the marble floors and wood-panelled walls, but even as all the Slayers who had quietly gathered drew their weapons, Willow’s left hand flung up, her eyes went completely black and Talnor’s growl was suddenly a roar.

A second later every Groxlar Beast turned on Maureen.

“Don’t kill her!” Giles cried, and Willow turned her head a fraction, studying him with those dark, unreadable eyes.

“Why?”

Who was she really, he wondered. She was her old self most of the time, but then there would be glimpses (or, like now, full-blown incidents) where it seemed as if the human face was nothing but a mask.

“I will negotiate with this woman.” Maureen stated, before turning to Willow, ignoring the hordes surrounding her. “What is your name?”

“I am Talnor, the Beast Master,” Willow replied, then blinked, eyes returning to normal.

“Andrew — bring me the relevant dossier. Giles, where do you want these stashing?”

“Um, holding cell 5 in the cellar should be able to hold them all,” Giles replied, and Willow nodded: “Go.”

And as one the whole pack turned and in perfect unison walked towards the cellar doors.

“Ternisha, lock them in,” Giles said quietly, noticing the Slayer by his side, but it was Willow who replied. Her eyes might have returned to normal, but her voice was still coolly controlled and almost monotone.

“No need for locks, they won’t even blink without my say-so. I’ll take our guest into the second conference room.”

And with that she smiled at Maureen, holding out her left hand towards the stairs, her voice returning to normal in the process.

“Sorry about all that. Purple scales, how unusual…”
Slightly less than an hour later Buffy walked through the front doors to the Watcher’s Council.

“Buffy! You’re OK!” Ternisha exclaimed, literally skidding to a halt and almost dropping the tray with tea and biscuits she was carrying.

“Why wouldn’t I be OK?” Buffy replied, possibly a tad aggressively, but she wasn’t in a good mood, having spent the best part of the preceding two hours cursing the vampires who had broken her cell, the cell itself for being so flimsy, and most of all London for being enormous and herself for going so far away for a few stray vamps. The actual dusting had only taken seconds (once she’d gotten back on her feet), but the journey back had been endless.

Moving to London for good more than a year previously meant that at least she had an idea where she was going, but she missed Sunnydale more than she could explain. She’d been able to run everywhere… And sure, the motorbike was cool, but London was so huge that even when hovering at the speed limit everywhere took forever.

The journey back had also been interrupted by random fights that she felt she had to stop. She couldn’t know if they were just the regular bust-ups or some Wolfram and Hart related incident…

Looking around at the fantastical hive of activity now surrounding her, it seemed unreal that she had helped create this, that she knew what they were all doing. What the blue demon with the wings had been brought in to help with, and which areas the three junior Watchers she spotted in the office opposite would be investigating and…

Hang on.

“Wait, why do you have tea and biscuits?”

Of all the ridiculous things…

Ternisha pulled a face.

“Willow is in a super important meeting with a big purple demon lady, and they demanded tea. And apparently that is more important than patrolling.”

Buffy opened her mouth, faltered, then — as Ternisha made to leave — took hold of her arm.

“Are they back?”

The other Slayer hesitated, then nodded her head towards the biggest meeting room to her left.

“Spike’s in there.”

“Thank you,” Buffy said, unable to express the depth of her gratitude for this simple but impossibly important information.

He had made it. He was alive.

The meeting room had banks of computers running down both sides, all of them already occupied by their best tech people and watched over by Andrew who was here there and everywhere, having not just become an expert on Illyria’s network, but even going so far as getting a few mystical tattoos in order to move up the ranks.

But she barely noticed them, because in the middle, at the other end of the large central table already
full of maps, books and papers stood Giles, Eve — and Spike.

She almost sagged in immediate relief at visual proof of Ternisha’s words, before stepping forward as she began taking in the state of him. She needed a moment. Eighteen months of waiting…

His hair was as short and bleached-white as it had been last time, except now it was dirty and unruly, dried blood running from his temple down his cheek. His hands were bloody and dirty too, his coat was torn at the shoulder — the top of his left sleeve covered by a rudimentary bandage — and when he moved he winced.

“What kind of symbols?” Eve asked, “can you describe them?” and he slowly shook his head.

“It’s… a blur. Suffered a good deal of blood loss before we got there, not exactly on top form pet. And that place, it… screwed with our heads. Everything was a bloody illusion…”

Eve pressed her lips together with that patented long-suffering look she always adopted when people were less prepared than she wished. Buffy would be forever grateful that they had managed to track her down and convince her to work for them, as her knowledge of Wolfram and Hart was second to none, but she was not the easiest person to work with.

“Spike!” she cried, knowing that he had to know she was there, and slowly he lifted his head to look at her, eyes dark and exhausted.

Making her way around the table, she tried to reach out, hand faltering mid-motion.

“What happened?”

“We did it,” he replied, voice hollow.

“I don’t understand,” she said, grasping his hand and laying a thumb across his wrist to confirm what her other senses had already told her. No pulse. Just cool vampire skin, covered in yet more dried blood. She looked around, tried to make sense of it all.

“Where’s Angel?”

He closed his eyes, almost swaying on his feet.

“Angel’s gone.”

For a second the world froze. Surely he couldn’t mean…

Glancing at the pile of books in front of him he quietly continued.

“Illyria too. It was…”

His voice trailed off, and, shooting Buffy a quick apologetic glance, Eve pushed yet another book under his nose.

“The symbols - did they look like this?”

He blinked, shook his head. His voice sounded so fatigued she ached, even as she still tried to come to terms with what he’d just told her. Angel couldn’t...

“No. No nothing like that. Why’s it important again? And… how are you… here?”

Eve sighed.
“Listen Champ I’m here to help — funnily enough there are not a lot of job opportunities for someone like me. But if we can unravel the underpinnings that you undid we will know what angle to tackle them from. Bit like knowing what alphabet an encrypted note is written in really helps?”

He shook his head.

“Sorry, it’s just a blank, all I remember is-”

He stopped, and Giles stepped around him and quietly pulled Buffy aside.

“One of the patrols found him outside in the alley about an hour ago. And I know he will need a break, but we need to know everything that happened, so we can adapt our plans. Understood? Buffy?”

“Yes, yes of course,” she replied, not really listening. What had he meant ‘Angel’s gone’? Her brain didn’t seem to be functioning.

“Buffy!” Giles said, and she tried to focus on him again.

“I asked where you have been — we tried to call you, but you never replied.”

“My cell broke,” she replied, a little too curtly probably, but dammit Spike was hurt and Angel ‘gone’…

“Buffy!”

Andrew this time.

“Look, I need you, just for a second, or maybe ten, or twenty, but we have a minor emergency which could any moment become major and-”

“Fine.”

She allowed herself to be led away, silently wondering why she had decided that being Top Slayer was a good idea and momentarily missing her Dolce Vita in Rome, before remembering The Immortal, Ilona Costa Bianchi, never getting the hang of Italian, and all the other reasons she’d left.

***

Several hours later, a bright morning sun shining through the windows, Giles called a big meeting, Andrew having linked up all the different factions around the world through video links, and Buffy (on autopilot, and keen to get it all over with) laid out the overall structure of their plans, which bits to change, which parts to focus on.

They were only interrupted twice — first by a swarm of locusts which Willow swiftly banished and secondly by a six-armed demon which kicked its way through the doors, yelling ‘Prepare to di-’ before seven different Slayers attacked it simultaneously and it ended up in many smaller pieces all over the floor.

To their relief their careful preparation was paying off.

They had been inundated with calls for protection, as well as clans and groups declaring war — and (surprisingly) many factions and clients saying they were happy to work with the Watcher’s Council. Andrew had created a massive interactive programme (his pride and joy), a project he had worked on for months, but which was now running smoothly and efficiently.
Giles had been sceptical, but he had to admit that it was actually working — they had instant information, only delayed by the fact of people having to input the updates; but overall they could tell at a glance who was with them, who against, who they hadn’t heard from yet.

Spike didn’t speak at all, silently leaning against the wall like a black-clad and bloodied ghost.

The meeting over Buffy got up, determined to get him alone so she could look after him, but realised he’d slipped away in the melee.

When she finally found him, he was simply sitting on the stairs, like a stone in a stream, people walking around him.

“Spike,” she said, and although he was looking at her, he didn’t seem to see her at all.

“I should call Connor. And Nina. And Lorne… Where did he get to again? He doesn’t seem to be around…”

She realised that his leg was hurt also, his jeans torn and caked in dried blood.

“Spike!”

She took hold of his face, and he visibly flinched away from her. It was all she could do not to yell out of desperation.

“What happened? What did this to you? We need to get you bandaged up, I have some spare clothes.”

“Not important,” he cut her off, then stood. “I need to borrow a phone, I think mine was killed by the same beasts that did for my arm…”

And he walked past her down the stairs, as if she wasn’t even there.

Unsure how to react, she barely noticed Willow until her friend was standing immediately in front of her.

“Did you see that?” Buffy asked. “He’s behaving—“

“He’s behaving like — like he did after you died,” Willow said gently. “Give him time.”

But surely he would come to her for comfort? It made no sense. And she wasn’t going to let him just suffer. She couldn’t process the loss of Angel just yet, but Spike was here and she could help him, whether he wanted it or not. Stupid bloody vampires.

She waited until he’d finished his phone calls, then marched him along to the shower rooms, handing him a pile of clean clothes and towels before guarding the door until he had finished getting clean, fervently ignoring Giles calling for her, as well as the orange goo that was slowly dripping down from the ceiling above and the strange scuttling sound from down the hallway.

Once the shower had stopped she let herself in, locking the door behind her and then inhaling sharply as she took the extent of the damage. Without the armour (discarded in a pile along with the coat and the other clothing) it would have been infinitely worse, but his upper left arm had been nearly torn to shreds, his shoulder was so mangled she barely knew how to start, and his legs had lacerations to the bone.

“Oh god,” she whispered, before grimly getting to work bandaging him up as best she could. He
seemed to disengage again, lost in himself, somewhere she couldn’t follow. Or maybe it was just the pain getting to him.

“Spike, if you need to talk, I’m here, OK?”

He nodded, but didn’t reply.

***

For the next few days ‘work’ took over wholesale, a never-ending avalanche of crises that required a multitude of different responses. They careened from near-disaster to full blown emergency about every half hour, and Buffy began to wish for a simple straight-forward apocalypse, not three million separate calamities.

Most newspapers had Wolfram and Hart’s collapse on their front pages, endless columns about the unexpected fall of the ancient law firm and how safe were other companies? The panic seeped through to the stock market and economic anxieties were added to every other problem.

Spike plain disappeared, and by the time Buffy realised she decided not to worry — especially as she had no way to track him down, or any time in which to do so, as the next minute they received reports of three warlocks appearing in the middle of Oxford Circus and the tourists thinking it was a promotion for a new show or movie, and they had to despatch Willow before the situation turned into a bloodbath.

Then they had to gather a team to tackle Wolfram and Hart’s London offices, or more precisely all the things therein which might now get out — according to Eve, Wolfram and Hart had been very good at keeping anything undesirable (i.e. Creatures or persons who would fight against them) locked up, but now… no one knew.

It had been one of the top priorities on their agenda, but they had been too snowed under to even think about it for the first day. And reports from other Slayer hubs elsewhere in the world made it a very unappealing prospect. Ternisha’s suggestion of just blowing it up made Eve shake her head.

“That would probably make all the schools explode too — or something similar. There are usually fail safes at all levels, and more magical protections than you can imagine. I have given you basic schematics, but I won’t know about any particulars.”

“I’m in!” Andrew announced triumphantly, cutting her off, and they all turned to him. Looking up from his laptop, he glanced around.

“One of their employees was a follower Illyria, and now they’ve gone under he wants to make sure he won’t be a target. Oh mama, he’s given me the keys to the kingdom…”

“Wonderful,” Buffy said, pushing back her chair as she stood. “Co-ordinate with Ternisha and Eve so you know what you’ll be tackling. Ternisha — have you got this?”

The young Slayer smiled, her eyes glinting with excitement as she brushed her dreadlocks out of the way.

“Bring it on.”

Ternisha often reminded Buffy too much of Faith, but at times like this it was welcome. Only seventeen, but she’d racked up a bigger kill list than most of the others already — if she couldn’t get the job done, no one could.
Buffy left the meeting to find that the building was under attack from a large group of Grimslaw demons (human-sized, six-legged green bugs that could suck people’s hearts out) sent by a Wolfram and Hart client who didn’t like the Slayers telling him that he was no longer allowed to use human sacrifices.

(After that they had to triple the cleaners’ salary as the mess after the battle was indescribable, especially as the Grimslaws could climb walls and create webs, thus leaving their marks literally everywhere.)

And even before the last bug had been killed they had to attempt to work out why their protection spells had failed, uncovering a whole array of very subtle magical attacks, so low-key that they hadn’t noticed them, causing Andrew to back up everything ten times in a row.

At the same time the local MP appeared, turning very pale at the sight of the Grimslaw carcasses that littered the lobby and stairs, but still nastily pleased to let them know that he would do his utmost to get them evicted for noise and disruption and general mayhem, leading to Giles — usually the best person for dealing with that kind of issue — having to be held back from punching the guy, fuming something about ‘Bloody Tories, bet you were deep in Wolfram and Hart’s pockets!’; after which Buffy had to insist Giles get some sleep, almost frog-marching him to his office.

“Miss Summers!” a little admin person called out, as she returned from Giles’ office. “So sorry to bother you, but it — well, it looks like we have blood coming out of the taps… And I don’t know how long anyone will be able to carry on if we can’t make tea.”

She ended up sending someone to Starbucks for a huge order of teas and coffees whilst they worked out what had happened to their water supply, and (when trying to enjoy her Starbucks in an attempt at two minutes’ peace) had a witch teleport in from Iceland with tales of the ‘Little People’ (who lived in inhabited rocks apparently) being very restless due to how unsettled the world had become, and the local wiccas were worried what might happen if calm wasn’t restored soon. ‘Little People’ could cause big disturbances.

And throughout everything, Wolfram and Hart employees were turning up on their doorstep trying to peddle their insider knowledge and none of them could be sent away in case they’d retaliate. A handful actually turned out to have valuable information — including a janitor, who was hired on the spot when they discovered he knew a way to get stains out of anything.

She seemed to live 20 hour days, with a few hours’ sleep snatched whenever there was a catastrophe that didn’t actually have her name on it.

As for Spike, then he wasn’t an immediate priority in any way, so when she had a moment to be able to worry she told herself that London was his home, so he’d be fine, right? Maybe he’d just gone to hide somewhere, in order to heal? Or maybe he didn’t want to get under her feet, knowing how busy she was? And at least he had survived, unlike Angel (not now, don’t grieve now). Maybe- oh god, why was there a dragon outside?

Although there were glimpses of light.

Xander arrived, looking tanned and impossibly relaxed, and Buffy fell into his arms with more relief than she could articulate.

Dawn turned up, her summer holiday interrupted, and was the first person who could get along with Eve, to Buffy’s immense relief.

And then Andrew’s boyfriend appeared, frantic with worry as Andrew hadn’t answered his phone.
for three days, and then proceeded to scream at them because Andrew had used magic to keep himself awake for seventy two hours straight and none of them had noticed.

The situation was not made any better by half the people in the room clamouring to know which spell he’d used.

***

After six days Spike returned late one night, still drunk from what had clearly been a days’ long bender, and — apart from a black T-shirt and jeans — was also (somewhat incongruously) wearing a long black hooded cape with a red silk lining.

Giles had to admit he hadn’t particularly paid attention to Spike’s absence, but despatched a junior Slayer to fetch Buffy, hoping she could wrap up whatever she was doing and come to take charge of her ‘champion’.

Running down the stairs moments later, Xander following, Buffy looked somewhere between relieved and furious.

“Spike! Where have you been?”

“Mish me?” he asked, a sarcastic smirk on his face, and Giles saw her take a deep breath, and then another one.

“Yes. Yes I missed you. What’ve you been doing? Just getting blind drunk?”

“M not blind,” he retorted, swaying a little on his feet as Giles realised the vampire was a great deal more inebriated than he’d realised. “You jus’ a lil blurry…”

Buffy caught him as he fell, and got Xander to help her carry him over to a bench in a dark corner. At this point there were people sleeping in every nook and cranny, Giles was surprised that there was a bench free.

Buffy — exhausted, but a trooper as always — said she’d have to get back to Ternisha, but would Xander get them some coffee?

As Giles tried to remember what he himself had been doing when Spike had interrupted him, a creature that looked like the actual devil stepped through the doors — red skin, horns, tail, the lot. Except it was also wearing a very fetching suit.

“Good evening,” Giles said cautiously, as he sensed Xander stop and turn. “I’m Rupert Giles, Head Watcher. How can I help?”

The demon inclined its head.

“I’m Hazrufel. My cousin was a member of the Circle of the Black Thorn, and was murdered a few years ago.”

“And you want us to… investigate?” Giles said, wondering if this would be a lawsuit about damages. Angel’s team had taken down the Circle, but that didn’t mean people wouldn’t want reparations. To his relief, Hazrufel shook his head.

“Well, looking at how the chips are falling, I think I have some… information which you would find very advantageous.”
Before Giles could even think to turn Eve was at his side, face coolly appraising. He found himself wondering what kind of senses she possessed, she always appeared at the right time.

“I had dealings with Izzerial, your cousin, in L.A. Follow me.”

And with that she swept him up and ushered him into her office. Calm, professional, immaculately dressed — a stark contrast to the rest of team, who were more or less conscious, but looked as rumpled and exhausted as could be expected after almost a week of working non-stop.

“G-man, can I ask a question?” Xander asked, scratching the back of his head. “No one will tell me who this woman is. Or what she is doing here. And why do I have a feeling that she could take that guy to pieces without breaking a sweat?”

Giles glanced at him, then sighed.

“She was Angel’s contact to the Senior Partners when he was at Wolfram and Hart. Don’t know much else, except that she fell out with them. We… granted her asylum in return for her knowledge.”

“Huh,” Xander replied, conveying a world of scepticism with his one eye. “How’s that working out? She double-crossed you yet?”

“She won’t,” Giles said.

“And you know this… how?”

Giles smiled sadly, and repeated the words Lorne had told him a year and a half ago.

“Because she has nothing left to lose, and nowhere else to go.”

Making his way back to the little old lady waiting in his office (it was something about her cats suddenly levitating, and when they checked up on her they discovered that Wolfram and Hart had owned the plot her house was built on), he thought with regret of Lorne’s decision to leave. It had all been going very well, Lorne had been quite enthusiastic about helping the Slayers, but one look at Eve and the green demon had excused himself, insisting that he was going back to LA. Giles had coaxed the full story out of him with the help of his best whiskey — and a few confessions of his own. But he understood the weight of guilt and had wished Lorne the best. And his final words had stuck in Giles’ head.

‘Wolfram and Hart got us all, one way or another. I need to go learn to live with my sins.’

He had a feeling that this was what Eve was doing also.

Catching a glimpse of the red lining of the ridiculous cape, he added Spike to the list.

***

The next morning Buffy brought Spike a cup of black coffee and waited for him to regain consciousness.

Daybreak was dull, overcast and muggy and what one of the older cleaning ladies called ‘close’, which Buffy found an oddly accurate description. She could feel a headache beginning to assert itself (at some point she’d catch up on all the sleep she’d missed, although it might be next century) and she more than suspected that it was all building up to a massive thunderstorm. She wondered if this would be good or bad for them. Would the demons go away or be spurred on?
She had been up since 3 am when there had been a disturbance that had needed dealing with (it all blurred, but there had been a lot of teeth), but seeing how exhausted the younger Slayers had been she’d sent them back to bed as she’d been worried they would end up injured or worse.

“Good morning?”

He glared at her, but at least it was an actual look, and not that horrible, distant silence of the night he’d returned.

“Fucking awful morning, but that’s nothing new.”

“Spike…”

“Sorry, you must’ve been snowed under. Couldn’t help. Too hurt, too…” He paused. “I just needed to…”

His eyes grew distant.

“Spike?”

“Huh?”

Deep breath. Not that much better then. But at least he was attempting to talk.

“It’ll be like three minutes until the next disaster, can you just focus? Where did you go?”

He took a sip of his coffee, glancing at her over the rim.

(The cuts on his face were mostly healed by now, his eyes as blue as she had ever seen and his hair was all messed up, blond and fuzzy, and she wanted to run her hands through it, wanted to- oh god, she’d not had sex in almost two years, she felt almost hollow with sudden longing. He was back and he was here and he was okay, and as soon as the worst of the fallout was over with they could…) 

“Um, Soho mostly, there’s a great demon pub-”

She blinked, forcing herself to remember her previous line of thought.

“No, not where you went now. You and — and Angel…”

(Every time she remembered there was a sudden painful stab inside. But she couldn’t fall apart, couldn’t run away, she was Big Grown-up Buffy these days. She just bankrolled the losses and carried on… How could she be so simultaneously happy and grieving?)

Spike frowned, drank more of the coffee.

“Told Giles everything I remember already.”

“No but — before that. You were gone for eighteen months…”

Slowly he lowered the cup, searching her face.

“We were gone for a day. Like, twenty four hours tops. It’s been eighteen months?”

She nodded, pressing her lips together to stop letting her emotions take over. Not yet. Once this endless carousel of nightmare scenarios was over, then she’d grieve. (And have really spectacular sex. How was it all so mixed up?) But not yet.
“Spike I… am way too tired right now, just promise me you won’t disappear again, OK?”

As she spoke, she realised that he was looking past her, eyes widening and a smile slowly spreading across his face.

“Connor!”

A second later he was running across the lobby, before enthusiastically embracing the somewhat bewildered young man who had quietly come through the front door. He had a large carryall over one shoulder, and generally looked so normal that he almost seemed out of place.

“Didn’t know you were comin’,” Spike exclaimed, as Buffy made her way to them, and Connor shrugged.

“I tried to call, but it’s a bit hard getting through… And I figured you could do with help? If you’ll have me?”

A beat, then he dropped his head, not quite looking at them.

“Just figured, since my dad isn’t here…”

He was directing his questions more to Buffy than Spike, and she nodded.

“Of course. Can’t believe you came all this way, but another fighter is always welcome. We have been—”

There was a loud scream, and she tilted her head.

“I think that’s the exorcism of the Seers we found in Wolfram and Hart’s basement. Although it might be that evil centipede from another dimension which keeps clawing its way back through, no matter how often we banish it. Or maybe the sewer demon showed up again, one of the girls has a phobia…”

She was prattling on, but she couldn’t quite engage with what this all meant. How people — even Angel’s own son — just kept saying how he was gone… It didn’t fit, and she was too exhausted to grapple with it.

But Spike reached out, took hold of Connor’s shoulder. Friendly, familiar, supportive.

“He’d be proud of you kid. And he’d tell you so if he was here. Brag to all and sundry as a matter of fact.”

Connor smiled ruefully. (And the little sideways smile was so much like Angel’s that for a second Buffy couldn’t breathe.)

“If only he hadn’t signed that prophecy away…”

Spike snorted agreement, even as the words set off a chain-reaction in Buffy’s mind.

She had quite consciously shoved the loss of Angel out of her mind whenever it had cropped up. It was nothing like the grief of having to sacrifice him when she was seventeen, she wasn’t ‘in love’; but he was Angel. He should just be there, because that’s who he was.

And after Spike had returned without a heartbeat she had almost forgotten the weirdly named prophecy. Shan… Shan… Shanshu, that was it.
But what if Angel had fulfilled it by using the Dead Key…

“Wait-” she said, turning to Spike, eyes widening.

“Buffy, no, you don’t understand-” he called out, but she was already on her way to find Willow. 

*What if?*
Xander hadn’t seen Spike in years, and hadn’t missed him much, if he was honest. Not that he hated the vampire or anything that drastic, but there was too much awkward history for him to be entirely comfortable. If Buffy wanted to date him, that was fine, but he was perfectly happy with it taking place elsewhere. He could still remember that very unfortunate time when they’d turned up in Rome and been witness to more Spike and Buffy smooching than anyone should ever have to witness. Like that time with the accidental love spell, but for real.

The long distance relationship thing seemed to be going well as far as he could tell, apart from how Spike & co had completely disappeared for the past… year and a half?

Except now they were arguing. And it wasn’t a small argument either.

Buffy had burst into what was known as the ‘Common Room’ (it was some weird British term), Spike and a young man Xander had never seen before following moments later, but Buffy was already on a roll:

“Willow! Or whoever is best at all this prophecy stuff — where’s Dawn? — can you research the Shanshu prophecy?”

All the people who had bedded down were rapidly forcing themselves into more or less upright positions, wondering what new calamity the morning had brought. Willow blinked at Buffy, her hair a rusty halo around her head, and Xander wondered what the hell a shoe prophecy had to do with anything. Wolfram and Hart had evil shoes?

“Buffy!” Spike cut in, almost yelling. “Stop this, it’s pointless.”

(Spike as the voice of reason? Well, stranger things had happened…)

“Pointless,” she replied frostily. “Really? Unlike getting blind drunk, which is so very productive. Not to mention refusing to talk to anyone.”

Spike’s eyes narrowed to slits, his anger clear as day, and Xander began to realise that this was a proper argument. He’d not seen them like this since… Since Sunnydale.

“I’m sorry I’m not dealing with this in whatever way you would like, but just listen to me. They made him sign away the Shanshu — in his own blood, on the prophecy itself — for exactly this reason. On the off-chance he’d go rogue after all and try to fight against them. Trust me, they would
have made one hundred percent certain that he’d never, ever get that shiny reward. Hell, if he’s out there with a pulse, I’ll be the best man at your wedding!”

Buffy visibly blanched, but Spike continued undeterred.

“Angel knew the price, knew exactly what he was doing. I don’t know why he did it, but it wasn’t for fun. Can’t ask him, can we, since he’s in hell!”

At this Buffy’s eyes widened, and Xander could almost see the light bulb above her head. He rather wished someone would explain things — why were they talking about Angel? What prophecy?

“Wait. Maybe — maybe if he isn’t human, we could find him? Like, bring him back? He came back from hell once, and — and Willow pulled me out of heaven! And you came back!”

Willow was watching, head going from side to side as if she were watching a tennis match, and looked like she wanted to speak up, but didn’t get a chance.

“No.” Spike’s voice was a flat fiat.

“No?” Buffy shot back. Arms crossed, chin up, so full of defiance and self-assurance Xander half-expected everyone in the room to snap to attention.

Spike wasn’t playing however.

“No. Sometimes you just can’t save people.”

Buffy shook her head, incredulous. Xander wondered how she was coping, she had to be running on pure adrenaline by now. This was really not the best time for anyone to be picking a fight — which made him wonder about Spike. Why was he so dead-set against trying to get Angel back? Not that Xander was particularly keen, and it seemed a strange thing to focus on in the middle of everything else, but those were not Spike’s arguments.

“Why do you suddenly get to decide who can be saved?” Buffy snapped, and Spike almost exploded.

“Because I know it won’t work! Because I know what these people were capable of! I spent ten years witnessing the fallout from their policies firsthand, what happened to those who went against them. Wolfram and Hart would have made triple sure that whoever brought them down would be suitably punished. The price for saving the world, is him. And it was his choice!”

The room was deathly silent by now, assorted Slayers and the handful of junior Watchers sat clutching their blankets, unsure and apprehensive. Xander for a moment wondered what they made of it all — and what they might tell Giles later. As far as he knew Giles had disappeared in the middle of the night to mediate in some conflict that had suddenly flared up, claiming that no one else would understand the subtleties of the politics involved. Xander was beginning to wish he’d gone with him.

Then Buffy spoke again, voice almost breaking, and Xander remembered the way she had fallen into his arms when he’d arrived. Why on earth was Spike being so obtuse? He was supposed to be her boyfriend, what the hell happened to supporting the woman with the weight of the world on her shoulders?

“How can you be like that? Just giving up before even trying?”

There was a long pause as they merely watched each other. Eventually Spike took a deep breath, as
if trying to steel himself.

“Fine — remember you wanted to know why Illyria hurt so much? Why I couldn’t look at her when she looked like Fred?"

A beat, then he continued, voice suddenly quiet and raw with emotion.

“When was Fred dying — which happened like, out of the blue, no warning, just suddenly her insides were cooking — we discovered that it was Illyria gutting her from the inside out, slowly and painfully turning her into nothing but a shell. We were fucking desperate to save her. Angel and I travelled halfway around the world, because there was a tiny chance that we could save her. And the kicker? We could. There was a way — except it would cost the lives of millions of people. Do you have any idea how close we came?”

He closed his eyes, shook his head, then looked up again.

“The reason it hurts is because we let her die. Mark my words Slayer: if you find a way to save Angel? There will be a price, and you won’t be able to pay it.”

Buffy’s nostrils flared.

“You have no idea what I’m willing to do for him!”

At this Spike tilted his head, voice almost cruel:

“Did you ever try to find me? After I burned to death saving the world?”

The room seemed entirely too silent, no one moving or even breathing.

“That’s — that’s different.”

“No it isn’t! It’s exactly the same. Leave him alone. Nothin’ good can come of your meddling.”

They had all observed the back and forth without daring to intervene, and the sound of another voice surprised them all.

“Spike’s right.”

It was the youngster. Voice quiet, but assertive. And American, which was unexpected.

“You’re as bad as him!” Buffy said, raising her arms in exasperation, and the kid gave a small smile.

“Well, we are his sons.”

Xander blinked. The lad didn’t look like a vampire. And since when… No, nothing made sense anymore.

Spike turned to him, pleased and surprised, even as Buffy folded her arms again:

“I have to try.”

Spike sighed, the anger suddenly seeping out of him, almost like he was deflating before their eyes.

“I know. I… can’t help. Sorry.”

He sounded defeated, and Xander almost felt sorry for him, even if he couldn’t wrap his mind
around Spike’s reasons for being so recalcitrant.

Buffy opened her mouth to say something, then paused as she looked past Spike, and they all turned to see Eve in the doorway. It was anyone’s guess how long she had been there.

“Eve! Oh my god, of course — I want to—”

“I know,” Eve replied, leaning against the doorway, and smiling that infuriating smile she seemed to excel at. Xander didn’t know how she did it, but she constantly seemed smugly overbearing.

“You want to ‘rescue’ Angel. I hate to break it to you kids, but Spike’s right, Angel can’t be saved. However, I’ll very much enjoy watching you try and fail.”

“What do you mean?” Buffy was wary now, but Eve didn’t flinch, her smile deepening as she took a step into the room, eyeing Buffy coolly.

“Angel is going to suffer forever, and getting a front seat to having this confirmed is quite literally what I have been waiting for.”

Xander felt like yelling ‘I knew she was evil!’ and Buffy looked like she had not dissimilar notions.

“But you have been helping us!”

“Sure sweetie,” Eve replied. “Watching Wolfram and Hart collapse has been great too. It’s possible to hate several things at the same time.”

“But why do you hate Angel?” Buffy pressed on, and the smile faded from Eve’s face.

“Angel killed the man I loved. The man I sacrificed everything for. And the funny thing is, I’m pretty sure Angel didn’t even pull the trigger himself — oh no, Angel probably got someone else to do his dirty work for him. You seem to think he was nobly fighting from inside the belly of the beast — I was there, and he was eaten alive. No one signs up for that job and just walks away. No, it’s exactly the opposite of what you presume — the reason he was so successful is that he was very good at his job.”

She tilted her head, eyes like steel.

“Now believe me, the irony of Wolfram and Hart being taken down by one of their own isn’t lost on me, and it’s quite poetic, really. But to ask me to care? To think Angel any more worth saving than that baby eating demon who was angry because his supply got cut off? Oh honey, you have got to be kidding. All I have left is vengeance, and it was this job or signing up with D’Hoffryn. And quite frankly I’ve had enough of men telling me what to do.”

They were all staring at her, stunned, and the smile came back as she held up her hands.

“Hey kids, don’t look so worried. Sorry if I’ve upended your cosy little worldview, but surely you must have understood by now that Angel was a manipulative, scheming bastard who literally sold his friends down the river for his own ends?”

She (weirdly) shot the American boy a strange look but then thankfully left, only stopping to half-turn in the doorway, glancing over her shoulder for a final parting shot:

“Besides, he wasn’t even that great in bed.”

Xander felt his jaw drop. What the hell was this woman? He stared at Buffy, who seemed frozen in
disbelief, except before he could do or say anything Andrew appeared in the doorway, covered in something foul and green.

“Buffy! We need all the Slayers asap — there’s been another breach, we have a demon army coming through in the store cupboard on the third floor, Ternisha is holding them back almost single-handedly.”

As if waking from sleep, Buffy snapped her fingers, gathering the Slayers in the room and sending them ahead, only stopping in the doorway to catch Willow’s eyes:

“Unless an actual Hellmouth opens, Angel is top priority, understood?”

Willow nodded, and before she could reply Buffy had run off.

“Well, that’s my morning booked,” Willow remarked to no one in particular, then turned to Talnor. “So, pudding faces, how do you feel about searching through a whole bunch of hell-dimensions looking for a souled vampire? Sure he’s not smelling of roses, but we can’t go about throwing stones what with living in a massive glass house…”

Xander got to his feet, stiff from sleeping curled up on a small sofa, and stretched as much as he was able, only half-noticing three junior Watcher scurrying away, not meeting anyone’s eyes. Whether they were uncomfortable with the big showdown, or wanted to avoid getting dragged into any research, their escape left only himself, Willow, Spike and the boy (young man? He could be anything from 16 to 25).

Xander was about to ask who he was, when he noticed once more how utterly defeated Spike looked. Like all energy had been drained from him by the argument, strangely at odds with the ridiculousness of the cape that he still had tied around his neck, like he’d dressed up for a silly costume party. Xander felt sorry for him, yet felt he ought to point out the very obvious truth they had all danced around, but never spoken out loud.

It wasn’t tactful, but Xander was too tired to politely pussy-foot around the big issues that were tearing them all apart. He knew the price of keeping up appearances and had paid it in full.

“Look Spike, she’ll always love Angel—”

He didn’t get any further as he found himself slammed up against the wall, feet barely touching the floor and Spike’s cold hard fingers in a tight grip around his throat, the fury back with a vengeance:

“You think I don’t? You think I wouldn’t sell my soul ten times over to get him back? But I know it won’t work, and when she finally has to accept it too, I’ll have to pick up the pieces. Like always.”

‘You think I don’t?’ the words were ricocheting around Xander’s brain, making no sense. Spike loved Angel? What the hell… except the world seemed to be going out of focus and he would really, really like to breathe but there was something crushing his windpipe…

Just as the world was fading away, Xander found himself landing on the floor, painfully gulping down air as Willow hovered into view, calling his name.

She gently got him up to a sitting position where he tried to ease his breathing and attempted to work out what had happened and why. Except once he managed to focus on Spike again the vampire seemed to have forgotten all about him, instead speaking to no one in particular, something that might almost be tears in his eyes:

“Why does everyone in my family have to burn?”
The American kid seemed to ponder this. “I had my throat cut. And my mother got staked. Twice.”

A ghost of a smile lit up Spike’s features, the humour almost reaching his eyes.

“Damn, I like you kid. Wanna go get a pint? Great pub not far off — King’s Arms. Got a blue plaque for your dad and everything.”

The youngster shook his head.

“I think it’s like… 6 am?”

Spike ran a hand through his (already very messy) hair.

“Good point. Well, tonight we’ll do your father proud.”

Fighting against a coughing fit, Xander finally managed to find his voice and waved towards the youngster.

“But who are you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, didn’t mean to be rude. I’m Connor, Angel’s son. His human son, I should probably clarify.”

He held out his hand, so perfectly ‘the normal American youth’ that Xander could only stare wordlessly.

“I don’t understand,” he said eventually, and Spike snorted.

“Well, there’s an understatement if ever there was one. C’mon Connor, let’s get some tea instead. Proper tea, not that pathetic stuff they drink on the other side of the pond.”

And with that he slung an arm across ‘Connor’s’ shoulders and they walked out.

Xander turned to Willow.

“What happened?”

Slowly she shook her head.

“No idea. But Buffy’s my friend, and having a quick look for Angel can’t hurt. It’ll make a nice break from the rest of the crap we’ve had to deal with.”

She pulled a face, and looked almost exactly the way she had when she was twelve and complained about Cordelia being a bitch.

“Last thing before I crashed for the night, Talnor and I had to banish this tentacle beast with wicked psychic powers — Wolfram and Hart had kept it in a cage and it kept trying to eat me…”

She shuddered, then caught Xander’s eyes.

“So yeah, trying to save someone sounds like a neat idea.”

Reaching out, she patted Xander’s arm.

“Oh and try to stay out of the drama? We don’t want any collateral damage from friendly fire, K?”

Impulsively he hugged her.
“I’ve missed you.”

“Me too,” she whispered.

***

“Kitchen should be down this way,” Spike said, and Connor followed, jet-lagged and somewhat disoriented, but quite willing to get something to drink. And maybe eat — although listening to the sounds of fighting coming from the third floor he asked whether the Slayers maybe needed some help?

Spike shrugged, and turned down some steps.

“There’ll be plenty of things for you to kill, don’t worry. How come you’re here anyway? Bit of a way to travel…”

“Well, I’d been thinking what to do if… y’know, stuff went down. And then you called and I figured I could lend a hand. My parents kept saying I should do something with my summer, so I turned round and told them I wanted to go to Europe. Had to get a passport sorted and all that, which is why I’ve taken nearly a week to actually get here.”

“Well, it’s good to see you.”

Spike turned in the doorway to what Connor presumed was the kitchen, studying him with dark eyes.

“Seriously, can’t explain what it means to me. Watched all that’s left of my family burn to death within the past few weeks, and… not doing so well, as I’m sure you noticed already. I’ve been accused of many things, but subtlety of emotion isn’t one of them.”

“Yeah, what… was that?” Connor asked, as Spike continued into the kitchen which was strewn with dirty crockery; cups, plates and cutlery piled high in the sink and covering every surface. Spike didn’t seem to mind, and located an electric kettle on a worktop behind an unstable-looking pile of plates, before proceeding to fill it from the tap with a fair bit of contortion so as not to upset the careful balance of encrusted cups in the sink.

Spike didn’t answer the question immediately, instead simply leaning on the worktop, looking into the distance.

“What was that… Too many exhausted grieving people, that’s what. And it’ll get worse before it gets better… Thanks for backing me up by the way.”

Connor put down his carryall and found a chair. The kitchen was roomy, and painted a pale green that somehow reminded him of hospitals. The cabinets were dark wood, the floor white and black tiled linoleum and he idly wondered when it had last been decorated. Fifty years minimum he’d wager. He was stalling he knew, trying to avoid what he had to say. He cleared his throat.

“Angel… came to see me, before you set off. From what he said he… didn’t expect to make it. And I know the fallout from trying to change things. That woman — Eve? She never said my name, but I know it was me she was talking about. I’m the reason Angel took the job. The reason everyone died.”

Spike, who had been practically climbing inside a cabinet and had come back out with a teapot, almost froze where he stood, then carefully put the teapot down and made his way around the central workstation.
“Now don’t you go blaming yourself, you hear me? You were a victim and Angel never, not for one second, regretted his choice. Would’ve died a hundred times over, as long as you were OK.”

Connor half-smiled.

“You don’t have to do the pep talk, I’m fine. Well, as fine as anyone could be under the circumstances. It’s just… he wanted me away from all this, to keep me ‘safe’, but I don’t think that’s really possible?”

Quirking an eyebrow, Spike looked up from a box of tea bags which he had discovered in a cupboard above the sink.

“Considerin’ you just walked into the lion’s den…”

They were interrupted by a bustling black woman who looked to be somewhere in her fifties, in a cleaner’s outfit.

“Now would you look at this mess! I’ll never understand why these magical people can’t be a little more like Harry Potter, surely they could just do a spell or two and make everything clean?”

She had the most delightful lilting accent that Connor couldn't place, and then she looked across to Spike who was still holding the box of teabags.

“Ah dear, do you want some help with that?”

Bemused, he shook his head.

“Listen Doris, I’ve been making tea since Queen Victoria was still on the throne. I think I’ll manage.”

A beat, then he pursed his lips.

“Although if you know where there’s some actual real loose tea, I’d be much obliged.”

She shook her head.

“No, none of that, although I have a secret stash of Earl Grey?”

Spike leaned forwards, a slow, smouldering smile spreading across his face and his eyes practically glowing with focus.

“Oh Doris, if I didn’t already have a girlfriend I’d be proposing about now…”

She laughed and told him her name was actually Rosemary. The kettle boiled and they made the tea, Rosemary locating some milk also, but Connor felt oddly disconnected, even as he sipped the (pleasantly fragrant) tea. In his head, all he could hear was his father’s voice (his first father, voice old and gravelled and with unmistakable gravity).

‘Never forget that the vampire is a predator. This does not mean merely his fangs or his supernatural strength. No the vampire looks human, and uses this to his utmost advantage. A master vampire can charm and flatter his way into places where a mere beast could never hope to enter. And that makes him all the more dangerous.’

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Spike, but Angel had always been careful, cautious, filled with guilt. But seeing this innate and unconscious use of charm was a timely reminder that not all evil looked monstrous. He thought of Eve, and tried to suppress a shudder. Had her words been a warning? Did
she blame him for her fate?

“Grandma…”

Thrown out of his thoughts Connor looked up to see a young black girl in the doorway to the kitchen. She was covered in green goo and clutching her side where a large red stain was spreading across her clothing.

“Ternisha!” Rosemary exclaimed, “What have you been doing?”

The girl smiled, eyes dancing despite the obvious pain.

“Holding back a demon army on my own? But one of the bastards cut me as it fell…”

Her grandmother tutted loudly.

“Language young lady, what have I told you. Now then, where is a First Aid kit when you need it, I’m sure there was one in this cupboard down here… Ternisha darling, sit down and try not to bleed on the floor…”

Unearthing a rudimentary kit, she kept talking.

“Sorry, have you met my granddaughter? Always in trouble when she was younger; truanting, getting in fights, hanging out with all kinds of undesirables, but then one day – let me have a look sweetheart – this young woman turns up on our doorstep, says our Ternisha has a special calling, that she has been chosen as a fighter against the forces of darkness. Ah we didn’t know what to think – there, there, it’s not all that bad, you’ll be right as rain in no time – but it’s been the making of her, hasn’t it?”

Ternisha looked as if she was used to this monologue and smiled somewhat stiffly – although that could just be the pain — as her grandmother continued blithely.

“Who would have thought it, two years back when the police brought you home for shoplifting, that you would be fighting armies…”

They were interrupted by a roar, and turned to see a hideous demon in the doorway; large, brutal-looking, heavily armoured and wielding two swords, clearly getting ready to pounce.

“Alright Boy Wonder, looks like you’re up,” Spike drawled, tossing Connor his sword and raising his tea cup in encouragement.

For a fraction of a second he could feel his world freeze. He hadn’t fought since that initial battle with Sahjhan (and helping Angel when LA Wolfram and Hart fell); trying to keep the two halves of his life separate. Fighting meant tapping into that other life, the one of pain and hunger and a desperate, overriding will for survival.

But wasn’t this why he’d come? To try to reconcile the two halves? To see if he could be that warrior for good his father so clearly wanted him to be. (Daddy-issues three times over, he was such a mess. But he knew that his dad — knowing nothing of demons and darkness — would simply say ‘Do whatever feels right, son. I trust you to make the right decisions.’)

Grasping the sword he allowed himself to react through pure instinct, the Kill Before Getting Killed that was still embedded deep within his bones, knowing that there was never back-up, no one to save him but himself.
The demon fell down dead within mere moments (it seemed to think Connor would adhere to any kind of sword fighting rules, rather than go straight for the kill), and Connor looked up to see Spike smirking and Ternisha and Rosemary looking surprised.

“Well my child, who are you? I would say you fight almost as well as my little girl here…”

He lowered the sword, taking a moment to come back into the room. He could do this. Make the fighter a part of himself, not something separate. He was more than a stolen child, reared in a Hell dimension, with a bunch of happy memories thrown on top.

“I’m Connor,” he replied, and somehow the next words felt more real than they had so far. “Angel’s son.”

There followed more tea, a secret stash of ‘biscuits’, and a lot of talk, periodically interrupted by more demons attacking, until eventually all three of them had to get up, Connor leading with Ternisha and Spike flanking, as some kind of evil mole infestation erupted through the floor. Connor — as the only uninjured one — lifted Rosemary onto a worktop while they stabbed ‘the dirty little buggers’ (Spike’s words, Ternisha’s were more colourful, which earned her a telling off), and they ended up ankle deep in small bloodied furry bodies.

At which point Buffy appeared in the doorway, studying the tiny corpses with a deep frown, before re-focussing on Spike.

“Right, so this is where you’ve been hiding. Thought I’d let you know that Willow is ready for her big spell. Although you seem… busy…”

She studied the floor again, shook her head and left, and Connor almost felt the sigh beside him.

“Guess we better go.”

“What’s happening?” Ternisha asked, and Spike shrugged.

“Just another spell. Won’t work, but…”

Ternisha’s interest had turned to zero at the mere mention of the word ‘spell’, so they said their goodbyes and made their way back upstairs.

However, halfway up the stairs Spike turned, studying Connor for a long moment.

“Why, by the way? Why’d you agree with me? I think we got interrupted, and I’m curious. I’d have expected you to be first in line to get your father back.”

Connor let his hand trail along the beautiful wooden bannister, trying to put his thoughts into words.

“I’ve… been expecting it, I guess. He wasn’t counting on coming back, said his goodbyes very carefully. And people die. Good people, bad people, heroes, villains… My mother staked herself so I could live, it’s…” he lifted his eyes, “It’s fucked up, but that’s just how the world works. And once I thought it meant that everything was meaningless. That everything was a lie. Angel saved me then, and you know the price he paid. The price everyone paid. So I… guess I believe in doing my bit, but there’s no such thing as miracles. Nothing is free, happy endings must be paid for. And he’d never agree to it.”

Spike had studied him, eyebrows rising.

“Well, gotta give Stanford its due, you’re bloody articulate. Nicely said. Should’ve just let you do the
talking.”

The caretakers were dragging demon bodies out the back as they made their way across the hallway back into the Common Room, green slime and blood covering the floor, and Connor was thinking that he’d have to buy new shoes.

The witch (Willow) had made a nice set-up with a mystical circle and candles, the curtains drawn even though it was still grey outside. The one-eyed guy (Xander?) was the only one there besides Buffy.

“You sure you’ll be OK?” Buffy was asking, and Willow almost laughed.

“I’ve got my lil hell buddy here, he can easily access a higher plane-slash-hell dimension, so finding Angel shouldn’t be much of a problem. Getting him out… That might be more of an issue, but this should be a good start. And it’ll be a nice break from all the crazy.”

“Yeah, let’s do the hell dimension holiday package, such fun,” Spike muttered under his breath, before leaning against the wall by the door, silent and maudlin, the easy banter of the tea break gone completely. Connor placed himself next to him, curious despite himself to see how this would play out. He eyed what Willow had referred to as ‘my lil hell buddy’ suspiciously — Spike had given him a rudimentary explanation, but all his old instincts were waking up, and he was wondering what would happen if the creature (Talnor, that was the name) decided to go rogue after all…

Eve was nowhere to be seen, presumably she’d been told she wasn’t welcome.

Willow started the spell, softly chanting as a beautiful glow surrounded her and Talnor, the light intensifying until without warning there was a large, silent explosion, throwing everyone in the room to the ground as a hideous, yet insubstantial, shape unfurled — enormous horns, red eyes, skeletal hands and arms outstretched — and roared:

“THE VAMPIRE IS MINE.”

Chaos followed.

Willow was freaking out, making as if to wipe something invisible off herself (“Oh god, I can feel it, it was inside me, oh god oh god…”), Talnor roaring, Xander was trying to pick himself up from the floor to comfort Willow, Buffy looked like she was in tears, and it took a moment for Connor to notice Spike’s reaction.

Except when he began to listen, he forgot about the mayhem at the other side of the room. Spike was talking to himself, as if not quite believing his own words.

“It all makes sense. How did I forget — I had those bloody symbols carved into my chest. Should’ve known…”

“What do you mean?” Connor asked, and Spike looked up, studying him but still seeming to speak more to himself than Connor, as if piecing things together as he spoke:

“Illyria said that — that in her day, the Wolf, Ram and Hart were barely above vampires, that they had to have found some kind of pure power source to ‘beef up’. And… The First Evil must have been it. The amulet, remember? No wait, you won’t know about that, but I took down The First Evil with an amulet that came from Wolfram and Hart. Must have been a safeguard they kept handy in case The First tried to rise again and take back their power. And then—”

He stopped, nodded.
“That’s what we did, what the Dead Key did. Severed that link, cut off their power at the source. That’s why they had those symbols.”

“What symbols?” Connor asked, confused. He was piecing together that the big demon thing had been ‘The First Evil’, that the others had fought it previously, and that it was bad enough to have them all badly shook.

At his question Spike seemed to focus on him properly for the first time.

“So, back in Sunnydale we found this seal above the Hellmouth, and we realised it belonged to ‘The First Evil’. And those same symbols were on the mystical circle in ‘the Home Office’ or wherever it was we went. Angel picked up the Dead Key and jumped into it and it just sort of… exploded in light. I knew I recognised them, I just… blanked it out, I guess. Torture tends to do that, s’pose.”

He shook his head, eyes once more growing distant.

“Anyway, it all fits… See if someone was foolish enough to try what we did, they’d get served up for The First to feast on. That was the scream that Dru and Willow heard, the deterrent. And Angel—”

His voice trailed off as he realised the room had fallen silent, listening to him.

“Happy now?” he asked, in what was probably meant to be a final, cutting remark, but sounded more like an exhausted plea.

From Buffy’s reaction, Spike might as well have slapped her, but instead of replying she turned her back on Spike, instead asking Willow if there was any chance of getting Angel out. Willow was clutching Talnor tight, emphatically shaking her head and looking pale and shaken.

The sense of defeat and hopelessness in the room was palpable, and when a large winged demon creature burst through the door, Buffy threw a knife at it without even looking up, and it fell to the floor with a silent shriek, dark purple blood slowly spreading across the ornate, but faded carpet.

Connor wasn’t quite sure what to do; but then without any warning Spike abruptly folded up beside him, screaming in pain and clutching his head.
For the first split-second there was nothing but déjà vu — mind-splitting pain exploding in his skull, and Spike tried to bite back the scream that was forming, but was unable to contain it. He felt all the old defences spring back up — never mind that the chip was years in his past and long long gone, the pain was indistinguishable.

But then — images, like some internet video, the cuts too fast to follow, but burned onto his retinas as he blinked, back in the room and the whole Scoobie Gang bent over him, Buffy kneeling in front of him and grasping his good arm.

“Spike? Are you OK? Spike?”

A girl. Maybe a girl. Short dyed black hair, serious eyeliner. Leather. A street… Posh, fancy townhouses. Belgravia somewhere? And demons, nasty, like those- oh yes, he remembered now. Oh hell, if some of those were running around…

“Spike!”

He blinked, focussed on Buffy’s face, faltering as he was forced to put a name to what had happened, insane as it sounded.

“I think I… had a vision?”

Buffy did a double take.

“A vision?”

“Like…” he tried to remember back. The guy, what was his name again? Eve’s sweetheart, the one she was clearly still pissed about. Doyle? No, Lindsey, that was it, had talked about visions from the Powers that Be… Load of bullshit as it turned out, it’d been Cordelia who’d had the visions. Oh. That final big meeting when Angel had laid out his plan for taking down the Circle of the Black Thorn:

“When did this all start?’ Spike had asked. And Angel’s reply…

‘2 months ago. With a kiss.’

Wesley had confirmed it: ‘Cordelia gave you her visions?’
He inhaled sharply. Of course. Why was he always so bloody slow? He could almost feel Angel smacking him around the head.

‘Help the helpless’ — that had been the motto back in the day. It made sense — not in the horrible, gut wrenching sense of before, but in the sense of everything fitting together. A bigger picture, a bigger story.

Touching his lips, replaying that final goodbye in his mind, he smiled softly. It had been a gift — a mission, a purpose, now he was left all alone.

He focussed on Buffy again, the smile widening.

“Yeah, a vision. I need to — go save a girl. Or possibly a very pretty boy, it’s hard to tell, bit blurry.”

“I don’t understand,” she replied, and he almost laughed.

“A vision. From the bloody Powers that Be. Cordelia used to have them, believe it or not. They’re… a thing. She gave them to Angel before she died and Angel must have passed them on to me.”

“Passed them on to you? What do you mean?”

Impulsively he reached out and kissed her — for the first time since he’d returned — feeling like a heavy weight had been lifted. He’d been so lost, so alone, the loss of Angel so swiftly after Dru numbing him, their deaths like wildfires tearing through his past, shared memories and bonds turning to ashes all around him.

(And Buffy had said she loved him — properly loved him, just the way he was — but she couldn’t be there for him, nor he for her; not this time, not this loss. He didn’t blame Buffy for not understanding, she was obviously grieving in her own way, but what Angel meant to them was poles apart.)

The kid helped though. More than Spike really knew how to explain, but the sheer fact of being near physical family was a balm. Despite being human, he smelled right; had Darla’s eyes (except less bitchy), Angel’s smile. And he understood, was a fundamental cog in the dark web of Angel’s life.

“I mean — I have a mission!”

He couldn’t stop the grin on his face, the feeling of purpose filling him up like sunlight once had. Considerably less fatal though.

He’d had a mission for so long that losing it had left a hole in his life, so fundamental that he had almost not realised that this was where part of the pain came from. Oh he could have helped out Buffy (his left arm and shoulder were almost better by now), but there were so many bitty Slayers now that his input was negligible when it came to fighting beside her.

Back in LA he had chosen Angel’s fight — not on a whim, but carefully, deliberately. For once in his life trying to let his brain do the driving. Understanding that he still had that fight was something to cling to in this new Angel-less world.

Because this; this he could do. Give him danger, point him in the right direction, and he was flying.

Buffy still looked shell shocked (as well she might, and oh she was beautiful, his gorgeous, incredible Slayer) and he jumped to his feet.

“Anyone got a bike? Like a motorbike?”
“It’s… daylight?” Xander offered, and Spike raised an eyebrow of derision.

“This is London, mate. That cloud may turn to rain, but there’ll be no sunshine today, that’s for sure.”

He was on home territory, and sure, the city had grown and changed, but he was getting more certain as to where he was going — the rich liked to keep things the way they always had been, and he was pretty certain he and Dru had killed a family in a house on that street…

“Bike?” he asked again, and Buffy got to her feet, meeting his eyes calmly.

“I have a bike. It’s parked out the back.”

She dug into a pocket, brought out a key.

“You going to wear the cape, driving around like Batman?”

He’d forgotten about the cape — a simple solution to the daylight, and he had been beyond caring about the visuals.

Undoing it, he turned to the kid.

“Right Junior, you up for another fight, or is the jet lag setting in yet?”

“Too wired to sleep yet,” Connor replied.

Two more minutes (borrowing a helmet for the kid, despite his protestations, and a few more weapons), and he and Connor were off.

Christ he’d missed this — the feeling of a metal engine growling beneath him, the wind in his hair, the **freedom**. Weaving in and out of the traffic, split-second adjustments as time seemed to slow down; this was where he lived.

If hell dimensions had motorbikes he’d have liked them so much more…

As expected, the police had bigger fish to fry than one biker breaking a few laws, and after trying a few streets that turned out to be duds he drove down a row of houses that fitted the flickering images in his memory.

“Think this is it…” he said, letting the bike putter to a halt.

Parking up, he tried to hone in on anything — smells, darkness, sounds…

Connor tilted his head, nodding towards the house a little further down.

“That one?”

“Mmmm. Spot on.”

After polite knocking did nothing, they decided to go over the back wall. Fewer witnesses. And the clouds looked like they could turn to rain any moment.

The back door was easily kicked in, and Connor cautiously stepped over the threshold. Spike hesitated, but then realised he could enter. Their eyes met, and Spike pulled a face. Were they too late? Was the kid already dead? Well, if so they could at least kill the demons…
Very nice house though — thoroughly modernised, everything looked like it came straight out of a magazine…

Then an eerie shriek that seemed to cut straight through his gut, and yeah, those were the wraiths he remembered. Half-remembered. He’d watched the fight from a roof, when he’d bothered to pay attention. Only couple of weeks ago, yet it felt like years, the lethargy had been so all-encompassing he couldn’t really remember much… And they were both gone now, his fellow warriors.

But he’d already tried to drown his grief in a bottle, this at least was a helluva lot more productive.

“Right — don’t touch them,” he informed Connor. “Not even after they’re dead. They’ll turn you into their kind.”

“You… could have mentioned this before,” Connor said, unsheathing his sword, and Spike grinned. “Like that would’ve made a difference…”

There were only four wraiths, but the no-touch rule meant it was a difficult fight. When they’d eventually managed to off them all, they fine-combed the house to make sure they had got them all, and it’d be nice to get a clue as to why they’d been there. Plus there was the kid…

They didn’t know what to make of the house. It was inhabited; food in the fridge, jackets and shoes in the hallway, dirty plates and cups in front of the telly, but the bedrooms were pristine, with nothing in the wardrobes…

Having worked their way up the floors, they eventually pushed open the door to the loft conversion and saw two big, frightened eyes staring back at them.

The eyes — to Spike’s pleasant surprise — belonged to the kid from his vision; he immediately recognised the jet-black hair (in his expert opinion dyed rather than natural), the eyeliner and the multiple earrings. The rest of the outfit matched the hair — T-shirt to boots it was top to toe black, with wide black leather wristbands and black nail polish. He really liked the kid’s style.

Unfortunately there was also a magical staff pointed at them, covered in runes.

“Are you from the Watcher’s Council?” the kid asked, voice breaking, and Spike tilted his head. A boy then. Although very young, maybe thirteen, fourteen at the most…

“Do we look like Slayers?” he replied, and the staff wavered a little.

“Did you kill my wraiths?” the boy then asked, and Spike nodded.

“Yes, they were bloody nasty things. Which begs the question — why were they ‘yours’ and… who or what are you?”

The boy’s eyes widened and he pointed the staff squarely at Spike’s chest.

“I could kill you,” he stated — a threat that might have worked a little better if he hadn’t looked like he was about to burst into tears.

Connor sighed, and literally laid down his sword before holding out his hands, palms up, smiling.

“Hey, we’re not here to hurt you. I’m Connor and this is Spike. Now Spike is a vampire, and the fact that he is standing where he is means that either all the people who live here are dead — or, if it’s your house, that you’re not human. And that’s fine.”
Spike felt like pointing out that if the boy was actually a face-stealing baby eater, ‘fine’ might not be the best term, but he couldn’t argue with the outcome, as the boy did lower his stick a little.

“What’s your name, kid?” Spike asked, softening his voice, and the lad swallowed.

“Adam. But why are you here if you’re not from the Council?”

“Right then Adam,” Spike began, wondering exactly how to spin it. “So, yours truly gets visions from the Powers that Screw. This one was about you, so I presumed you needed rescuing from the wraiths. I’m beginning to suspect the reality is a little more complicated…”

A beat, then the boy lowered the staff completely and started speaking, the words tumbling out.

“I’m only here to study and they got me this house for the summer holidays and everything was fine, but then suddenly Wolfram & Hart, like, disappeared and everything was collapsing and I couldn’t get hold of anyone and Slayers were killing lots of my contacts and so I did a spell to summon the wraiths because they could protect me, but they wouldn’t let me leave the house so I was trapped and I didn’t know what to do and I’m really scared because what if the Slayers come to kill me?”

Spike and Connor glanced at each other. So it was Wolfram & Hart related after all…

Before Spike could ask what exactly Adam’s connection to Wolfram & Hart was, Connor spoke again.

“So you’re here all on your own? No friends? Family?”

Adam shrugged.

“I have, like, an older sister, but she’s been missing for, like, years, which probably means that she got killed…”

“Oh. Sorry, that sucks.”

Adam shrugged again, this time somehow even less concerned.

“I say ‘sister’ but it’s not like we’re human or that I particularly care, I barely know her. And she screwed up on the job, like, big-time, so I presume they had her killed. Wolfram & Hart aren’t big on second chances…”

“What’d she do?” Spike asked, partly out of curiosity, and partly because he wasn’t quite sure what to ask next. ‘Come back to Slayer Central’ wouldn’t go down well, but he couldn’t leave the kid on his own.

“She fell in love,” Adam sneered, with all the contempt of the very young, still untouched by Cupid’s arrow. “Betrayed the Senior Partners. Like, we were born to work for them, how could she be so stupid?”

Spike felt like massive cogs were slowly connecting in his head. His hangover was pretty manageable, but it did seem to impede his brain functions somewhat, everything taking far longer to work out than it should.

“Hang on,” he said. “I think I know your sister…”

***

Opening the main doors of the Watcher’s Council they walked straight into a major argument.
“I go away for half a day-” Giles was saying, sounding equal parts exhausted and angry, and Buffy cut him off, furious.

“Oh don’t you dare go all Patriarchy on me. If we hadn’t tried to get Angel back we wouldn’t know any of this, and wouldn’t have uncovered her real agenda!”

“Hey!” Eve interjected. “I’m not the bad guy here. I’ve done nothing except help you. And half your people have tried destroying the world, why-”

She turned to see who was interrupting them, and her eyes widened.

The next second she was striding across the foyer.

“Adam! What are you doing here? And what the hell are you wearing? Is this what passes for a uniform at Eton?”

Adam raised his chin, defiant.

“It’s the summer holidays, I can wear what I want. And besides you’re human now Spike says, why should I listen to you?”

A second later Eve’s hand flashed forward, slapping him soundly across the face.

“Don’t you dare! You know nothing about what I’ve been through!”

“I was all alone!” The boy had tears in his eyes now. “I thought you were dead. And there was no one to help me and I had no one to ask and everything was falling apart and Slayers were killing everyone and I thought they would come for me too…”

He looked like he was going to actually burst into tears, as Giles and Buffy appeared.

“So… who is this?” Giles asked, clearly wishing himself a hundred miles away, and Spike smirked. It was good to be back, and even better to be able to enjoy the mayhem properly.

“Well Rupert, allow me to introduce Adam. He’s a child of the Senior Partners, and incidentally Eve’s little brother.”

There was a long pause as Giles seemed to reboot his whole brain.

“Right then. But… why is he here?”

Spike blinked innocently. “He’s technically an orphan now. Surely you’d want to help him? Besides, I had a vision, as you may have heard. From the actual Powers That Be. We’re meant to be helping him.”

Buffy’s eyes had darted between the two of them, taking in Spike’s now gelled back hair, eyeliner and nail polish.

“Looks more like your little brother,” she remarked, and Spike grinned widely.

After working out that it was indeed ‘their’ Eve who was Adam’s sister they sat him down to have a proper chat, but within five minutes Connor was fast asleep.

“Jet lag,” Spike explained. “Just arrived from America this morning. Seems a shame to wake him, so I guess the family reunion will have to wait a bit…”
Glancing around the large room (as messy a teenager’s bedroom as could be found anywhere, posters of long haired rock bands adorning the walls and clothes casually distributed across the floor and furniture) his eyes hit on the substantial collection of make up, hair spray and other beauty products on the smaller of the desks.

“Hey, would you mind if I borrowed some nail polish?”

Adam looked surprised, but shook his head.

“Sure. Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” Spike replied, jumping to his feet and feeling not unlike a kid in a sweet shop.

“Say what you will about the world of humans, but when it comes to personal grooming your average hell dimension is severely lacking.”

“So… you been to a lot of hell dimensions recently?” Adam asked, and Spike chuckled.

“Too many to name, for ‘bout ten years. Not to be recommended. Oh, eyeliner — do you mind?”

“Go ahead. There’s a mirror over there…”

Spike raised an eyebrow.

“Vampire.”

“Oh yeah. But… how’d you do that without a mirror?”

“Watch and learn, junior.”

Unfortunately the kid wasn’t stupid, and after having admired Spike’s effortless way with the eyeliner and his expertise with hair gel, Adam carried on with the previous topic.

“So, like, if you like the world of humans so much, why’d you spend so long in demon dimensions?”

Spike shot him a sharp glance. The teenage trappings aside, the boy wasn’t thick. Sent to the world of humans to learns their ways and become a loyal tool to his ‘parents’, he still had to learn the ways of subtlety, but his instincts were on point.

“Well, since you’ll find out one way or another,” Spike started, as he began to do his nails, briefly sketching in their quest, and the outcome.

Blowing on the nails to dry them, he waited for Adam to respond.

“So this… was all you? Everything falling apart?”

“Yup. I’d say I was sorry, but Wolfram & Hart were evil bastards, so…”

He shrugged, feigning nonchalance, but was ready to spring into action should need be. Instead Adam turned completely silent for a long moment.

“I can do what I want,” he eventually said. “Like, I’m free…”
“That’s the spirit,” Spike encouraged. Look at the opportunities, not what had been lost. “So, what are you going to do with your newfound freedom?”

“For starters I’m not going back to fucking Eton,” Adam replied vehemently.

Looking over the black haired Mini Me across from him, Spike had to bite back a chuckle. Ah that heady rush of being able to do whatever you wanted, and screw the rules.

“Lemme guess, you don’t exactly fit in?”

“I hate them all!” the boy stated, with absolute finality. “They were all ‘future contacts’ and ‘valued clients’ so I had to be polite and pretend to like them and all that… But now…”

His eyes lit up with unmistakable glee, and Spike shook his head. Time to impart a little wisdom — he couldn’t claim to posses much, but he was pretty sure he knew exactly what was on the boy’s mind.

“Now then, the reason I earned my nickname — my real name is William — is because after I was turned I went round and used railroad spikes to torture all the pricks who’d been nasty to me when I was alive.”

Adam looked suitably impressed, but Spike held up a hand.

“Very messy, not recommended. And don’t rush off to curse anyone either, or whatever magical tricks you’ve got up your sleeve. If you’re lucky, they’ll already be panicking because all their shady dealings have gone belly-up. As I’m sure you know, people like that always care more about status and money than anything else. If you want revenge, go for the money, or humiliate them.”

“You’re not really what I expected a hero to be like…” Adam offered after a moment, and Spike grinned, wolf-like.

“Welcome to the real world. Let’s go see if your sister wants anything to do with you, yeah?”

At Buffy’s words, he slung an arm around Adam’s slender shoulders.

“There, see we could be brothers. You, me ’n Connor, eh?”

“The three musketeers?” Eve offered coldly, and Spike looked back innocently.

“If you like. Although I thought you’d be pleased I found your brother…”

She let her eyes rest on Adam for a long moment, and Spike wondered what on earth was going on in her head.

“Fine. But you’re washing your face young man.”

“Not a chance. I like looking like this. I didn’t ask for this body or this face, but I’ll do whatever the hell I like with it!”

“It seems a pretty harmless outlet for rebellion,” Connor added. “I locked my dad in a cage and dropped him at the bottom of the ocean… Angel I mean, not one of the others.”
“This,” Spike said happily, looking from Connor’s wry amusement to Adam’s defiant face, “Is a beautiful day.”

A second later all the windows shattered as a black-clad swat team burst through them into the tall foyer.

Buffy stared up at the heavy armed militia descending on long ropes and shook her head.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

Then she turned on Spike:

“Oh and this is 100% your fault. That was a perfect jinx.”

“Fair nuff,” he replied, drawing his sword.

Then Eve sighed, looking at them like they were all morons.

“How are you all so stupid? Do I have to do everything around here?”

Grasping the magic staff that Adam still clung to like a security blanket, she stepped forwards, holding it up.

“Please inform your leader know that we will see them, their safety is guaranteed.”

Half-turning, she quietly added: “Older demons can be extremely paranoid. These are private soldiers, hired for security purposes in order to secure the area — hopefully whoever-it-is should now feel safe enough to talk to us.”

“And the stick?” Buffy hissed.

“Official Wolfram and Hart magic apparatus. Again, it helps build trust.”

Glancing at Adam, she didn’t miss a chance for a getting her point across: “And this is why it is helpful to look smart and professional and not like you fell out of a Soho gay bar.”

“You can take the lawyer out of Wolfram & Hart…” Spike observed to no one in particular, and then they all turned to look at the enormously fat demon which was now trying to get through the doors.

It looked uncommonly like Jabba the Hutt, and Spike took a step back, and then another.

“Right, I’m going to skedaddle, this whole polite negotiation is really not my forte…”

***

Many hours later, the luminescent London night’s sky above him, Spike was on the roof of the Council, having a quiet cigarette, legs dangling over the side. The roof was flat, with raised edges, and he wondered if the bitty Slayers used it for training.

He’d disappeared again, needing to sort himself out properly; take stock, work out what to do next. He’d eventually returned to the Council, but one look at the monks which were filing in through the front door made him head for the roof.

Someone must have told Buffy where he was, because after a little while she turned up, quietly appearing beside him.
“You… OK?” she asked cautiously, clearly still wondering exactly where they were after their big fight this morning, and he nodded.

“Yeah. Yeah I think I’m good. You?”

She nodded, even if her body language showed that she was obviously still not very comfortable.

“Been better, but yeah. OK I guess.”

Angel’s name hung unspoken between them.

It almost seemed like a dream — a ten year long nightmare with a few bright points (like Venka), but it all blurred, looking back. All he remembered was Angel; Angel grumpy, Angel happy, Angel impatient and bored and frustrated and Angel having his back, always.

Like back in the day; the two of them bickering and fighting and arguing over how and who to kill and the girls rolling their eyes…

He still expected him to be there, opening his mouth to say something cutting and then realising that Angel wouldn’t be there to hear it. Like a phantom limb.

“Do you think The First will get me too when I die?” he asked speculatively, before turning to look at Buffy and taking one final drag of the fag. “I did stop it from rising, that should do it, right? Make it personal enough for it to go for me.”

He seemed to have rendered Buffy speechless once again. But she’d wanted him to talk so… he talked. If it wasn’t what she wanted to hear, well, he couldn’t help that.

“It’d make it easier to bear if I knew we wouldn’t be alone forever — that’s what destroys you, not the torture.”

A beat, then he continued.

“I just wish I knew. Angel once told me he never escaped from hell, just got a reprieve… Did I tell you that already? Anyway, I guess that’s one reason I told you not to try to get him back. He always knew what was coming.”

He flicked the now dead cigarette end into the air, watching as it tumbled through the air and then leaning forwards to see if he managed to hit anyone on the head far, far below.

Buffy grasped hold of his sleeve:

“Stop. You will fall!”

“Fallen further, still here,” he replied, then abruptly turned around completely, taking her face in his hands and studying her. The half light couldn’t hide her beauty, nor the worry and grief that he could see so clearly, and that he had stubbornly ignored whilst trying to work out what to do, lost inside himself.

“But I think I’ve worked it out now. The Shanshu was obviously bollocks, but I have this.” He spread his hand out to encompass the city scape spread out around them, as far as the eyes could see. “This world — you — are my reprieve. I’ll meet a dusty end at some point, but until then… Until then, this’ll do me just fine.”

She was shaking her head. “How can you talk like that?”
“Told you once before, remember?” He raised an eyebrow at her. “I like this world. You've got... dog racing, Manchester United...”

A smile began sneaking onto her face.

“And people like Happy Meals on legs? Yeah. I remember.”

“Seems like life-times ago,” he said, drifting off point again, remembering that first truce and the events that had led up to it. “I hated him so much. Can’t believe he’s gone, y’know? He was just always there. Me an’ him — the perfect double act. Been everything to each other.” Raised an eyebrow, smiling at the horizon. “Done everything...”

“Every thing?” Buffy asked, hesitating, and he glanced at her. Surely it couldn’t be that much of a curveball?

“Yes even that... Once. One night. Guess that’s something else we’ve got in common — one time with Angel.”

Seeing the look on her face, he decided to change the subject. Especially as he didn’t quite know how to describe that night himself.

“Anyway, it was years ago. And not the point I wanted to make. See I’ve been thinking.”

She waited, unsure, and he looked her dead in the eye, hope and fear warring inside him:

“I’ve made a decision — I’m going to LA to re-establish Angel Investigations. So I was wonderin’ — d’you wanna come with?”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Most of this chapter didn’t exist before Tuesday this week (except as a vague outline as to what needed to happen). Hope you like...

For a long moment, Buffy wasn’t sure she had heard right. Spike was going to LA to re-establish Angel’s detective firm and asking…

“You want me to… work for you?”

He looked surprised.

“Huh? No, you just do your Slayer thing. Um, lemme explain… So, first of all London’s obviously home, and’s nice to be here and all, but you’ve also got more Slayers than you know what to do with, so I think I should go somewhere I could make an actual difference. And I got my visions to guide me, see?”

A grin, wider than she had seen in forever followed the words.

“Plus, LA needs the help, spent long enough hanging around to get more than a passing acquaintance with the lowlives there. Secondly, there’s still the hotel. I’m pretty sure it’s mine now. Well, mine or Connor’s I guess, but I can’t imagine what he’d do with it, or that he’d mind me using it. So, that’s somewhere to live. Third — do you really want to stay here? Don’t you miss California?”

She took a moment to reply.

“You’ve really thought this through.”

“Like I’ve told you before, I’m more than just a pretty face,” he smirked. “But, Buffy…”

His face turned serious. “Remember what you told me in Pylea?”

“Yeah,” she said softly, “I remember.”

Words yelled in anger and frustration, words she had (for the past year and a half) wished had been more polished, more eloquent, and not borne out of such dire circumstances. Words she had clung to while he was gone, like the amulet around her neck, words that meant that he knew how she felt; that no matter how long he disappeared for, he’d not think that she was only waiting for him to get a heartbeat.

“See I thought… we could try?” he said, voice oddly tentative. “Try to have an actual relationship, y’know? The hotel is bloody enormous, we could have a proper little apartment, see if we could actually function as a real couple. If… that is what you want?”

His eyes were large and vulnerable, all the fury of that morning (as well as the avoidance of the past
week) thoroughly gone. He was… asking her to move in with him.

The strange enormity of the moment suddenly hit her. He was back, properly back, and he was staying.

“Spike…” she said simply, reaching out and taking his hand; instinctively he leaned into her and suddenly there was no space between them at all — her lips on his, her hands tangling in his hair, his hands pulling her flush against him, sneaking under her clothes, and oh god, it had been for literally ever-

***

“Adam — I asked you to fetch Buffy. Wasn’t she there?”

Giles sounded irritable, and Adam sighed. They wouldn’t let him do any magic or help in any way except make tea and run errands, and he was bored out of his mind, despite only having been there for half a day. Why hadn’t he brought his Playstation?

This time he’d been sent off to the roof, where Spike had been seen heading, followed by Buffy. And since her Slayerness was needed for something terribly important, obviously Adam had to go fetch her.

Except…

“Oh she was there,” he replied flippantly. “Spike too.”

As he didn’t continue, Giles eventually bothered to actually look at him. Old and tweed-clad and constantly grumpy, it was like being back at Eton.

“And? Why didn’t you bring her?”

Adam inspected his nails. He’d chipped the nail polish on one of them, he’d need to fix that. After waiting for a suitable amount of time he glanced up, studied Giles from under his eyelashes.

“Well they were… preoccupied. If you get my drift.”

He tried and failed to keep the glee out of his voice, and was thrilled as he saw understanding dawning on Giles’ face. The Watcher pulled off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing deeply.

“I see.”

“Maybe I should get a vampire boyfriend,” Adam mused. “They look really limber…”

Since he wasn’t human it’d be perfectly safe, and vampires were, like, quite kinky? Oh and he might get the vampire to harass/kill the worst of his former classmates and then the Slayers could stake it — perfect.

He was exceedingly pleased with his plan when his sister’s voice cut through his thoughts.

“Not a chance. You are way too young for starters.”

“What, so you’re allowed to shag vamps, but I’m not?”

Grabbing hold of his arm, she dragged him from the office.
“Mystical influence,” she hissed. “And I’m beginning to think this is not a good environment for a teenager.”

“There’s nothing but teenagers here,” he protested, waving a hand towards a cohort of Slayers walking past. So damn fit (way, way better than the posh drips Eton students dated), except they were all older than him and wouldn’t even give him the time of day. (A Slayer girlfriend would be even better than a vampire boyfriend, but so far it looked sadly unlikely.)

“I noticed,” Eve replied frostily. “One more day and it’ll be you up on the roof with one of them I’m sure. Too many hormones, I should just lock you up.”

His eyes narrowed.

“You send me back to Eton and I swear, I’ll kill someone.”

She looked at him with ill-concealed exasperation.

“No, not Eton. However, it’s not like you have any friends here… So, maybe, if I’m truly stuck with you, we should just move back to LA. I still have a flat there. And with Wolfram & Hart gone, I might be able to use some of my old contacts.”

“LA sounds cool,” he replied, for the first time in an age feeling something like excitement. Sun and beaches and film stars… Yeah, he could go for that.

***

Spike set off for LA a few days later. Connor had offered that they could travel together, but Spike wasn’t keen on going on a plane — for starters he didn’t have a passport, airports were full of glass and he would prefer to avoid combusting, and he still had contacts on the docks, so smuggling himself onto a boat wasn’t going to be problem.

No, arranging travel was not the problem (even if he dearly wished Illyria had been there to whip up a portal) — the problem was travelling alone.

No Illyria to bitch about how she was above such travel-arrangements, no Angel to get antsy and irritable, before beginning to talk out of sheer boredom…

This was no good.

He tried to force himself to think about practicalities; how the hell did you go about setting up a detective agency? How exactly had Angel done… any of it? At the beginning, back when Spike had looked him up (and tortured him, but hey, that was all water under the bridge) Angel’d had that pointy-faced Irish guy, and Cordelia. He presumed Cordelia had looked after the money, and there had to be money in the gig, or Cordelia would have been out the door in no time flat. Had they advertised? He couldn’t imagine Angel doing something that crass, yet they had to have been bringing in the punters in some way…

Everything led back to Angel, it was literally a nightmare.

OK, hotel. Start with the base. Get some business cards printed? Do something online maybe? Yes, that would make sense. People with supernatural problems were more likely to look up stuff on the internet than go to the police. Wished he could’ve asked Andrew for help, but the boy was still working round the clock to sort out Wolfram & Hart related problems… He sighed. Connor maybe? He was young, and would presumably know how to set up that kind of stuff. But would they have to set up an actual business? With a bank account? Why hadn’t he listened when Angel had talked
about stuff?

And back he was to Angel, like a boomerang returning to hit him every time he tried to get rid of it… But the hold in the belly of the boat was dark, and he only had his own thoughts to keep him company.

Then (almost to his relief) an excruciating vision blanked out all his planning, and he went to save the chef from some demon eggs which were about to hatch. The upshot was that he spent the rest of the journey in the galley, happily avoiding his ghosts.

After they got to New York he hitchhiked across the country, distracting himself by talking to the truck drivers who picked him up as well as the occasional brawl, which worked great until he got to LA.

The Hyperion wouldn’t let him forget.

The Hyperion towered over him and he felt like he was drowning.

Wesley and Gunn’s graves to the side (Cvys Vail’s bones now in a small heap on the ground), and if he closed his eyes he could still see Drusilla dancing out into the sunshine, feel Angel’s arms around him…

He stood there, helpless against his memories, his hands curling into fists.

This was why he’d come alone. He needed to face this on his own and then somehow build a future. Needed to say his goodbyes, make peace with the past and the loss that still cut him too deep for words.

No more hiding.

He lifted his chin. He was William the Bloody, slayer of Slayers, defeater of the First Evil, Champion™. He could do this.

***

Two days later Nina received a phone call.

When she heard Spike’s voice she almost put the phone down immediately, but fighting against the sudden lurch in her stomach she managed to reply. It had been nearly three weeks since he’d called last, letting her know that Angel hadn’t made it. And although she had expected it, it had still knocked her so badly that she still wasn’t quite sure how to cope.

Her sister and her friends had been lovely and supportive, but there were so many things she couldn’t tell them. She had spun a whole web of lies, and now she didn’t have a clue how to untangle it. How to explain what she really was, what he had been, what his mission had entailed…

And it wasn’t that she blamed Spike, but he had been the one to call, the one still alive-

_Deep breath Nina, you can do this._

After she had established that Spike was back in LA, she said she’d come see him. By the tone of his voice, she figured that maybe this was what he had wanted all along.

Returning to the Hyperion was daunting, even as she knew she couldn’t have avoided it much longer — the moon was getting fuller with every day, and her cage was in the basement. And she had
nowhere else to go.

She found Spike in Angel’s room, sitting on the floor, his back against the bed, silent.

When he finally looked up, he just shook his head.

“I was going to pack stuff up,” he said. “But I can’t. I saw him burn, I know he’s gone, but…”

A long pause.

“S why I called you. What do you want to do with it?”

She grasped the strap on her shoulder bag harder, looked around. The rooms had become familiar, homely. Angel had hung some of her sketches on the wall, his clothes were still in the wardrobe, there was a bottle of her perfume on the bedside table…

She felt tears well up (how many times could she cry, would she ever stop?) and shook her head.

“Just leave it,” she whispered. “Please. Don’t change a thing.”

As her voice broke, she realised his arms were already around her (vampire speed — did anyone ever get used to it?), and she finally cried with someone who actually understood what she had lost.

After she had blown her nose and tried to tidy herself up a bit, he made them both tea. The kitchen was bare, the fridge empty, but he had tea and milk. Maybe it was a British thing?

She should ask about the final journey, about what had happened, about… Angel’s death.

But then Spike fixed her with a candid look.

“So. Don’t suppose you know anything about running a detective agency?”

“Detective agency?” she repeated, thrown, and he dragged a hand through his hair.

“Well, something like that. Private investigator. ‘S what Angel did before the evil law firm, but I’ve not exactly done anything like it before. I’m currently at the point of thinking maybe I should just buy a deerstalker and a pipe and ham it up like Sherlock Holmes.”

She studied him over the rim of the tea cup, and thought about her current waitressing job (instant fame and international exhibitions had somehow not followed graduation) and the fact that she had lost touch with the world of demons and all things supernatural since — since Angel had left. She hadn’t known anyone except his people, and didn’t know where to look. There was Buffy, but she was in Europe…

“Do you need help?” she asked. “Could you make a living that way?”

Blue eyes met hers, surprised and with sudden focus.

“Yes. And… I bloody well hope so. You see-”

Then he dropped his cup and screamed, clutching his head.

By the time she was beside him, whatever-it-was seemed to be over and he managed to focus on her, teeth bared in a feral grin.

“Oh yeah, and I get visions from the Powers That Be now, should probably have mentioned that.
Although so far, none of them have been about how to set up a business…”

Despite herself she smiled. This was that madness she remembered. And ‘I took a job with a private investigator who looks into supernatural things’ might be a useful starting point for one day telling her sister the truth about herself — and Angel.

Her beautiful Angel, the best (and worst) man she had ever known.

***

In the end, Connor stayed in England for a whole month. He’d offered to travel back with Spike (despite having only just arrived), but Spike had shaken his head.

“Appreciate the offer, but apart from all the practical reasons… This is something I need to do on my own.”

Connor understood the sentiment; he’d only spent half a day with Spike, but the whirlwind of those hours (the talk in the kitchen, the spell to get Angel back and the aftermath, the mission to save Adam) was already more to work through than he had anticipated. So he stayed with the Slayers, helping out and learning to appreciate the mindset behind a sacred calling; young women for whom fighting was a way of life, with traditions and guidelines running back to prehistory. He found the approach satisfyingly structured (despite the appearance of mayhem when he’d first turned up) and ultimately helpful in figuring out his own approach. And it didn’t hurt that they were all very fit, and welcomed him more or less as one of their own.

When he returned to LA he went to look up Spike, and found him in the process of setting up as a private investigator.

Spike was already in touch with Nina and Lorne — the latter had various shady contacts — and between them they had managed to cobble together something not entirely unlike an actual business. Nina was surprisingly savvy for an artist, and was the one keeping on top of the budget and the accounts.

Connor wasn’t quite sure what he could contribute, but Spike was thrilled to see him and seemed a lot more calm than that morning in London.

Since Connor still had a good bit of his holidays left he offered to help out, but after moving into the Hyperion realised why Spike had needed the alone time. The place was crowded with ghosts, every place he turned filled with reminders of the past that had been ‘written over’. Gritting his teeth he decided that this had to be part of it. He could never hope to deal with his past without facing it head-on. Besides, Spike really needed another fighter.

One night they went out for a drink with Lorne — which turned into far too many — but Spike got talking to a warlock on the next table, bonding over their tastes in music before ending up ‘talking shop’, the unlikely (but very fortuitous) upshot being that he agreed to undo the big spell on the hotel, in return for a portrait from Nina.

With Wolfram & Hart gone the spell was no longer necessary (and indeed was somewhat of a hindrance since they literally couldn’t get customers through the door) and Willow was very happy to let someone else do the hard work — she had been meaning to teleport across in order to ‘do it properly’, but she kept getting delayed with other issues, and if this guy could do it, all the better.

As it turned out, the warlock was so pleased with his portrait that Nina began to build herself quite a following from the more refined echelons of demon society, her wolfiness a bonus rather than a
drawback. Demons who were unlikely to sit for a human painter had no qualms about a werewolf, and even if she complained that portraiture wasn’t her forte, she wasn’t about to turn down such a lucrative opportunity.

And then Spike had a vision which led him to rescue a guy who turned out to be a website designer, and Connor felt that maybe the whole thing would turn out OK. Not that he didn’t trust Spike, but he seemed to sort of make it up as he went along, and Connor (the child of careful planners many times over) had felt a little uncertain as to how it would all work out.

Even so, he stayed out his summer holidays in LA, mostly helping Spike kill things. He was beginning to feel more comfortable in his own skin, the violence (and the past) more integrated and natural; which didn’t sound like it should be a good thing, but was. This way he could not just control it, but use it.

He hoped Angel would be proud.

***

Moving was strange.

Buffy hadn’t had any belongings when she’d first gone to Europe, and moving from Rome to London had been fairly straightforward. It had been more of a relocation, based on practicalities.

But moving to LA… Moving to LA with Spike, in order to move in together — it seemed somehow too far-fetched. Like, was this real? She had never lived with a guy, always had her own space, her own place, and what if it didn’t work out? What if an actual relationship proved too difficult? What if-?

They were both tip-toeing, tentatively working out what the new parameters were. She had taken almost two months to finally get herself back across to America — officially because the fallout from Wolfram & Hart’s collapse kept generating more issues, unofficially because she needed time to make sure she was making the right decision. The sex on the roof had been amazing (they were Good At Sex), but A Proper Relationship was something else and Spike had been very careful not to push her one way or another.

But when she had finally arrived, and then began dithering over which rooms to choose, he had almost lost his cool.

“Buffy, just choose a room already. We can always switch if you change your mind. We both have super powers, it’s not like moving the furniture is going to be a problem.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” she replied, her worries tumbling out. “You and me? What if we argue all the time? What if-”

He stopped her by taking hold of her arms and kissing her soundly.

“We won’t find out unless we try,” he said, watching her intently. “No one’s ever done this before, okay? And quite frankly after ten years of hell dimensions with Angel and Illyria… you’ll have to try very very hard to put me off.”

“You say the sweetest things,” she replied, and he brightened.

“Does that mean-”

“No, no troll head.”
“Compromise is a bitch,” he reluctantly acquiesced.

***

Adam wasn’t sure what he’d expected, but LA hadn’t magically made all his problems go away.

If he was honest with himself, he was still not sure what to make of this new world, where he would be able to choose his own future. All he had known was duty, his own wishes and desires nothing but an afterthought, and of no importance to those who had brought him into the world.

The earth beneath his feet might as well have rolled itself up and disappeared for all he knew what to do with himself. He’d seen how the Slayers, the Watchers looked at him — was he just an evil thing? His sole purpose had been to help uphold a status quo which was now nonexistent.

Was this how they all felt? All the creatures and lawyers and ‘monsters’ whose lives had been bought and owned by Wolfram & Hart? Was this why so many of them threw themselves on the Slayers’ swords?

Where was there to go now for someone like him?

To his sister’s dismay he started hanging out with a demon biker gang (that breathtaking ride through London, clinging onto Spike and Connor, still etched on his memory), but for better or worse his involvement was cut short one night when they had a bust-up with another gang, interrupted by two blondes in long black coats.

It took several awestruck moments before Adam realised that it was Spike and Buffy, and without hesitation he stabbed the nearest gang member in the back.

When the battle was done he bounded across the dead bodies, happier than he had been for weeks. The fight had been mesmerising, the two of them fighting with perfect synchronicity; two black figures moving as one, tearing a bloody swathe through the demon onslaught, and Adam had wished he could have filmed it so he could watch it over and over.

“Where are you going? Can I help?”

Buffy didn’t look pleased, but Spike grinned and slapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey kid, didn’t know you were in town. And you know what — I think you are just the guy I need.”

***

The next day Buffy checked up on her fellow Slayers (it had been a quiet night apart from the demon biker fight), perfunctorially tidied the apartment, put some washing in the washer, went grocery shopping and checked the messages on the machine (two automated messages from cold callers and something that might be a case) — she wrote down the details of the possible case, since Nina was busy with a commission and wouldn’t be in for the next few days, and then began wondering exactly where Spike was. Leaving the housekeeping to her was par for the course (and the cause of most of their arguments, their relationship so far almost ridiculously ‘normal’), but he usually resurfaced the second someone mentioned the word ‘client’.

Somewhat to her surprise he was pretty good at selling his services, flirting quite shamelessly with humans and demons alike if he thought it’d get him a bigger tip, and Buffy tried her best to stay out of it except when he explicitly asked for help — usually just with killing things, like the night before, and it tended to be vision-related, not paid work.
He would grumble that it was very inconvenient for Illyria to have disappeared the way she had, he could really do with another fighter — and would then immediately add that he didn’t mean that Buffy had to step up; trying to work it out, she came to the conclusion that he didn’t want to feel beholden to her. It seemed very important to him that he had his own mission.

He wasn’t earning a lot so far, but with time that would hopefully change. The shift from inter-dimensional travel to something approximating a settled job was still a work in progress, but generally he didn’t disappear…

Unable to locate him in any of his usual hiding places, Buffy eventually made her way down into the basement of the Hyperion. There seemed to be… bleating?

As her eyes got used to the gloom, she saw Spike and Adam busy with painting symbols on the floor, magical paraphernalia on a table by the wall — and a small goat tied up.

“What exactly are you doing?” she asked cautiously, and Spike looked up.

“Told you I was going to try to get hold of Illyria.”

“You didn’t say you were going to sacrifice a goat!”

“If you know a better way…” he replied, then — taking note of the look on her face — handed the brush to Adam:

“Finish that off will you junior?”

Buffy folded her arms, trying to work out how to tackle the myriad issues she had.

“And why is he helping?”

“Well, we had a good chat last night, after you’d gone to bed. I remembered him saying something about how he’d like to be a witch, back when we were in London, and he has a pretty good base knowledge already. Figured this’d be good training.”

“For a teenager?”

“He ain’t human. He’ll need a profession that’ll last him. And I could do with a magic user.”

“But... ritual sacrifice?”

Looking up at her, where she was standing on the stairs, Spike had that intensely stubborn look on his face again.

“The boy will be fine, he’s only helping. Buffy, I need to do this. If this doesn’t work, nothing will. And unlike little Andrew and his online acolytes — I believe in her. I’ve seen what she can do.”

He’d brought up Illyria more frequently as the weeks went on. Wondering what exactly had happened to her. Where she’d gotten to. Why hadn’t she returned?

But they were still sidestepping the elephant in the room.

“So… what? It was pointless for me to look for Angel, but slaughtering goats for Illyria is A-OK?”

They hadn’t broached the subject much, but he didn’t flinch or try to avoid the topic.

“Angel was… different. We were expecting it to be the end of the line. But Illyria is a god. Old Ones
don’t die. If anything it’s the opposite — I don’t want to save her, I’m wondering if *she* can help *us.*”

A beat, as he pursed his lips, hesitating.

“Besides, and I’m not exactly proud of this, but Angel would probably be pleased that I paid some attention — being descended from The Order of Aurelius I might have a bit of an advantage over the average newly converted human.”

This was going from zero to one hundred in no time flat. She had no idea what he was talking about.

“Say what?”

“The Order of Aurelius? The Master? My great-great-granddaddy, I hear you met? You had a mutual killing spree? And I offed his annoying little offspring?”

“Sure, but-”

Spike tilted his head, eyes narrowing.

“Figured Giles would’ve explained this, but I guess you were sixteen, so maybe he didn’t bother. The Order of Aurelius was dedicated to worshipping the Old Ones, and The Master’s great plan was to bring ’em back. Fuck knows why, he’d probably get eaten considerin’ how Illyria used to treat us, but hey, any port in a storm. Look, I even painted our symbol!”

He pointed to a circle within which was a sun with three stars.

There was a point at which she just abdicated, and this was it. Looking across at the teenager, she resigned herself to what was happening.

“You going to be okay Adam?” she asked, feeling that she needed to somehow be the responsible one, and he grinned.

“Not my first time sacrificing a goat. This was like… what I did in nursery. Evil nursery.”

Despite telling herself to just leave them to it, she stayed. Illyria was a strange unknown quantity and Spike’s attachment was… odd. His ties to Angel were understandable, but Illyria? No, she didn’t get it.

But, if something went wrong they could probably do with a hand. She had a sneaking suspicion that ‘contacting a Hell God’ wouldn’t be as straightforward as Spike obviously hoped.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

FYI, since I now have drafts of everything to come, I can let you know that there will be two more chapters and then an epilogue. Thank you all for reading and I hope you will enjoy the ending. (It feels so weird to write that, I started writing this fic in... 2007 I think. But I think it has been worth it?) ♥

Spike felt Buffy’s eyes on him as he continued to prepare for the ritual, grateful for Adam’s matter-of-fact demeanour without which the atmosphere would have been even more strained.

Why’d she have to bring up Angel? Illyria — Illyria would have answers. Illyria was a bitch, but she was his, dammit, and he needed her.

He checked everything one final time — the symbols, the knife, the goat; they were ready, they were doing this.

If the room exploded, well, so be it.

Except it didn’t.

For a moment he thought that despite everything they must have made a mistake somewhere, as nothing at all happened, the seconds stretching as the blood poured into the circle (his stomach rumbled, which was just typical, but all that lovely fresh blood going to waste…) — and then a quick flicker in the air, like a tv screen springing to life, before an image appeared which Spike recognised as Illyria’s original form.

And then her voice rang out, a bit crackly, as if coming from an old-fashioned answering machine:

“Thank you for your sacrifice. It has not currently been possible to contact Illyria, nor can you leave a message. Blessings upon you and keep the faith.”

Then the image winked out.

Staring at the empty air Spike didn’t even notice the blood which had now reached his boots.
“What the…” he began, voice trailing off, before slowly turning to Buffy.

But she had already left.

What now?

At the back of his mind, so far back that it had taken weeks upon weeks for him to acknowledge it, he’d held Illyria in reserve. Not in the sense of being able to save her in any way, but as a higher power who could make sense of things. Someone… more. His goddess.

She’d been downgraded, but she couldn’t die.

Except.

He stopped, ignoring Adam who was now asking questions.

Maybe she had been trapped by Wolfram & Hart somehow? As stuck as Angel? Or maybe she’d just had enough of humanity and the dullness of mortal creatures and decided to stay put on a higher plane?

All of a sudden he was very tired.

The night before had been exhausting on its own — the big fight with the biker gangs, followed by a long chat with Adam which had led to the somewhat impulsive decision to attempt to summon Illyria. And now…

“Spike!”

The boy was literally waving a hand in front of his face. “What now? What was that?”

Sighing, Spike looked around, realised the floor was covered in blood and magical symbols and that Adam was still holding onto the now very dead goat.

He also realised that he’d get the bollocking from hell if he left the basement like this — and not just from Buffy.

Nina was quite proprietary when it came to the basement, and would not relish a floor covered in blood (although when was the next full moon? She might appreciate the goat…) That said, he was tempted to leave the Aurelius symbol — it was quite pretty, and had done exactly nothing, so it seemed safe. The rest however...

“What happens now kid, is that we clean up. We’re on our own.”

***

When they finally got out of the basement Buffy had gone out, but had left a note with information about a potential client.

Spike sat down at the desk to call, but…

But she had mentioned ‘the A word’ and now his thoughts, like stampeding wildebeests, ran straight to the events he had tried to block out; Willow’s spell, The First appearing, that initial blind panic followed by gut-level nausea… Because he knew.

Knew what it was like to be in The First’s power, to have endless faces from the past haunt and torment — nothing was real except the pain and the guilt and the self-loathing, and knowing that
Angel was stuck, that they were utterly helpless, he (as always) heard Pavayne’s voice whispering in his ear, unbidden and unavoidable:

‘Look... hell knows you're ready, plump and ripe. Beginning to understand, aren't you? The soul that blesses you...damns you to suffer — forever.’

The Shanshu had always been a chimera, and all they got was a temporary reprieve. The memories were now like dominoes, a chain reaction he was helpless against…

The day before the big showdown with the Circle of the Black Thorn.

‘What do you think all this means for that Shanshu bugaboo?’ Spike had asked. ‘If we make it through this, does one of us get to be a real boy?’

Angel had crossed his arms.

‘Who you kidding? We're not gonna make it through.’

At the time, Spike had replied flippantly, unable to voice any of the feelings inside:

‘Well, long as it's not you.’

And it hadn’t been. Instead Angel was trapped forever, alone, and no one would ever come for him.

Spike still hadn’t been able to adequately sort through his own emotions: the loss, the grief, the (illogical) anger at having been abandoned, the kiss and all that it might mean, the fact of living in a place where Angel was imprinted in every corner and every room, his smell still lingering so Spike kept expecting to see him when he woke.

He thought that Nina was probably struggling with the same push-pull of the scent, but was holding up admirably. He wondered if she was counting the days, the way he had after Buffy died.

***

The building was shiny and modern, and Nina wondered whether that was a good sign or not. She tried to sound out new prospective sitters ahead of the first appointment, but this one had come via her previous client, and if she didn’t like him, well, she could easily make excuses.

Walking up to the reception desk Nina found her attention caught by a statue by the stairs — good, clean lines, and the bronze almost glowed under the carefully placed lights. She took it as a good omen, and too late registered the familiar scent which was followed a second later by Harmony’s voice ringing out:

“Oh my god, Nina! It’s been forever, how are you? How’s… everyone? Still with Angel, or did you guys break up?”

Nina felt as if she’d been struck by lightning, frozen in place, yet heard her voice reply, devoid of emotion:

“Angel’s dead.”

Harmony looked sad.

“Oh. Hamilton did say that he was going to squish him like a bug or something-”

“He sacrificed himself to destroy Wolfram & Hart,” Nina cut in, and Harmony blinked.
“You know, I heard something—” but then the intercom buzzed and Nina could thankfully make her way through to the office where a tall and pointy demon was waiting for her, and she desperately tried to ignore the barrage of memories (Harmony’s cheerful greetings every month; Angel’s awkward conversations before they had gotten together; that time in his office, after hours, and both Spike and Harmony had grinned the next day…)

“Miss Ash. Welcome.”

She managed to smile and say the right things, but all the while the grief was churning through her. She needed to get so very drunk tonight.

And then Harmony talked at her again when she left. Why the hell had she fallen in love with a hero anyway?

***

Buffy returned to a dark hotel, evening twilight turning into night.

A quick errand had turned into a long afternoon as she had run into her old poetry professor; he had offered belated condolences regarding her mother’s death, and in an instant the past years fell away, Sunnydale rising around her.

Bursting into tears had been unexpected — for her as well as for him — but he had been very kind and taken her into a cafe for catching up and general TLC. Once she’d managed to make herself presentable again, they had enjoyed a good chat. He had settled in LA ‘after Sunnydale’ and listened with great interest to the stories of her ‘ex-pat years’.

And had then thrown yet another bombshell into her path.

“You say you have come back to settle down — have you considered going back to college?”

She had stared at him, eyes wide and mouth opening without a sound.

“I — I don’t know,” she finally managed. “And I… lost everything. I was the last person to leave Sunnydale and I didn’t pack…”

He waved the objection away.

“There will be electronic records somewhere, I’ll be happy to get things moving.”

Noting the still stunned look on her face, he smiled.

“You can start by auditing, to get back into the swing of it all. I know it can be daunting, but I have several ‘mature students’ and they always bring something much more… interesting to the table than your average eighteen year old. Look, here’re my details. Let me know what you decide, okay? You were a good student, and I would love to see what you could achieve.”

She had walked home bewildered. Go back to studying? She had the time, certainly. Things were… good. It was nice, just to live. To only have three fellow Slayers in the whole of the city, who — although young — were competent and capable and that she found herself working with very well. To have Spike, in every way, to get used to believing that maybe they were allowed to be happy. To not have Giles or Andrew or Willow call her at any time of night and day with emergencies, or being surrounded by countless newly called Slayers who were always shy or nervous, or being in a country where she never felt quite at home…
Yes, things were good.

But in that quiet satisfaction, older hurts had begun raising their heads. All the issues she had consistently ignored or pushed away. Sunnydale-that-was was just down the road, and it had begun to make its way into her thoughts, almost unnoticed, but quietly, persistently and by now — unavoidably.

Bursting into tears had been embarrassing, but had also shown her that she couldn’t hide from the past any longer.

But maybe now was the time?

She wandered through the whole of the Hyperion before eventually finding Spike on the roof. It seemed his go-to place, watching the world at night.

Walking up to him, she leaned against the parapet.

Had it been this morning he’d done the failed spell? Felt like so much longer.

“Hi,” he said, and she silently acknowledged him. How to broach the subject? The studying — that could wait. He’d support her, she knew. But the rest… How often had she wished he was there, over the past years? How often had she wanted to talk, to work through things, to have him as a sounding board? How often had she worried because they lost touch because of all his travels? Well, now he was here. And she had better try to talk, or all this was for nothing.

“Buffy?” he asked, sensing her internal conflict, and she took a deep breath. Share. Talk. Open up. Go on Buffy, you can do it. He knows the best and the worst of you, and he still loves you…

“I… look, I don’t know. But…”

He waited, and slowly, haltingly, she tried to put everything into words. “Everything is fine, please don’t get the wrong idea, it’s not you, but, being here, being ‘home’… I ran away, after we won against The First. Ran to Europe, but all the while my home was just… this huge crater in ground. My whole life just — obliterated. And it’s like, what does that mean? I tried to hide in Rome and just live the Dolce Vita, and then I tried to be Buffy the Super Slayer, being the big boss in London and, like, it wasn’t bad, but looking back… I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

She wasn’t sure what would happen next, but he surprised her by nodding, before studying her with those expressive eyes that always seemed to see so much more than was reasonably possible.

“Me too,” he said. “Not a clue. My whole family is dead — except for Connor, but that’s obviously different what with him bein’ human and all, so, yeah. I feel lost.” A beat, then he added: “Maybe we should go have a look?”

“Look at what?” she asked, confused.

“The crater of Sunnydale. For like, what’s it called? Closure?”

She nodded, leaning her head against his shoulder, the leather soft against her cheek and the familiar smell like a balm to her frayed mind. Her very own piece of Sunnydale, right here.

“Closure sounds good,” she nodded.

***
Harmony stepped over the threshold of the Hyperion, heart metaphorically beating and practically glowing with good intentions.

She was faced with Spike and Buffy, dressed in leather head to foot, Buffy with a motorbike helmet in her hand, and both of them looking at her with open annoyance.

“Hello Harm, what you doin’ here?” Spike asked, in a voice which implied that he would put a stop to it as soon as possible, and she folded her arms and almost pouted.

“I have come to see Nina,” she replied (quite truthfully), “the only contact details she gave were this address.”

“Why do you need Nina?” Buffy asked, surprise overlaying annoyance, and Harmony did a quick internal deliberation, but then fastened her eyes on Spike: “She is doing a portrait of my boss, but I kinda accidentally overheard something about how he wanted to avenge Wolfram & Hart and I may have mentioned that Nina used to date Angel and now he is going to kill her and I came to warn her, because I care.”

Spike looked back, with that self-same sceptical look Angel had so often shot her.

“…and?”

They were so cynical. So, they might be right to be cynical, but it was still disappointing.

“And… he might also have discovered that I used to work for Angel, so…”

“So?” Buffy this time.

“Well, I need a new job, and Nina was saying how she is getting too busy with all her painting to work for you…”

She smiled her best smile, fluttering her eyelashes a little, and saw the second Spike gave in. (Oh, she still had it!) He turned to Buffy, who was now looking incredulous.

“Are you kidding?” she asked, and he shrugged. “Hey, if she screws up you can always stake her…”

Buffy sighed, then turned back to Harmony.

“Fine. What’s this guy’s name?”

***

Sitting by the Sunnydale crater, a crescent moon above them, Buffy leaned her head against Spike’s shoulder.

He’d been completely silent since they arrived, but eventually he spoke.

“Wish I’d known it was this huge. Could’ve rubbed Angel’s nose in it — he never obliterated a town!”

She snorted, chuckling despite herself. Closure the Spike way, she should have known.

***

Buffy would be lying if she claimed to like the addition of Harmony to their lives, but she couldn’t deny that it was very useful.
Harmony was a genuinely good administrator (although Nina still looked after the money side), and could also be called on as a back-up fighter, meaning that Buffy didn’t feel guilty if she had Slayer-y commitments. The downside was of course that they couldn’t trust her, but they already had that problem with Adam, and Buffy figured that since both of them had stabbed people in the back in order to work with them, they deserved the benefit of the doubt.

Although there was also Eve of course, who they didn’t see often, but always went out of her way to be unpleasant, and whose latest bugbear was the fact that Adam had developed a huge crush on Harmony, and if she found the two of them in bed…

Spike had merely shrugged and remarked that as long as it wasn’t during work hours, it wasn’t his problem.

The fact that this had happened when Faith had come to visit was of course just an additional ‘bonus’. Faith had leaned against the wall, arms crossed as she observed the dramatics, called Harmony a cradle snatcher and Eve a stuck-up bitch, and generally appreciated the show greatly; remarking to Buffy afterwards that this ‘quiet life’ of hers was not exactly what Faith had imagined.

“Jealous?” Buffy asked, and Faith had burst out laughing.

The day had ended with a sinful amount of alcohol at Lorne’s new bar, talking about anything and everything — but especially Angel — until dawn, and Buffy was beginning to appreciate ‘closure’ and facing her demons, whichever face they wore.

***

Life went on.

Buffy started auditing and began to remember why she had liked studying, once upon a time, in a different life. And Spike took her to a bar where they had an open mike night for poetry readings — the crowd seemed to be all leather-clad bikers, but friendly and supportive, and she felt like she was getting another small piece of the jigsaw.

Then Nina painted a portrait of Angel which made Buffy cry. Not bursting-into-tears, she didn’t even realise until Nina asked her if she was okay, and when she felt her cheek it was wet.

“I…” she stopped, shook her head. “I have a lot of… feelings, that I don’t think I ever dealt with properly.”

Both Nina and Spike were now watching her, silently and expectantly, before Spike finally spoke.

“Would this be about you rushing off to find a way to save him back in the summer?”

She nodded, studying the painting in order to avoid looking at either of them. Angel was looking straight out, gaze unflinching, pale but determined. But the rest was black, his black unbuttoned shirt fading into the black background, and he somehow looked both like a ghost and simultaneously so real she felt she could almost reach out and touch his familiar features. She half suspected witch-craft, but also understood why Nina was so in demand.

Still, she knew what the issue was — her consistent failure to save Angel. She had lost him his soul, and then sent him to hell, and she had never ever been able to save him… Not then, not now.

“You tried to save him?” Nina asked, eyes wide, after Buffy attempted to explain, and moments later Buffy found herself wrapped in Nina’s arms.
“It didn’t work,” Buffy said, superfluously, but Nina shook her head.

“Doesn’t matter. You *tried*.”

Dimly, Buffy registered Spike in the distance muttering about ‘Women’, before adding that he was going to fetch a hammer and some nails, as he wanted to hang the painting in the foyer, if that was OK?

A few weeks later Spike had a vision which through a convoluted series of events led to them meeting a guy (‘Call me David’) who could have been Andrew’s nerdier older brother, but had once known Angel & co and was thrilled to meet what he called ‘The Next Generation’. Since he was loaded (something computer related, Buffy zoned out), Harmony of course attached herself like a burr and Spike had to take Adam out for drinks and commiserations.

At least Angel Investigations was slowly, but steadily, getting cases, and Spike found it in equal measures ridiculous and annoying that he would have to do things like file tax returns.

Connor stopped by regularly and Buffy tried to drop hints about Dawn, since she had been too busy to try to set them up in the summer. Connor seemed impervious however, although he was a safe pair of hands, and Spike always cheered up when he visited.

Christmas came and went (in sunny LA, with no magic snow or British rain) and for the first time in years Buffy didn’t wish herself somewhere else. It was just Christmas, with cheesy decorations (Spike and Harmony went all out) and a mish-mash of different traditions and the excitement of opening stockings on Christmas morning, and Buffy thought she might actually be happy; which led to her becoming paranoid for several weeks, certain that the world was coming to an end.

Spike tried his best to convince her that the really very small apocalypse that they foiled shortly afterwards was completely unrelated, and told her to go sing for Lorne just to put her mind to rest. Reluctantly (but unable to refute his logic) she sang for Lorne, who just smiled, called her three different kinds of pastries, and told her to go learn to just *live*.

And so, bit by bit, their little world became the new normal.

One night Buffy had asked Spike to come patrol with her (it was Spring Break, and the other Slayers had gone to make sure lots of young people didn’t get murdered, which was very clearly just an excuse for them to party for a week), but apart from a few stray vamps it was a quiet night. Too quiet almost, so when Spike grasped his head, trying to bite back a scream, Buffy mostly looked forwards to what would hopefully be a good and satisfying fight.

Except Spike collapsed, fingers digging into his skull, and after a second Buffy realised something was wrong.

“Spike? Spike?”

But when she reached him he’d gone limp and unconscious, and no amount of yelling or shaking could wake him again.
“Oh. Thought that would be a vision, how odd…”

Spike’s voice trailed off as Buffy ignored what he was saying completely, instead running past him and falling to her knees beside… his body, which was lying on the ground a few feet away.

He stared open-mouthed for a moment, then cautiously walked up to her and tried to tap her shoulder, but his hand went straight through her.

Blinking in surprise at the impossible déjà vu, he shook his head:

“Oh bloody hell, not again!”

Buffy was now shaking him — or his body, rather — and yelling his name, and Spike pinched the bridge of his nose.

He wasn’t dusty, his body was right there, so why the ghostlies?

Well, he could worry about that later, for now he needed to contact Buffy.

*Reality bends to desire.*

He could do this.

Taking a deep, unneeded breath, he tried to gather together all his will power. Just a tap on the shoulder first…

To his immense relief she felt something, half-turning and looking around in confusion, but before he could work out where to go from here (how to convey a message? He needed something written on — or maybe he could just get back into his body?) a voice spoke his name.

Looking up he saw a pointy-faced, dark haired, vaguely familiar-looking bloke standing next to him.

“Never seen anyone able to do that before. However, it won’t help.”

Spike frowned.

“So… you can see me? What the hell is going on? And… who are you?”
“I’m Doyle. We met before, you may remember me? I was Angel’s friend once, and his link to the Powers That Be.”

Spike took a moment, searched back to… The Gem of Amarra? Ah yes, there he was. That accent was unmistakable.

“Yeah, I remember. You an’ Cordy. So what do you want with me?”

“Well, I still work for the Powers. And… I’m afraid you have to come with me. There is some unfinished business.”

Spike’s instinct was to argue, but then his brain caught up with the situation and what it might mean. The Powers That Be and… ‘unfinished business’. He pursed his lips.

“Alright then. But make it snappy, don’t want Buffy upset for much longer.”

Doyle nodded and then — the world faded away and they found themselves in an Irish pub. A proper Irish pub, not an American knock-off with shamrocks everywhere. There were other people in the pub, but they all seemed oddly out of focus. And somewhere there was someone singing ‘Danny Boy’, but looking around he couldn’t pinpoint who it was.

He was standing next to a table, however, and Doyle was already taking a seat. Wary, but not complaining since there were two pints on the table, Spike sat himself down across from Doyle.

“That was quick,” he remarked. “Where are we? Didn’t think the Powers went in for Danny Boy…”

“It’s… Well, it’s kinda like The Matrix?” Doyle replied. “A sort of virtual reality where we can talk things through in peace.”

“That don’t explain why it’s a pub,” Spike observed, and Doyle lifted his pint.

“Been forever since I’ve had a drink, hope you won’t begrudge me the opportunity for a Guinness?”

Chuckling, Spike lifted his own glass in salute. He liked this guy’s attitude.

“Fair nuff mate. Cheers.”

Doyle smiled back, took a thoughtful sip, then leaned back in his seat.

“Where to start? Well, once upon a time there was a prophecy, or, more accurately, a whole bunch of them… Except prophecies are not always straightforward.”

“Preaching to the choir, mate.”

Doyle looked mildly annoyed:

“Look, I am trying to set out the basic parameters here, okay? I have a script to follow.”

“Fine, carry on,” Spike replied, trying not to roll his eyes. He’d never had any patience for this kind of nonsense, and he didn’t like to feel helpless; but he supposed it wasn’t Doyle’s fault.

“So, vampire with a soul, our very own broody giant with the overhanging forehead, the one with the destiny and all the prophecies as you know. Except then you came along, saving the world and what-not. Remember when you were made corporeal again? And the universe went out of whack?”

Spike thought back. Big box with a flash of nothing and…
Touch and taste and feel and Harmony (he was pretty sure she was keeping their ‘Nooner’ — such as it had been — in reserve for blackmail purposes in case he felt like firing her) and…

Angel, slowly getting up from the floor in the dusty and dirty theatre where fake Watcher guy had placed the fake Cup of Torment; bloodied, in pain, but deathly serious:

‘So ask yourself: Is this really the destiny that was meant for you? Do you even really want it? Or is it that you just want to take something away from me?’

At the time, Spike had been too angry and too triumphant to even bother considering the question with any seriousness, but now…

Trying to affect nonchalance, he replied:

“When Harmony was crying blood and all that? All ‘cause there were two Champions that both fit the bill, so we had to settle it, so Angel and I had that big pointless fight over the Cup of Mountain Dew?”

“That’s the one. Now as you may remember, The Senior Partners fixed the imbalance, but it was always just a temporary thing, waiting for one of you to fulfill the Shanshu. Which would have been all well and good… except for Angel taking down the Circle of the Black Thorn.”

Spike drummed his fingers on the table, frowning. The singer had finished Danny Boy and was now starting on a song he didn’t know, but it was equally as maudlin. He could have done without the soundtrack if he was honest, and did his best to block it out.

“But didn’t Angel get a vision about that? Wasn’t it something planned by the Powers?”

Doyle nodded.

“And that’s where it gets complicated. The Powers decided to use Angel’s position as CEO to attack Wolfram & Hart, but didn’t foresee that the Circle would make him sign away the Shanshu.”

Spike grasped onto the pint again, wishing for strength.

“I know all this, can we skip to the reason I’m here?”

“Patience, young Padawan—”

“Look kid, I’m old enough to be your great-great-grandfather, just bloody talk to me!”

Doyle sighed and may or may not have muttered something about vampires, the words muffled by the glass as he lifted it for another mouthful. Setting it down on the table, he composed himself.

“Right so, The Key. As you know, the enemies of Wolfram & Hart created it to destroy their power by severing the link they had set up with The First, but the Senior Partners got wind of it. Took the Key, killed its energy, broke it and scattered it in the safest places they could think of. However, they were well aware of the Shanshu prophecy, and that at some point some tenacious hero-type was likely to do what you did, so they went one step further. They couldn’t undo the Key’s purpose, but they could add another clause — and they did: It could only be brought back to life by a member of the Black Thorn; the group of people who were singularly focussed on the upkeep of Wolfram & Hart’s apocalypse. It must have seemed like the perfect failsafe.”

Spike stared, the words unleashing a whole row of dominoes that started falling, one after another.
“That’s- That’s why-”

That’s why Angel had done it. That’s why that final desperate kiss. The urgent message. Angel hadn’t known beforehand, Spike was sure of it. Christ. What a curveball.

Doyle nodded, and then continued, unaware of the emotional upheaval which the words had caused.

“Aye. Extra insurance, since they knew someone on that level would be unlikely to destroy their own power. Except if they were a self-sacrificial hero type like Angel — which is why they made him sign away the Shanshu. And therein lies our problem.”

Figuring he knew what came next, Spike nodded.

“Right, go on.”

Doyle raised an eyebrow, and pushed his Guinness out of the way:

“The only person who could use The Key had signed away the reward. And this wasn’t just a nice cruise around the Mediterranean, it was a very big, important prophecy, hardwired into the past and the future. Angel fulfilled the prophecy — but he also signed it away. In his own blood and so forth. And so we have a delightful catch-22. And a whole universe that could go belly-up at any moment.”

“Hang on-” Spike held up a hand, remembering the army that had greeted them in ‘The Home Office’. “Wesley and Charlie-boy, saying they were there to save the world from us…”

Doyle nodded.

“Exactly. If Angel used The Key, there would be no more Senior Partners to hold things together, just a massive hole in the fabric of reality, going to swallow up… everything. A big blank nothing.”

Spike shook his head, thrown.

“But it’s still there. Well, there was some upheaval when Wolfram & Hart fell, but the Slayers sorted that, pretty much. No holes in reality, and I think we’d have noticed…”

“Ah now,” Doyle replied. “This is where things are never as straightforward as they look. What no one foresaw was that in the middle of all this was an Old One.”

“Illyria…”

“Bingo. Not quite what she was, but strong enough to hold reality together.” Doyle tilted his head. “Well, I guess they knew that, they just didn’t figure she’d care that much…”

Spike smiled, pleased. No wonder she’d been too busy to answer him.

“She’s got a vested interest now, oh yes. Might have slipped the notice of the higher ups, but then I don’t think they ever really cared about understanding the internet?”

Doyle blinked, looking a little confused.

“… No, I don’t think that ever came up. However, although The Powers are happy she stepped in, they don’t like the solution, and really don’t like loose ends, especially when it comes to prophecies. And they have now finally decided what to do — which is why you are here.”

Spike tried to appear unaffected, lifting his chin.
“About time. What’s the verdict?”

Doyle seemed to hesitate.

“You’re a Victorian, you’ll know your Bible. Remember the story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac?”

Spike took another sip of his not-real beer, and unearthed the story from whichever dusty place he’d assigned it to. Abraham had been asked to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, but at the very very last minute Old Testament God had intervened and said to sacrifice a sheep instead ’cause he’d proven himself…

He scratched his head.

“Don’t follow you mate.”

Doyle fixed him with a serious look.

“Well, I thought it’d be quite simple: because you were ready and willing to do it, it still counts, even if you didn’t actually do the deed.”

As the significance sunk in, Doyle lifted his pint in salute:

“In short — I am here to tell you: the Shanshu is yours. Congratulations Champion, and welcome to humanity.”
Chapter 34

Buffy felt a tap on her shoulder, but when she turned there was no one there.

Maybe she was just imagining things…

Briefly burying her head in her hands she wondered what to do now. What had happened? The visions were painful, but somehow Spike screaming and clutching his head was just… normal. She had never thought about whether there might be side effects — after all the chip had deteriorated, maybe the visions were harming him? Or maybe it was Something Else, someone wanting vengeance? Or…

The possibilities were too many to worry about, first of all she needed to get Spike home.

Standing up, she tried to assess the situation. She could carry him she supposed, but it was a long way and she wasn’t keen on hauling a dead weight around. Getting out her phone, she scrolled through the contacts, eventually (and somewhat reluctantly) calling Harmony. How she could afford to keep a car on what they were paying her Buffy didn’t know (nor cared about), but right now it was very useful.

“Buffy? If it’s about that guy I was kinda necking yesterday, then like I told Spike, he asked me to, it was for this ting-”

“Shut up Harmony, I am calling because — because I need a favour.”

Buffy could almost hear the pout.

“If this is another apocalypse-”

“Harmony! Spike’s collapsed, I need to get him back to the hotel. If I tell you where we are, can you help?”

“I guess…”

Whilst waiting for Harmony to arrive, Buffy called Giles. Thankfully it was early morning in London and Giles had already had a cup of coffee, so he was marginally less snippy than he might
otherwise have been, although that wasn’t saying much. He had never said it outright, but Buffy knew he resented Spike for ‘stealing’ her away to LA.

“I’m sorry Buffy, but what exactly is it that you want me to actually do?”

“Just look into whether there is anything mystical happening that could have caused this.”

“And he is in… a coma?”

She wanted to throw something in frustration.

“I guess? Giles, please!”

“Very well. I’ll let you know if we find anything.”

Hanging up, she sat back down next to Spike, brushing a white-blond lock away from his face. He looked… peaceful. Calm. Like he was asleep. A sleeping beauty…

Feeling a little foolish, but figuring it was worth trying, she kissed him. Just in case. But still nothing. Just a dead body.

Her mind was going in circles — the cases he had taken recently, had there been anything weird? Unhappy clients? Or further back…

Biting the bullet (any port in a storm) she dialled Eve’s number.

Eve was of course very annoyed at being woken ’in the middle of the night’ (Buffy bit back a comment about it being 1am, ‘middle’ was hardly accurate unless Eve went to bed at 6pm with a cup of hot milk), and was deeply uninterested in Spike’s condition.

“Eve, I just want to know if you have heard anything about any disgruntled Wolfram & Hart people who might have it in for Spike. Or me.”

“Why do you think they would tell me of all people?” Eve asked, and Buffy shook her head.

“I don’t know. I just thought maybe you would care — anyone coming after us might come for you too.”

This at least made an impact as Eve went quiet, then said “I’ll get back to you”, and hung up.

Leaving Buffy alone again, fighting against unspoken, unknowable fear. Give her something to punch, and she’d be fine. But this… nothingness was impossible to deal with.

Thankfully Harmony then arrived, and was so annoying that she made Buffy forget about being worried.

She complained about being dragged out so late, about Spike being heavy, about David not calling her back, about Eve being a bitch and Adam being an annoying puppy and one of her friends who had borrowed her top and gotten red wine on it and now it was ruined and surely helping Buffy tonight counted as overtime, or at the very least she could get some kind of bonus in her wage packet, right?

Biting her tongue until they were back in the Hyperion, Buffy curtly pointed out that without Spike Harmony would have to look for a new job, so to view the night’s helping hand as an investment — or maybe as a contribution to a good cause?
Alternatively Buffy could just stake her, and then they wouldn’t have to pay her at all!

Harmony tossed her hair, and sniffed that there was no need to be like that, and that none of them appreciated her and maybe she’d go find another job and then they’d all be sorry.

Buffy congratulated herself on letting Harmony leave by the door and not throwing her out of a window.

She didn’t feel so flippant once she was alone.

Spike’s complete stillness was unnerving. She had gotten him into bed (only removing his boots) and found herself in silent vigil at his side.

Neither Giles nor Eve were getting back to her and Willow wasn’t answering her phone, and although there had been that nice warlock they’d met last year, she wasn’t sure if she’d trust him with Spike’s life…

Plus it was a wolf-y night, so Nina was all growly in the basement and unable to provide any kind of support or advice. So instead Buffy just sat by Spike’s side, waiting for a miracle.

Except after ten minutes she started pacing. This was no good. Who hadn’t she tried?

The answer was almost immediate, and not much later Lorne was running up the stairs, dressed in the shiniest pink suit she had ever seen.

“My little crème brûlée, what happened?”

As she described the events of the evening, Lorne slowly walked up to Spike and studied him silently.

“Now, this is going back a few years, but something similar happened to Cordy once…”

Buffy almost laughed in relief. Why hadn’t she called Lorne straight away?

“And?”

“Well, Cordelia was only human, the visions were taking their toll, and she was basically at death’s door. One more vision and she’d be a goner. Didn’t tell any of us of course, just carried on being stupidly brave. Except during her coma she made a deal of some sort and became part-demon, so she could keep the visions…”

Something wasn’t adding up, and Buffy frowned.

“But Spike’s all demon…”

Lorne spread his hands.

“Indeed. So, whatever this is…”

“Is something else again.”

She collapsed on a chair, staring forlornly at the immobile figure on the bed.

“Why can I never catch a break?”

Taking a seat next to her, Lorne patted her shoulder.
“Well, you could try to conjure up our favourite Blue Wonder, I’m sure she’d love to do a Lazarus trick.”

She smiled despite herself.

“Nice idea, but Spike tried contacting Illyria last year, and that was a dead end.”

A pause, as they just sat in the half-light, the lamp beside the bed casting a soft golden glow around the dark room.

“Right then, alcohol or coffee?” Lorne asked, and Buffy felt gratitude welling up. Just to have someone there made all the difference in the world.

“Coffee. And just… thank you.”

“Thank you, Princess. You gave me another shot at… Trying to get life right. I’ll get us some coffee, and then we can have a proper catch-up while we wait for Sleeping Beauty to wake up.”

Then he raised an eyebrow, adding:

“Don’t suppose you’ve tried to kiss him to wake him up?”

She bit her lip.

“… Yes.”

A chuckle.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained. And hey, those are very kissable kips, we’re all jealous you know.”

Coffee was good. As was someone to talk to. Lorne could both tell a story and also listen, and she found herself unburdening more than expected, stripping back the many layers of hers and Spike’s history; the fights, the pain, the hope, the love…

“I guess, it’s just the fact of seeing him like this… It’s like…” she searched for words, like stepping into unknown terrain. “Like we’re constantly living on borrowed time? I was supposed to die at sixteen… Well, I did die, and then I died again some years later and Spike sacrificed himself in the Hellmouth and — I keep expecting something like this? Not this exact thing, the coma-out-of-nowhere is just weird, but that something could happen, y’know?”

She gripped the cup more tightly, staring at Spike’s immobile form with unseeing eyes.

“We could die, either of us, any day. We slip up, that’s it. And that’s my life, I don’t think I know any other way to live now. Except there’s this big prophecy thing where he might get to be human and… I’m supposed to want that, like a ‘real’ life and children and settling down. But what if I don’t? What if… this is settling down, for me? I think…”

Glancing at Lorne she saw those sympathetic red eyes watching her silently, and somehow found the strength to continue. She really wasn’t good at talking about all this, but she could at least try.

“I think I’m happy? It kinda wigs me out saying it, but it’s like I’m finally in control of my life again, without running away or trying to please other people or having to be something I’m not. And I am so scared that it’ll get taken away…”

Her eyes were burning and then there was an arm around her shoulders.
“Shhh, my little Shield Maiden. You’re allowed to be happy. Trust old Lorne, and trust your Peroxide Prince. He’s a fighter, and what’s more, he’s not above fighting dirty. I’m sure he’ll pull through.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, not trusting her voice.

*She was allowed to be happy.* Such simple words, yet they seemed to upend her whole world. How Lorne had managed to not only hear what she had been trying to say, rather than the actual words, but also refute her fears at the same time she’d never know. It was probably the whole ‘Empath’ demon thing. Whatever the case, she was grateful. And oddly hopeful.

***

Almost five hours after he had collapsed, Spike gasped back to life.

Lorne had gone for a lie-down — he had started to nod off, and Buffy had marched him into the room next door, pointing out that it was nearly sun rise and Nina would be human again soon, and honestly she’d be fine for a few minutes.

Scrambling to a sitting position, Spike saw her and stopped.

Before she could speak he reached out and took hold of her hand, the intense look on his face silencing her.

“Buffy, please: Tell me you love Angel?”

Of all the questions she had expected, this was the last.

“I am deathly serious. Buffy, you said I had no idea what you were willing to do for him — I hope you were right.”

“I don’t understand,” she replied, “What does Angel have to do with anything? Are you OK? What happened?”

He stopped for a moment, as if not quite sure where he was, looking around the room.

“That was- The Powers’ way of having a chat. And they offered me… the Shanshu.”

She inhaled sharply, but he shook his head, a strangely triumphant glow in his eyes.

“And I turned it down.”

***

Doyle lifted his pint in salute:

“In short — I am here to tell you: the Shanshu is yours. Congratulations Champion, and welcome to humanity.”

The initial shock took a while to sink in, but then Spike shook his head.

“Well then mate, best let them know that I’m not interested.”

Doyle’s eyebrows went to almost comical heights.

“Not interested?”
“Nope. They can keep their Shanshu, give it to Harmony, I don’t care.”

Doyle was now slowly shaking his head, utterly thrown.

“And what makes you think you have a choice?”

Leaning back, Spike folded his arms, smirking.

“The fact that I’m here. The fact that they bent the rules so they could make their stupid prophecy fit. Well, I’m not playing. I’m tired of being pushed back and forth, and I’m not very impressed by their planning. Or lack of same, rather. It’s their catch-22, not mine, so I reckon I’ve got leverage. Besides, if they didn’t need consent, no reason to go to all this trouble—” he held out his hand, indicating their surroundings. “Just turn me human and be done with it, yes?”

“You are… not wrong,” Doyle eventually replied. “What do you want?”

Spike stopped then, before slowly replying. He’d never thought about it, and yet there was no hesitation as he began laying out his terms.

“I want Angel back. For good. This whole bleedin’ mess is all thanks to this stupid destiny stuff which got divided in half so nothing fits. Well I don’t care where you put us, heaven or hell or bloody Cleveland, as long as we’re together, understood?”

And then he’d realised that Doyle had tears in his eyes (bloody Irish! Too sentimental by far), and a second later he found himself hugged fiercely by… Cordelia?

“Told you he’d come through!” she said (presumably to Doyle) and then studied Spike with that no-nonsense look he still remembered very clearly.

“Angel told me you’d become a Champion, but I never really believed him. Thank you for proving him right. And be sure to tell him I’m still keeping tabs!”

And then everything faded away, as he was jolted back into awareness, in his bed, and saw Buffy… And realised exactly what he’d done.

***

There was a long moment of silence, then he continued: “I figured out that I had one over them, could choose the terms. So I did. And Buffy, I love you, I love you more than life itself, but I couldn’t — I couldn’t leave him with The First. Couldn’t have a life with you if I knew that he had to suffer forever as part of the bargain.”

“I understand.” She squeezed his hand, a slow, almost luminous, smile lighting up her face. “And thank you. I couldn’t have lived like that either. Plus, I kinda like you just the way you are.”

Impulsively he kissed her (he’d hoped for this reaction, but his hopes didn’t often overlap with reality), but as the broke apart her eyes turned speculative.

“So, what now?” she asked.

Spike scratched his head.

“Dunno. Woke back up. Guy didn’t elaborate, so…”

He vaguely looked around, as if expecting Angel to appear out of thin air.
“Guess I never said anything about now. Or where…”

***

Nina slowly came to, the concrete floor cold against her naked skin. Mind fuzzy she sat up, feeling as if there was something else, something different…

Slowly adjusting her vision (where had she put the key? And her clothes should be…) she suddenly sat up straight, staring in disbelief.

Some distance away, on top of the now somewhat faded Aurelius symbol, lay a naked Angel.

Chapter End Notes

Epilogue still to come, and then it's all over!!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

It seems impossible that I am actually posting this epilogue. It’s taken nearly twelve years from my first drafts and until today. Back when I first mulled over the plot for this story neither AO3 nor Dreamwidth existed (nor Tumblr for that matter), just to put it all into perspective. But unlike most of my fics I always knew the arc of this, and, although there were a few twists that took me by surprise, this epilogue hasn’t changed much from my original notes.

Although I feel I should add that this isn’t quite the final part. I have a (fairly short, about 6 chapters) sequel to this, set 20+ years into the future, called ‘The End of the Reprieve’, which I will probably write up at some point. However I like leaving the story here, so we’ll see. <3

But mostly, I just wanted to thank you all for reading. When I finally started posting I was worried that the Buffy & Angel fandoms had mostly dispersed, and I was 10 years too late. So I am grateful for each and everyone of you.

Hope you like the ending — I know it’s short compared to my usual chapters, but this just seemed right.

Spike’s favourite place was the Hyperion roof. Sitting on the parapet, the glow of the LA night lighting up the darkness, a smoke in his hand, the world at his feet — it had become a little evening ritual, a way to take stock before ‘going to work’ and dealing with whatever new case they might have picked up.

He liked to think that Illyria was looking down on him; she hadn’t reappeared, so presumably she was up there somewhere, keeping tabs on them all from up above and looking after their little world. Their world, where somehow Spike had gotten a starring role in the stupid games they had to play; he sincerely hoped all that nonsense was over now. Because the world was back the way it should be: two vampires and the women they loved. Even if the women were now a werewolf and a Slayer, and the vampires had souls… He smiled. It was all good.
Idly he wondered what exactly the Powers were doing about their prophecy — Angel couldn’t shanshu, Spike had refused, and it didn’t look like they were going with the Harmony option… He took a deep drag and shook his head. Bureaucracy had never been his thing, and as long as they didn’t go back on their ‘deal’ and take Angel away, he couldn’t care less. Hell, bringing Angel back to ‘un-life’ might even fit? He was a bit fuzzy on the actual details, but he didn’t think it actually used the word ‘human’.

Sensing Angel appearing at his side and carefully leaning against the balustrade, Spike kept quiet at first, finishing the cigarette before flicking it down into the road below and pretending to ignore him.

But, it was good that Angel was up and about. He’d been in quite a state when he’d first appeared, and Nina had cared for him with a protective fierceness that only Connor had been able to challenge for the first week. Buffy had managed it the day before yesterday, but only for few minutes. So if Nina was allowing him to walk about (even if it was just up the stairs) it meant that Angel was definitely on the mend.

“Come to tell me off for buggering up the Shanshu?” he eventually asked, keeping his voice light, and Angel snorted.

“Quite the opposite. I wanted to…” his voice trailed off. “If you hadn’t turned it down, I’d still be… there.”


“You never mentioned this…” Angel said slowly, and Spike shrugged.

“Knew Buffy would come for me, sooner or later, so I could… block it out, after a fashion. Without her…”

He stopped, studying the row of cars below, stopping, starting, stopping again; remembered when it would have all been horses and carriages.

“So yeah. Don’t mention it.”

But still, he knew they were dancing around the main issue. Issues, even. All the things they didn’t really talk about. Saving each other, that was one thing. But the why…

Sending Angel a quick glance, he cleared his throat. Fuck it, there was no polite way around it, might as well take the bull by the horns.

“Anyway, so I was wonderin’ — the reason you snogged my face off, back when, y’know… It was for the visions, yeah? Passing on the mission and all that?”

There was a lengthy pause as they both just looked out over LA, before Angel replied.

“Well, if you read the fine print…” a beat, until Spike turned and met his eyes, waiting. “For it to work, you… you have to love the person you’re kissing.”

For what seemed like eons Spike merely stared in silent shock; even as a dancing, irrepressible joy welled up inside.

Eyes aglow he studied Angel — then made a decision and moved closer, tilting his head. He wanted to reciprocate, but ‘I love you too’ was somehow too banal. Besides, he’d just had a great idea.
“Well then Champ, want ‘em back? I could do without the migraines from hell…”

Smiling languorously as he leaned in, there was quiet amusement in Angel’s voice:

“Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged! Give me my sin again.”

Romeo and Juliet now? Angel was taking the piss and no mistake, but if he thought that would put Spike off he was sorely mistaken.

A beat, their lips within a hair’s-breadth of each other, then Angel spoke again.

“Of course, for it to work you also have to be about to die…”

Pulling back, Spike pursed his lips sadly.

“Always some kind of catch.”

Angel was still smiling, a twinkle in his eyes.

“I don’t make the rules. Besides the girls would probably get… upset if they found us necking.”

Spike raised an eyebrow.

“Or we’d finally get another foursome…”

“You’re incorrigible,” Angel observed, shaking his head, and Spike smirked.

“S why you love me.”

Angel’s smile turned softer.

“Good point.”

After a minute, contented silence settling on them, Spike leaned his head on Angel’s shoulder. The world was turning; the dark heavens above, the earth below, but here and now he had everything he could ever have wished for.

~ The End ~

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!