The Blood Is the Life

by NanDibble

Summary

The Hellmouth is shut, the First defeated. Spike, Buffy, Dawn, and the remaining SITs must deal with new challenges--Buffy, about her role as Slayer and partnership with Spike; Spike, about the horrible (to him) prospect of becoming a champion of the PTB and about whether to claim the role of the active Master Vampire of Sunnydale; Dawn, about whether and how to grow up and handle an intense but angsty romance (sort of) with vampire Michael.

AU, sequel to Blood Kin.

Notes

Disclaimer: All canonical characters belong to Joss Whedon/Mutant Enemy, to which be all praise. No profit expected, only more Spikelove for everyone.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“For heaven’s sake, Spike, come on!” Dawn whined, hopping at the bottom of the basement stairs, head turned away to look back over her shoulder to the hallway above. “You’re gonna miss them!”

It was a good opportunity to drop the locket chain over her head.

“What’s this?” Dawn demanded, grabbing his arm with one hand and lifting the locket with the other, grimacing and rearing her head back as if the trinket smelled.

“An amulet, sort of,” Spike responded, resisting being dragged. “Charm. Something Red made up. Got one of my own, see?” He fished the chain out of the neck of his black T-shirt and showed the corresponding locket to her. “You just keep that on, Bit. For protection.”

“Why? The First’s been shut out, the Hellmouth’s closed. What do I need-- Oh, never mind, just come on! They’re leaving!”

“Then you’d best hurry and get back to wave them off, hadn’t you?”

She glared at him. He met her eyes calmly and didn’t budge.

Dawn demanded snarkily, “You gonna be tiresome about this?”

“S’daytime out.”

“Sure, like you never did a sprint with a blanket!”

“Not inclined to do that now. Got other business,” Spike said, turning away.


“Mine. You go wave to the children if you want, bid ‘em fucking bon voyage. Got nothing to do with me.”

“But it does, Spike. And you know it does. For once in your unlife, do the right thing.”

That stung somewhat, but not enough to make him change his mind. Nothing required that he present himself to let this final bunch of departing SITs go all weepy over each other, their leavetaking, him. Spike hated goodbyes and hated weeping girl children worse. Time for them to go. Let ‘em go.


Time, tide, and departing SUVs waited for no man. Dawn flapped her arms once in defeated exasperation and dashed away up the stairs. Absently rubbing the smooth metal of the locket, Spike wandered to the other end of the basement and flopped on one of the circle of couches there. He scooped up the current paperback from the floor, found his place, and started reading. The only light was two candles on a cabinet way off by the bed at the other end of the basement. Rather than light one nearer or turn on the track lighting he loathed, he subsided to game face, frowning yellow-eyed, trying to catch up the thread of the plot.
Generally, midafternoon, he’d be asleep. But even though he refused to see the SITs off, their departure was unsettling. Everything changing around him. He didn’t like it. “Stupid bints. Never asked ‘em to come. They want to go, no concern of mine. Nothing for them to be hanging about for anyway. Stupid damn bints.”

Slayer hadn’t told him yet what she figured to do, now that the Hellmouth was closed. Maybe nothing. Maybe just the two of them, patrolling, like it’d been before. That could be good…. Not like there weren’t still vamps in Sunnydale, after all, and considerable other strangeness to be sorted. Not many people left, that was true, but they’d drift back, need protecting. Only stood to reason. But she hasn’t said.

Maybe without all the teenaged Slayers in Training to feed and all, nobody but herself and Dawn to be seen to, maybe she’d want to start college again, the way the witch had. Council of Watchers all blown to hell, likely a ton of money sitting someplace in numbered accounts: maybe Rupert could come up with somewhat for that. Have to remember to ask, next time Rupert called to report progress and itinerary, escorting the foreign SITs in batches back to various wherevers…. 

If that was what she wanted, college girl, maybe he could help, find some sort of night work and chip in. Things were so slow with the town half depopulated, Anya always complaining about it. But Buffy hadn’t said. And Spike didn’t want to ask her, in case whatever she had in mind didn’t have any place or role for a pet vampire. Not as if he was some fucking American, work ethic, come all to pieces without a regular job, a set routine. None of that. Wasn’t as if he had nothing to do with himself if he didn’t have SITs to train, look after. Lots of things to do. Didn’t need much by way of money, just for himself, never had. Blood. Liquor. Smokes. Blood, that was gonna become a problem again, maybe, with the obliging children gone, willingly sharing with him in set rotation. Going back to that wretched foul dead pigs’ blood, that didn’t even bear considering. Like he was goddam Angel, which he wasn’t, nothing like at all, regardless of the soul.

There was an active Hellmouth in Cleveland, it seemed. Maybe she’d want to relocate there. Being the Slayer was real important to her. So maybe she’d want to take the show on the road, take the Scoobys or leave ‘em behind. Just the two of them again, doing whatever nasties showed their faces of an evening. Didn’t think he’d ever been in Cleveland nor she out of California. Bit of a change, maybe she’d like that. But she’d miss her friends. Miss the places and the ways she knew. Miss goddam Angel: back in L.A. again but only a couple hours’ drive away in case she felt like visiting and like that. Excellent argument in favor of Cleveland…. And of course they couldn’t leave Bit behind, went without saying. Maybe he shouldn’t have been so quick to piss Bit off, her wanting him to go play hugs and fond fucking goodbyes with the departing children being taken off and delivered to the bus station or the airport, a few more every day and this lot, now, about the last of them and Casa Spike so quiet, hardly any great galumphing girls pounding down the hallway overhead…. 

Maybe if Bit wasn’t too pissed off, she could sort of test the waters, like—see which way the wind was blowing, and he not have to ask anything directly at all. Only stood to reason, the Slayer’s sister and all, she’d want to know and have the right to ask. Not like him, with no connection beyond the loving her so hard, all knotted up and practically paralytic with it sometimes, hanging in endless suspense for her response, her consent, her shimmering, happy acceptance that he always felt a hungry space left open for, deep inside him. No rights at all according to how humans figured things or seemed to.

In the near darkness the words were hard to see, even with the greater acuity his vampire aspect granted. All the uncertainties spinning around in his head made it even harder to concentrate: he’d
read the same page at least twice. Now he had the lockets in place, for himself and Bit, each containing and protecting a magicked clay wafer that Red had assured him would prevent anything whatever from messing with his head (or Bit’s), maybe it was safe to let go his stubborn vigilance. Maybe he could sleep without dreaming.

It had been two days since the last dream and therefore two days since he’d slept….

Presence woke him. Kim…and Kennedy, just seating themselves on the carpeted rim of the conversation pit more or less opposite. Chubby Kim put down a candle she’d brought from the bed area. Spike was pleased at how well the SITs knew their manners: knew enough to keep their distance and not make a noise about themselves in the presence of a sleeping Master Vampire. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, shifting back to human aspect, easy with them as they were with him because they’d learned each other’s ways well enough, even allowing for Kennedy’s unstated but apparent animosity. She didn’t like vamps. Or didn’t like him. And Spike didn’t care. All peaceable.

“So,” he said to Kim, “the bints get off all right, did they?”

Kim didn’t say anything. She looked nervous. Kennedy was staring at him, a grim, challenging look.

Kennedy said, “Spike, I want to make a deal with you.”

“That a fact. What kind of a deal, pet?” He knew she hated his putting nicknames to them: treasure, pet, love. Too fucking bad about what she hated. Kennedy wasn’t among his favorite people for a hundred miles roundabout. Yet they had an understanding. Spike had saved her life at least once and she’d come up with the plan that let him feed on the SITs by consent. So he waited, still all peaceable, to hear her out.

“It’s like this,” said Kennedy. “I don’t want to go. And Willow thinks I should. Or she’s convinced herself to say I should. Anyway.” She clasped her hands and then threw them apart. “The issue isn’t money. I have that. Quite a lot of it, and it’s mine. Doled out quarterly from a trust fund until I’m twenty-one, but still mine. Now that we’re all disbanded, I could get a place here myself and stay. That’s not the issue. I need a reason. Something besides Willow, that Willow would accept.”

“A pretext,” chipped in Kim, and then looked upset to have spoken and bent her head.

Spike frowned because Kim was among the bravest of the children and one of the most determined fighters. There was muscle under the baby fat and she never spared herself in the training. Never whined or complained. After the arrangement had been made, Kim was the one who’d come first, to let him feed from her, when no one else was willing. Spike didn’t like seeing her make little of herself. Didn’t like to see her frightened.

He thought that if he asked her, she’d just refer him back to Kennedy, nearly hiding behind the taller, more self-assured girl; so he didn’t let on he’d noticed. “So how do I come into this?”

“There’s two others that want to stay,” said Kennedy. “Amanda, she lives in Sunnydale anyway, that’s not a problem. Kim. And Rona.”

“Rona’s from…New Jersey,” Spike recollected. “And she was in today’s batch for the bus station.”

“No,” said Kennedy. “Well, she was, but she didn’t go.”

“She hid out,” Kim muttered in a way that gave Spike severe misgivings.
“Where?” he demanded.

Kennedy made a dismissive gesture. “Doesn’t matter, just listen to me here.”

“Where, Kim?”

Kim had her eyes shut, twisting her hands together. “It will be OK, really. Likely he’s just asleep anyway and we know him, Spike.”

Fucking hell: the chit had hidden out at Casa Mike--Michael’s lair. Hidden out with a vampire.

Spike said, “What time is it,” staring at the ceiling, trying to feel the angle of sun, which was absurd, he could tell it was still daylight out by the faint tingling of his skin that he was free of only underground with earth between, like the basement of his old crypt or in the sewers or tunnels.

“About five,” said Kennedy, “but Spike--”

Pitching the book, Spike went fast toward the bed to grab a blanket, the two girls trailing along. “Settle this later,” he said, leveling a finger at Kennedy, “but for now, you mind. Get over there, quick as you can, make sure she’s all right, and get outside, into the light. Go.”

Things might be falling apart, but his children still knew how to behave, how to take an order and move. The two of them ran and Spike on their heels as far as the front door, stopping there to locate the shadows of trees he could use for cover. Only two, and nearly a block’s distance to cross. He could wait, go to a window and see who came out. But no: Michael was his responsibility too and though Kim could be trusted to hold back and decide, he didn’t trust Kennedy’s judgment in that respect. And if anybody was gonna dust the lad, it should be him.

He gathered the blanket over his head and ran for the first pool of shadow.

The two SITs had had the sense to leave the front door ajar. Spike burst inside smoking and swearing, taking in the scene at a glance, then continued through the front room to the kitchen, pressing folds of blanket against his burned right arm until he could thrust it under cold water from the faucet. Then he ducked his head to ease the heat on his ear and the side of his face. Stood and turned and sighed, dripping and blinking, regarding the three guilty-looking embarrassed SITs and the tall, broad vampire rising from the couch where he’d obviously been sleeping.

“No harm,” said Mike, lifting open hands. “I told Rona she could stay if she wanted. Wouldn’t nobody look for her here. Except they did, of course.” Mike put on a medium smile, his wide-set, light eyes calm. “No need to fry yourself.”

Spike leveled a finger at Rona, and the tall black girl came forward, looking at once sullen, frightened, and defiant. Then she glanced at the blisters coming up on Spike’s arm and hung her head, saying, “Didn’t mean to bother nobody. Or for nobody to get hurt. Wasn’t no need.” Then, obeying the finger, she stood right in front of Spike, and he took her hands.

“Rona, you know better. Michael’s had his leavegeld and he’s free. Not beholden to you or me or anybody. He could take you in a flash if he had a mind to, and he wouldn’t think twice about it then or ever. Now isn’t that so.”

“But we been, like, friends--” Rona protested.
“Only *like* friends. T’isn’t the same, Rona. That’s done now.”

Rona drew her hands away and set them on her hips. “Sure: that’s why you caught yourself afire to make sure baby vamp wasn’t snacking on me! Cause you don’t care, we’re not your pack anymore, it’s nothing to do with you. Sure, and you’re the world’s terrible liar, Spike. Everybody knows that.”

Spike looked past the SITs to the other vampire, who’d been his minion and nearly his childe for awhile. “Michael, you have any reason not to eat Rona?”

“Not hungry just now,” Mike replied calmly.

“Give it another few hours: how about then?”

“Then, maybe. Wouldn’t say no. Save me the hunting. But mostly I like the hunting. So likely not. Dawn wouldn’t like it. Course, likely Dawn wouldn’t know. So I might. It would depend.”

The three SITs all stared at Mike, wide-eyed and indignant. He smiled.

“Just funning you a little. Mostly,” he said, good-natured and serene.

Spike said, “No, you’re not, Michael. Don’t tell them lies.”

Mike gave him a look. A quiet calculation. “Don’t exactly answer to you no more, Spike. Except if I want to. And I mostly want to. Want to stay friends with you and Dawn, as best I can. No need to get into power games, you and me.”

Spike dropped into a chair. “You’re all such fucking fools. Dunno what to do with any of you.” Morosely, he lit a cigarette and breathed smoke on a sigh.

Kennedy took that as a signal to launch back into her interrupted argument. As Mike and Kim settled companionably on the couch and Rona came to lean against the back of Spike’s chair, all close warm girlsmell, bloodsmell, Kennedy began pacing and declaiming in the middle of the floor. “Even with the Hellmouth shut, there will still be a need for sweeps, patrols. Something will come up. Something always comes up. Give me a reason to stay that Willow will accept.”

“And you’ll do what?” Spike inquired, trying to sound noncommittal, neutral.

Kennedy wheeled and folded her arms. “I’ll pay you. I’ll pay the keep of Kim and Rona and you can pretend it’s from you. Pretend anything you like.”

“Please, Spike,” said Kim softly. “I’m good at this. I’ve never been good at anything before. I don’t want to leave it.”

Behind him, Rona leaned and muttered, “Whatever, I ain’t goin’ back to what I came from. Not gonna whine about it, just telling you. I’d sooner be turned than go back.”

“Michael, did Rona say anything about you turning her?”

“Might have.”

“You ever do that and I’ll dust the both of you. Just putting you on notice here. Rona. Shut the
As Rona went wordlessly to do as she’d been told, Spike returned to the kitchen and ran more cold water on his arm and the side of his face, then shook his head hard, trying to reconcile what was fit and proper for vampires, as against the spectacular self-centered urgencies of three teenaged girls. Four, if you counted Amanda—not yet heard from. And then Dawn of course: she’d want to stick her oar in, no question about it. That she hadn’t only meant Kennedy hadn’t confided this plot to her. Yet.

He returned to the chair. “You’re all beforehand, children. You’re trying to join a team that doesn’t exist. It all depends on what the Slayer decides, and she’s not told me anything of what she’s got in mind to do. Dunno what she’ll want with me, much less you lot.”

“Oh, I think we can guess,” said Kennedy dourly, and Kim clasped hands over a smile.

“And me the world’s worst liar, as everybody’s agreed. Bloody marvelous. What happens if she doesn’t buy it? You all just go your ways, or what?”

“An arrangement, Spike,” said Rona earnestly, “like we had before. You take care of us, and we’ll-”

Spike shook his head, fast and emphatic. “None of that. Not no more. Not just the three of you, wouldn’t do. No. You talk to the Slayer about what you want. She goes for it, I’ll think about it.”

“No, Spike, you got it backward,” said Kennedy. “I need a done deal to take to her. Actually, for you to take to her. Because it can’t come from me. That’s the whole point here. You have to bring it up.”

“Oh, that’s just fine,” said Spike. “And me the world’s worst liar, as everybody’s agreed. Bloody marvelous. What happens if she doesn’t buy it? You all just go your ways, or what?”

“We’ll deal with that if and when we get to it,” Kennedy said coolly. “I think the best thing is if we take the usual patrol tonight. Like always. The three of us, and you. And ‘Manda, if she wants to come. Just behave as if it’s already in effect, the way we want it to be. Your cut is $ 500 a week. Cash. In advance. Beyond reasonable expenses for the three of us. So: do we have a deal?”

Spike cocked his head, regarding her with no great favor. “And for that princely sum, exactly what is it you figure you’d be buying, pet? Me?”

Kennedy’s folded arms gripped tighter. “Spike, you’ve never liked me, and I’m not too fond of you either. But you play fair and you keep your word, and that’s good enough for me. I’d be paying for the right to stay. That’s all. No strings. I don’t consider your accepting the money as equivalent to a submission. I don’t expect to buy anything except what I’m paying for. Anything except what you’ve been doing all along. On patrol, I’ll take orders and go to the mark on your word. Fight or not, on your word. On SIT business, you’re boss. And not the Slayer. I answer to you. All of us alike. Just like it’s been. My private life, that’s none of your concern, no more than it ever was. No more than your private life is any concern of mine.”

“You break up with Willow? Is that the problem?” Spike inquired bluntly.

“No. I swear. She just assumes I’m going back where I came from, and she won’t hear anything about my staying just for her. So I need some other reason, Spike. That’s all it is.”

Kim still had her hands folded across her mouth and her eyes focused on the floor, sitting round-shouldered and anxious. Begging by not begging. And Rona’s warmth behind him, leaning on the
chair back, not quite touching. But close: making him aware of her presence, the smell that fear and
determination sent from her flesh that he couldn’t help but notice, and she knew enough to know that
and use it. Over the months, the children had learned something of conversing with vampires in ways
other than speech, and Spike had to respect that. And then there was Michael just sitting there
amused at Spike’s predicament, as though it mattered to him not at all, which wasn’t anything like
the truth neither.

Freed now of any obligation and yet still lairing here, still willing to regard Rona as something other
than food for the moment, still considering Dawn’s reaction and Spike’s to whatever he might do.
Michael had his own agenda, and Spike didn’t know what that was or if it was anything he should
be concerned about.

“It all depends,” Spike said finally, “on what the Slayer wants to do. And I don’t know that. Maybe
you could ask, find out. Anyway, if she calls for a patrol tonight, I’ll call you in if that’s what you
want. Not promising you nothing here. You were willing before, and if you’re willing now, I don’t
see any reason to turn you away. But beyond that, it’s the Slayer’s say, not mine. If she doesn’t
object, I’ll consider it. Not gonna go further than that until she’s declared. Got no Mission, myself. I
just tag along on whatever Mission comes up and she decides to set her hand to. And that’s hers to
say.’”

“Good enough,” said Kennedy, and collected her co-conspirators and led them outside. Kim turned
and shut the door tightly behind them, rattling the knob to make sure the lock had caught.

Spike stretched out long in the chair, ankles crossed, rubbing his eyes. Wasn’t such a fool as to sprint
a block in the sunshine if he didn’t have to. Sun would be down soon enough. He tapped cigarette
ash onto the rug. Not as if this lair was anything but an abandoned house, its protection as a personal
dwelling gone. If he hadn’t picked it to lodge his last batch of minions handily nearby, the
scavengers would have been through and raped the place long since.

Mike inquired, “You want to come hunt with me tonight?”

Eyes drowsily half-shut, Spike glanced over at the younger vampire and then away. “I suppose.
Yeah. All right.”

If they hunted together, likely Mike would hold himself short of a kill in feeding, following Spike’s
example. Spike had the Slayer to feed from, maybe once a week, and that was enough. Mike had no
such arrangement and wouldn’t tolerate dead animal blood in bottles any more than any self-
respecting vamp would, given a choice. Terrible swill. Spike had neither the authority nor the
inclination to try to stop the lad from hunting. But if he went along, likely nobody would die. At least
tonight. At least on that account. Because of course people died regardless. Every day, traffic
accidents killed more people than vamps did but wasn’t nobody setting up to stake Ford Echoes with
bobble-headed dogs on the dash. But that wasn’t how Buffy would look at it.

Hard to know what to do, how to do. Didn’t want his tentative unspoken arrangement with the
Slayer to turn into coercion for lack of another alternative. Take the joy right out of what felt like
communion, like a free gift freely shared. Profound meanings entirely beyond words, deeply
satisfying. As near as he could imagine to holy. Never wanted it to become a routine chore and
obligation, something he required of her and she merely resigned to it. He’d give it up altogether
rather than let that happen. Which meant hunting on a regular basis, now that the SITs were gone.
Which both Buffy and the soul wouldn’t much like. Which he therefore was uneasy, contemplating.

He hadn’t thought this far ahead. Hadn’t thought there’d be this far ahead: he’d expected the
Hellmouth to end him and been content enough with that. Never figured on having to sort the aftermath. Turned out, that’d been dumb, because here he still was, no worse than lightly singed around the edges. And the consequences just kept piling up.

Abstractedly he scratched his arm, healed enough to start itching as the burned skin tightened and drew.

Too many alternatives, too many choices to be thought through, made, and then continually reconsidered. Everything moving, shifting around him. So many of his own certainties conditional on the Slayer’s preferences and choices, that Spike wanted to leave completely free because her sense of duty left her so little freedom. He didn’t want to be more of a leech, and a problem, than he could help. Make his own way. Bring strength to their partnership, not depend on her except in the good ways.

Stretching out on the couch again, Mike commented lazily, “Be nice if Kim could stay. I’m used to Kim. And ‘Manda would miss her. They’re pretty well teamed up. Don’t care much either way about Rona nor Kennedy.”

“Yeah.”

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She didn’t like seeing him like this.

Returning in the SUV from delivering the SITs to their embarkation points, Buffy spotted Spike on the back porch. Asleep, his shoulder leaned into one of the posts, head bowed, chin on chest. The sleek, slicked-back cap of moonsilver hair. Exposed naked neck, always so absurdly fragile looking. She loved his neck…. He looked lost, collapsed there, undefended. Everything loose, exhausted, bent, bowed: in submission to sleep. From a distance, seeming a miniature figure she should be able to lift in a cupped palm, surround and gentle it, clasp hands warmly around like keeping safe a small treasure…. So deep asleep he didn’t wake or even twitch as she approached across the backyard’s mosaic of grass and patches the SITs had stamped bare as brick.

He’d been twitchy enough the past few days, though. Irritable, sure. That came with the package: probably hard-wired. Avoiding the SITs and the successive leavetakings like the plague. Grumping and refusing to join in conversations about them or the details and logistics of their dispersal. She understood: Spike didn’t do farewells, refused to admit to any attachments beyond herself and Dawn. But also withdrawn, mopy, elusive, unsure.

Since the Hellmouth had been closed. Since he’d done it. Since he’d been light.

She wondered if he missed it, if this was withdrawal from channeling, from being accepted into, that kind of huge bright energy. Had to leave a mark on a person, inwardly if not outwardly. According to Dawn, there’d been nothing to him but light: like an Elf Lord, she’d said, revealed in his wraith, a la Tolkien. Maybe this was what was left--the shadow cast by so much light. The ashes of such a blaze.

He hadn’t seemed quite right, quite here, since.

Settling on the step beside him, shoulder against shoulder, arm against arm, she said softly, “Hey,” expecting some reflexive protest that he hadn’t been asleep, had known she was there all along but hadn’t bothered rousing because after all it was only her, had only been resting his eyes.
Instead, he just woke, not greeting her, straightening and collecting himself close, blinking slowly at the dark. After a minute or so, he found his cigarettes and lit one. Still slow-moving, lethargic, drowsy.

Although her inclination was to push, provoke, she was learning to wait for him. Words, he’d bat back or dodge. Silence drew him.

Presently he said, “That Michael. Dunno what to do about him.”

“Do you have to do anything?”

“Well, he’s still here. Not cogged to anything about you lot. Just here.”

“And that’s a problem because…?”


Because his hand was occupied with the cigarette, Buffy slipped her arm under his. “If he’s anybody’s problem, he’s yours. I didn’t even know he was still around. No problem, as far as I’m concerned. Do you want to run him off?”

Another shrug. “Dunno why he stays.”

“Have you tried asking him, or would that be too simple?”

A long silence. “Best not to. Might not like the answer.” He drew on the cigarette, then let the hand fall to hang lax from the wrist, over his knee. “If Dawn doesn’t mind, I expect it’s best to let it alone.”

Buffy’s attention sharpened. “What’s Dawn got to do with it?”

Another long silence. “Nothing, likely. She hasn’t said. So likely there’s nothing.” He looked around at her. “You had your supper, love?”

“Tacos. That place by the airport. Think I’ll make some coffee, though,” Buffy remarked, rising. “You want some?”

“No,” he said, but pitched the cigarette and followed her into the kitchen anyway.

Preparing the coffee-maker, Buffy had a strong sense of his presence and the warmth of his attention on her in a way it hadn’t been, outside. Hitting the start button, she glanced around at him and gave him a smile he returned, as if her initiating it had given him permission. He shouldn’t need permission. He was waiting for something, some signal from her she hadn’t figured out yet.

She lifted her head, noticing the quiet. For months, it had impossible to be anywhere in the house except the bathroom or her bedroom without two or three SITs coming or going or standing and talking. Never alone like this. “Willow home?”

“Dunno. Haven’t seen her. Dawn’s gone over to Janice’s with algebra homework. Share the misery.”
“Just us chickens, then. I don’t know about you, but I’m too young for empty nest syndrome. For ages, I would have killed to have it this quiet. Now that I have it, I don’t know what to do with it.”

“Next catastrophe hasn’t upped and shown itself yet. When it comes, I expect you’ll know,” Spike responded casually, and Buffy considered that an odd thing for him to say.

“Is that what we’re doing? Waiting for the next apocalypse to erupt?”

As though that had been a challenge, except she hadn’t meant it that way, he retreated, withdrew. “Dunno what your priorities are, love. Expect I’ll find out.”

He left the kitchen. When the coffee was ready, Buffy poured herself a cup and followed. She found him in the front room, on the couch, flipping through the channels. Settling beside him, she reached to turn on a lamp, something he’d seldom think to do. The TV, yes; lights, no. Just another of the peculiar routines of life with a vampire, or…. “Ever think of taking up a career as a Jewish mother?”

He made an inattentive, inquiring noise.

“You know: Don’t mind me, I’ll just sit here in the dark?” She touched his arm and he flinched. She noticed then the reddened skin—there and the right side of his face. “Trying for a tan? Not a good idea.” She waited for him to explain what had prompted him to do a daylight dash, but he’d found something to hold his attention more than two seconds, a soccer game, and he turned up the volume. He didn’t need to, any more than he needed to turn the lights on, but he did anyway. He liked loud. Liked noise.

It must be achingly quiet now, over at Casa Spike. Even worse than here.


Despite the play-by-play, despite the crowd noise, of course he’d heard her. He sat very still.

“No more magic whirlpool in the basement,” Buffy found herself arguing. “No more hot and cold running SITs. Not the basement, I mean. Upstairs. With me.”

He bent his head. “Yeah. All right. If you want.”

“What do you want, Spike?”

He hit the mute. Was still a minute. Then he turned toward her with his heart in his eyes. Reached and set his cool hands on her face and bent in to kiss her hard, jeopardizing the coffee until she could set it on the floor and concentrate on kissing him back, feeling the intensity and the need because he’d forgotten she had to breathe and finally had to break the kiss and turn her head aside to do so. He kept kissing her: her cheek and forehead and eyes and finally the tip of her nose as she turned back.

“Want to be with you. Want to be good for you, help you be happy. Make you happy. Dunno if I can, if I’m fit to do that. Want—”

Her mouth silenced him. She thought, So that was what he was waiting for. To be asked. Stupid insecure vampire!

Feet loudly bounced down the stairs. Spike started to pull back, but Buffy leaned into him, captured
his mouth again, put her arms around him and pulled him close.

From the doorway arch behind, Kennedy’s flat voice asked, “So, are we going to do a patrol tonight?”

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Their patrolling muscles were stiff, Buffy thought. Two would have been nice. Six was both too many and too few. Kennedy kept claiming point, instead of either Amanda (who had to be phoned and then waited for) or Kim (who hung back and acted uncharacteristically nervous). Rona claimed rearguard, as if she didn’t want to be noticed. But since there were only four SITs, rearguard just meant that she and Kim became a de facto team, and Kennedy was paired with an irritated-looking Amanda, still officially the troop leader (though there was no longer a troop) normally with Kim as her second. Except for Buffy and Spike, nobody liked who they were with and as a result, all the SITs were in each other’s way. Their first encounter—with a Sh’narth demon, serpentine and about the length of a bus, apparently out for a stroll and a snack—was both ludicrous and dangerous. Both Kennedy and Amanda went in first and together instead of one engaging, one going for the kill. The Sh’narth bowled them both over, a tangle of limbs and weapons, and Spike had to fend it off with the two-handed axe, whereupon it turned on Kim, and Rona backed and dodged to get out of its way. Lunging, Buffy engaged with the broadsword until Spike could come in from behind the beastie and cleave through its crimson-tipped neck frill, dumping the wyrm in two unequal pieces, its stubby limbs scrabbling briefly before they stilled.

Spike set the axe-head on the ground and leaned on the haft. “Well, that certainly was nasty and incompetent.”

Kennedy and Amanda, disentangling and climbing to their feet, knew better than to say anything. Buffy, wiping her blade clean on the wyrm’s dorsal ridge, kept quiet too because the SITs, all or any of them, were Spike’s. He’d trained them, designed their moves and formations.

Amanda said bluntly, “Who’s lead here, Spike?”

Spike responded at once, “You are.”

“All right,” said Kennedy grudgingly. But then again, she always seemed to say things grudgingly, so maybe her ill grace was only her habitual sullenness.

Spike added, “And Kim’s your second. Move up, Kim.” He waited until the chunky girl trudged up and stood beside her tall, gangly partner. Kennedy, whose eyes had stayed on Spike the whole time, faded without command or comment back to rearguard, next to Rona, and waited. To Rona, Spike said, “You second Kennedy.”

Rona nodded.

Spike looked around at Buffy and started to say something, then stopped. Buffy quirked a small grin, knowing from his expression he’d been looking for Dawn, his usual adjutant. He and Buffy had rarely patrolled together, these past months, unless it was a joint sweep, combining both troops. So although they’d have been fine by themselves, with the SITs in the mix, all their habits were wrong.

Letting the axe haft tip against his shoulder, Spike expressed his frustration by pushing both hands through his hair. “Well, this is a right cock-up.”
Buffy said to Rona, curiously, “I thought you were leaving today.”

Spike cut in before the girl could say anything, which she clearly wasn’t eager to do. “Rona thought she might stay on for a bit. We’re still figuring that out. All right, different drill here. Got three teams here, all right? One, two, three.” His gestures paired himself and Buffy, Amanda and Kim, Kennedy and Rona. “Me and the Slayer, we take point. You lot flank, left and right. We don’t worry about rearguard. Think I’d hear anything coming up from behind. We come onto something, Slayer and me, we’ll engage if there’s just one. You lot, you stand clear and watch for company. Don’t get in the way, don’t leave yourselves exposed while we’re busy. All right?”

All four SITs immediately chorused, “Right, Spike.”

Spike continued, “We come onto a bunch, it’s the usual. Lead engages, second goes for the kill. We come onto something big, like we just done, Slayer and me will take it first, you lot come in behind like lead and second. Think we can acquit ourselves with something closer to competence, children?”

Instead of answering, Amanda pointed, and Spike looked around sharply. A vamp was standing by a tree. Seen, he moved a step nearer. Spike relaxed, bent his head, and sighed, and Buffy then recognized Mike by his Hellmouth souvenir T-shirt.

“What is it?” Spike asked, his tone at once irritated and resigned—not unlike the way he talked to Kennedy, when obliged to do so.

Seeing everyone standing down, Mike ambled casually up to them, surveying the wyrm with a pleased expression. “Ain’t seen one of them before. Where’d a thing like that come from, Spike?”

In a bored, lecturing voice, Spike replied, “They’re dimensional travelers. Likely making for the ocean, missed its target on the first try or got dumped short by the same dimensional instability that let it through in the first place. Would have snacked its way to the coast if we’d let it pass. Few cows, couple humans, would have done it for a snack, I expect. They mate in water. Since we’ve seen one, likely we’ll see more for awhile. That time of year, and apparently the auguries are auspicious or something the hell like that, so we get to be this year’s Acapulco, if you’re a Sh’narth.”

“Are they born like that, or do they turn into that from something else?” Mike enquired.

“They start somewhat smaller. A bit busy, now, Michael. Did you want something?”

“Maybe. Just thought I might tag along, see how you do.”

Spike looked at Buffy, and she tried to read his face to find out what answer he wanted. She read embarrassment and resignation. No hopefulness, no appeal that she could discern.

She’d never quite figured out why he felt responsible for Mike, what the connection was, except to see that it was plainly there. Spike hadn’t sired him: Angelus had. So they weren’t sire and childe. Spike had forced Mike’s submission on some point of vampire protocol, after pretty well beating his face in and breaking both his wrists and some ribs, but she understood that was all settled and done now. Spike was taking no minions and had dismissed the minions he’d had. But Mike remained, an awkwardness that Spike’s comments on the porch suggested he didn’t know how to resolve, or maybe didn’t know how he wanted to resolve. There was a clear undertone of Master Jedi and earnest padwan between them, and maybe that accounted for Spike’s embarrassment: he did not like admitting attachments, as his abrupt disengagement from the departing SITs demonstrated. But
toward the ones who hadn’t left yet, the ones he still had to deal with, he was trying for something like normality, business as usual.

She gathered Spike was minimally willing to have Mike along, if Buffy didn’t object. So she shrugged, tipped the broad-bladed sword onto her shoulder, and led off.

Sunnydale’s population had been decimated during the First’s tenancy on the Hellmouth by eruptions of high weirdness and the roving Turok-han—more by leaving town than by actual predation, though there’d been quite a lot of that, too. And the local vamps were reportedly unsettled by the comparative scarcity of prey and the intrusion of the more powerful and rapacious Turok-han: divisions between claimed hunting territories lost; what passed for leadership slaughtered or prudently relocating elsewhere, or their pack structure destroyed because Turok-han hated vamps and would even turn aside from a kill to pursue and dust them; the number of fledges way down because prey was needed for feeding and not as potential competition. As Spike had put it, “The idiots leading the morons.”

In the current sweeps, Buffy was concentrating on disrupting surviving or reforming nests nearest the residential areas that remained most populous. On the weekend, she’d focus on the downtown, the areas around the bars and the theater, where stupid highschool and college students provided the easiest and most numerous prey for even the stupidest fledges.

“Might want to check Restfield,” commented Mike, joggling along to Spike’s left, naming a cemetery at least a mile back and in the other direction.

“Why is that, Michael?” Spike responded.

“Well, I was over around there last night, looking out your old crypt I heard the children speak of. Found it, too, though it’s somewhat trashed. Still could smell you on it, you been back not too long ago. Maybe you kept that area clear when you laired there, but seems there’s been nobody minding it for awhile now. Two nests, five or six vamps apiece. Scrapping a bit, haven’t yet sorted out the hunting, the two masters turning one or two a week each, trying to bulk up their numbers, get an edge. You know how it goes.”

Spike stopped, so they all stopped. “My patch,” Spike said eventually, eyes on his boots. “I can clean it out.”

He meant now. Just leaving the patrol and going. Buffy could tell by the way he stood, leaned in that direction, ready to move.

Again, he deferred to her, waiting for her ruling. This time, Buffy neither wanted to make the call nor to throw the decision back to him. Too many ramifications. Your basic can of worms and maybe some of them bus-length.

Blithely ignoring the silence and the unmade choice, Mike proposed cheerfully, “I’ll help.”

And Spike went at him, grabbing his throat and holding him at stiff-arm’s length, glaring, gone suddenly to game face, shouting, “You’ll do no such thing, Michael. No need for you to be a pariah, you’re not chipped and fucking helpless, go after your own, kill vamps on behalf of your bleeding food. My fucking patch, and you stay clear of it, you hear me?”

Frowning but unshifted, Mike croaked placatingly, “On your side--”
“I got no fucking side, mate! So you can’t be on it! Don’t need your help. Don’t want it. Don’t want you anyplace around me or what’s mine, you get that? Now fuck off and stay the hell out of my sight!”

Though Mike was taller, broader, heavier, Spike in a white-hot fury was nothing anybody sane would want to confront. When Spike pitched him away, actually throwing him airborne at least a dozen feet against a lamp post his head bonged against, Mike tipped forward and went down on a knee and one braced arm like a linebacker, as if the next second he’d launch himself back and the two vampires would go at it. Spike was readying himself for that, setting his stance and choking up on the axe haft. Although Buffy wasn’t sure what had set Spike off, she didn’t like the situation and took charge of it. She set herself between, taking her own stance side-on, sword angled low with the point nearly touching the ground, looking Mike straight in the eyes. Making the odds so ridiculously uneven, since Mike was bare-handed, that nobody but Spike would have gone against them and not even Spike unless he was in a blind, heedless rage. She could practically feel him blazing behind her and halfway expected he’d try to shove her aside, remove her from the standoff, remove any implication she was protecting him or had any business between.

Before still another layer of insanity could be added, Mike straightened with both hands raised, palm out, staring past her at Spike, his still-human face showing no emotion and nothing at all of whatever was going on in his head. He backed two steps, then turned and walked deliberately away, vanishing beyond the first building he came to, a freestanding garage, and gone.

Buffy relaxed from her stance and turned, hand on hip. Spike had already tipped the axe onto his shoulder, his back to her so she couldn’t tell if he’d dropped game face, and was starting away at a strutting, edgy gait. All the SITs looked from him to Buffy, gaping and unsure whether or not they were supposed to follow. They’d never seen Spike erupt like that, joylessly and for no apparent reason. Buffy had, but not for at least a year. Not since the soul. Not once.

Before Buffy was sure what Spike thought he was doing, what any of them were doing, or where he was headed, he whistled sharply, a single note through his teeth, and ended a full arm wave, back to front, with a pointing finger. Thus summoned, the SITs jogged after him, trading mutters and uneasy glances.

Seeing that he was continuing in the designated direction of the patrol, not doubling back toward his long-abandoned crypt, Buffy shouldered the sword and took longer strides, passing among the SITs until she and Spike were moving level. He glanced at her: just his normal face, with the least hint of a smirk: a perversely feral expression that showed no teeth; the scarred eyebrow briefly lifted. That smirk was another throwback. Although she’d seen that expression countless times, it went back years. To the beginning, even. It went with sardonic, opaque, cobalt eyes blocking everything behind. It was a wall. A shield.

She’d never gotten past it. He’d only been enticed out from behind it--initially, against his will and certainly against hers.

Refusing to give the appropriate reaction--punching him solidly in the nose--Buffy returned his look as blandly as she could, being Adult, Sensible Buffy. “So what’s gonna get done about Restfield?” Carefully, she didn’t specify by who.

“Oh, I expect it'll get cleared out in its turn. Sometime.”

He hadn’t specified either. Hadn’t jealously claimed that chore as his, like he had with Mike. So maybe it hadn’t been about Restfield at all, between him and Mike. Buffy decided to store it all for
later sorting. She certainly wasn’t gonna go after him about it in front of the SITs. But there was a hot button buried there somewhere--that, at least, she was sure of.

Changing topic, she proposed, “After we get back, we can get you moved,” and waited to find out if he’d slide off, evade committing himself this time.

The smirk only settled and became a little less defensive, a little more real. “Might as well. If that’s what you want. Got no other pressing plans.”
Dawn was seething.

If Spike had had a puppy, it would be messily dead and put somewhere he’d trip over it. His motorbike would have had its tires slashed and been pushed into the road where eighteen-wheelers would run over it all day. Except that he’d given it to Mike as leavegeld, which removed it from the category of possible targets of Dawnwrath.

She did not think about Mike. Or about what big upstanding six-year-old vamps liked to do instead of have hysterics when they were so freakin’ upset that they’d pitch pebbles at your window and then walk loopy circles by the hedge corner for an hour, out of hugging distance because, they finally admitted, they had to be near but not too near because of the game face thing and therefore the blood thing followed by the insanely melodramatic dusty death thing and goodbye, hello and never could find the right distance and kitty would not get home tonight, never no more. Dawn was sixteen and three-quarters years old and Romeo positively refused to say one word against that peroxided wanker Tybalt and she now knew what wanker meant and wished she didn’t. Uber-squicky. The prospect of dying a virgin at 205 had increasing appeal. Anybody who let themselves get attached to a vamp was obviously certifiable and she was furiousfuckingmad, that’s what, and she kept her mind focused strictly on that.

She’d have gone after his beloved decrepit DeSoto, but all she knew was that it was up on blocks someplace unspecified. But a rag stuffed into the gas filler pipe, or whatever the hell it was called, his (cleverly stolen) lighter lit and applied, and that DeSoto would be history. Engulfed as suddenly and thoroughly as a vamp shoved outdoors at noon. She imagined doing it, every detail. By third period, she’d broken two pencils, staking books.

Since two-thirds of the incompletely rebuilt Sunnydale High School now resided in a crater three stories deep and two blocks across, at least the visible detritus that hadn’t vanished into the dimensional chaos of the Hellmouth in its last moments, most classes had been relocated to a series of tractor-trailers and doublewides lined up like unappealing carnival concessions on the ballfield. The one for fourth period English had recently seen duty transporting oranges not quite fast enough. The residual stench was unimaginable. Dawn vomited her breakfast out the door, conveniently located near her chair+flip desktop. Before returning to her seat she gave the sun a viciously approving glance and took up her notes feeling marginally better.

She visualized savage and irrevocable hair cuttage, with a rinse of some liquid containing copper, maybe copper sulfate, that would turn it green for months. And itch. Perpetual rash. That was in Chemistry and Life Sciences, following a picked-at lunch.

Trekking from one trailer to another between classes, she imagined gouging out his eyes, suggested by halves of a hard-boiled egg being doused with ketchup by an older student using the top of a protruding wheel well as a lunchbox stand. But then she shut her eyes and wished that imagined torture away. Renounced it. She’d seen him like that too recently. His eyes had just finished regenerating and she’d noticed he held paperbacks farther away than he used to. Farsighted and too fucking vain ever to get measured for or wear glasses, Oh No, Mr. Bill, not our platinum vamp preening before a mirror in front of a reflection visible only in the expression of others’ eyes.

And under the phrase *vampire protocol*, that she’d written in homeroom, she wrote the word *stunted*, leaning against a trailer prop to get her red spiral notebook (one of Willow’s endless color-coded
stash) out of her Holly Hobby vinyl bookbag. And in fifth period American History, she wrote the words *Powers. Lady Gates.*

The agenda list went faster after that. She doubted she’d heard, much less retained, a word said in any of her classes and hadn’t written down a single homework assignment, but she’d burned off the worst of her rage and could focus for several minutes at a time without feeling she was about to explode.

That was something she’d learned from him: it wasn’t wrong to imagine doing horrible, demented, vicious things. It was only horrible, vicious, and demented if you actually *did* them. That was what separated the monsters from the men.

Anger management a la Spike.

Numbering a new line, Dawn wrote the word *love.*

By the time the bus dropped her at the pharmacy corner and she started trudging the remaining blocks home to Revello, she had entered an icy, surreal calm. She found gratification in repeatedly stepping on sidewalk cracks, imagining intricate interlocked vertebrae coming asunder, like when you belted a Lesser Mothe demon (the skinny blue ones, not the big fat sloppy beige Greater Mothes) with a really big hammer. Cool about it, though. She’d even stopped grinding her teeth and hadn’t chewed the ends of her hair in some considerable time.

She had good reason to know that the preferred locale of Buffy/Spike nighttime sexual gymnastics had shifted from the yuppie-preppy plush-carpeted finished suburban tacky hellhole basement of Casa Spike. Dig out the earplugs. Again. And for further noise protection, Buffy still owed her a new micro-player to replace one personally crunched by the Slayer during a yelling sisterly argument. Except Buffy had forgotten everything related to Dawn past a month or so ago. Too bad: then Buffy couldn’t be sure it hadn’t happened either and would just have to pay up, that’s all. Have to accept it, the way she accepted Dawn’s unremembered birth and childhood: had to have happened because there Dawn was, right? A matter of faith. And a matter of dire expediency. No way was Dawn gonna put up with that kind of uber-squicky racket on a school night. Her grades would fall: Buffy would see. Eminently blackmailable.

So she knew where she’d probably find Spike at midafternoon.

Tromping up the stairs, she stood before the shut door of Buffy’s bedroom. She didn’t even bother to find out if it was locked. She just kicked on the solid bottom panel (Xander had warned her about the fragility of hollow-core doors) three times and shouted, “Spike! I don’t care if you’re asleep. I don’t care if you’re naked. On a count of ten you better let me in and be ready to talk or else go out that window and flambé yourself. *One!*”

She’d reached *seven* when the knob turned and Spike opened the door. He had his jeans on, anyway, and was shrugging into one of his blood-crimson long-sleeved button-downs, modestly covering his chest, as if she fucking cared. As she passed by to fling herself onto the vanity bench, he leaned and very openly sniffed near her shoulder and then by her elbow. Her waist. She flung her bookbag in his face, or almost, because his wrist came up and brushed it aside so it clunked on the edge of the throw-rug. And it was just wretched of him to be so vampire-fast even when he wasn’t fully awake, blinking and bedheaded.

Dawn kept her chin high and seated herself primly. Spike settled a hip on the foot of the unmade bed, half the covers spilled on the floor and the pink sheet with the roses all twisted into knots. When
Spike messed up a bed, he made a thorough job of it.

“So, Bit,” he said. “Where does that leave us, then?”

Dawn closed her hands around her knees until she could feel her thumbs gouging into the sockets. “We are gonna talk this out like two vamps, OK? Completely dispassionately and no dodging.”

“What sort of vamps? A couple of fledges? Pair of fresh-risen frat boys drunk on second-hand beer from their first kill? Couple of masters dickering about territory and trying to guess which will gut the other first? What’d you have in mind, pet?” His eyes were clearblue and guileless and Dawn had no complaint coming because he’d done exactly as she’d required: addressed her just as he would have another vamp, all silky and knife-edged and as subtle as a ton of bricks.


“Master vamps then, meeting on neutral territory, and a pax bond in place,” Spike refined.

“Pax bond,” Dawn repeated, requiring clarification.

“Somebody of greater rank or value with a great huge knife to his neck. Or hers. Pax bonds are pretty equal opportunity, pet. Vamps are the least sexist creatures on the planet. We’ll kill anybody, fuck anybody, and we’re not too particular who or what we jack off against neither. Pretty choosy who we mark, though, because that means something.”

Ignoring that attempt at distraction, Dawn said flatly, “Old news, Spike. That’s not the point. You belong to me. You’ve said so, and I’m holding you to it. I forbid—”

“No, pet. We’re not talking peers anymore. Don’t think this is gonna work out for you. You want to claim ownership, you have to go about this a different way.”

Dawn’s breath felt all locked up inside her chest and she resented that he didn’t have to breathe at all.

“Are you mine?”

His face went quiet, perfectly still as only a vamp’s could be. Complete, utter attention, the eyes locked, nothing else in the entire universe he was looking at or considering.

He couldn’t do thrall, she knew; but if he could, this would be what it would look like. How it would begin.

“Yes, Bit. I am. That means whatever you say, I’ll hear you out. An’ I’ll think about what you say as hard and fair as I can. Doesn’t mean I’ll do what you say, though. And you know better than to expect that. If Angelus couldn’t get me to mind with twenty years, a belt, and a lot of things I am never gonna talk to you about, not even when you’re ninety and the scandal of Paris, New York, and London, you are not gonna make me do anything like consistent. Though I love you and wouldn’t so much as distress you if there’d been any way around it. Can’t avoid the fallout, love. The Law of Unintended Consequences, like Red says it. Side effects. An’ I got to stop playing two vamps with you here, because I’d never talk to a vamp like I’d talk to you.” He held out his hands. Not reaching, not demanding, just waiting for her to make the reciprocal gesture. He said, “If we’re not gonna play vamps but just be us, I know I’d feel a lot better if you came over here and we could be easy with one another. I know you’re considerably pissed off at a number of things I’ve done lately. Last night most of all, I expect. About Michael. But we’re still who we are, and we’ll talk about it and find what’s to be done to make it as near to right, between us, as it can be and sod the
rest.”

“I’m fine where I am. And it’s really disgusting the way you smell people, Spike.”

He set his hands on his knees too, mirroring her without the hurtful sticking-in thumbs, and sat back farther on the bed edge, accepting that she wanted the distance and wouldn’t come. “So, pet. I know some of what you are to Michael. He’s marked you. When I realized, I couldn’t believe you’d been such a fucking bloody fool as to set that up with him, knowing how it’d draw him afterwards. How he’d regard such a thing. Even if it was for me.”

Though there’d been definite snark in what he’d said before, pitched to the two vamps scenario, he had that all damped down now: since admitting her claim on him. Despite the words, no anger. No accusation. Only serious and concerned.

Dawn stirred uncomfortably, releasing her knees to grasp her left forearm with her right hand. Body language: could she possibly be more obvious? Well, yes: she could be the Slayer, who bore three marks and could never decide between hiding and flaunting them. Annoyed with herself, Dawn took her hand away, leaving the marks of Mike’s fangs, pale but distinct to vampire eyes, even farsighted, unconcealed on the round of her forearm. She wasn’t ashamed of the mark or of how or why she’d gotten it. She stated, “You needed the blood. I couldn’t give it to you direct. So…. So Mike.”

“Michael, the walking feeding kit. Noticed he didn’t carry your blood to me twice. A bit humiliating, that.”

“Doesn’t matter. Didn’t care. Anyway, by that time, you were coordinated enough to bite me yourself.” It was a cold, spiteful, vamp thing to say. But she said it because it was true. Only a glancing bite, impulsive and unconsidered. His demon had got past him and snapped at what it wanted. Nothing deep and protracted enough to leave a mark.

Spike’s eyes didn’t change or move from her face. “Yes. I was. And I haven’t forgot. But now this has come of it, and I can’t not do something. He’s tasted you, Dawn. An’ I know the lad doesn’t mean the least harm in it, but he’s locked onto you now. That’s what he thinks of, when he’s feeding. And nothing else is as good. Because it’s not. He’s right. Slayer blood. Summers blood, all alike. And he may mean no harm, but harm will come of it just the same. He’ll drink you down and then be sorry as fucking hell that you’re gone, an’ you got to give me due credit, Bit: I’ve never said a word of blame to him about it, and I didn’t dust him last night when the breeze changed and I smelled you on him. And him offering to do vamps, just because I do it, like there’d be no consequences, goddam bloody idiot…. It got to be too much, is all, and I flashed out at him.”

Spike’s brief gesture with a lifted hand meant this wasn’t an apology, only an explanation. He went on, “I wasn’t inclined to say anything about that in front of the Slayer. But I think you should talk to her. Because as there’s things I know that she can’t, there’s maybe things she’d understand better than I ever will, to make you see how your choices stand and what the consequences are apt to be. Maybe she doesn’t remember you back to when you wore footie pajamas and carried stuffed animals to bed, even though that wasn’t but two years past; but she knows what it is to carry a vamp’s mark, put there by somebody she can’t truly separate herself from, and what follows from that. And it’s not mine, Bit.”

“Angel’s. I know.”

“Yeah. And I know when you start to tell her, she’ll go straight through the roof.” His arm and lifting
bladed hand illustrated that rocket-like ascent. “Like Rupert would. But that didn’t stop your sis talking to him about things he had a right to know, even though…. Well, you know, she’s not like us. Blunt talk’s not a thing she takes easy to. Never gonna be as plain-spoken as a vamp, our Buffy. But she made herself do it all the same, because if she’s anything, she’s brave about what she thinks is right. So you should do the same, because I know you’re braver than she is, cause you got the same sense of what’s right but all your strength is in your mind.” He tapped his forehead.

“Yeah, that’s me: muscle brain!” Dawn giggled harshly.

“Don’t you make small of yourself. Mainly because it’s a lie. Can’t have lies between us or how is anything to come out well?” Spike lifted a hand and then let it drop, finally unlocking that searchlight gaze from her face, and that released her to look away too, which was a relief. Spike said, “Really wish you’d come here to me, pet. Don’t care for the distance. I’m yours, all right. But you’re also mine, and no need to bite you in the arm, or the ass, to claim you, and you’re not gonna say otherwise. Now are you.”

“No,” Dawn admitted, wringing a fold of her plaid school skirt into a tighter and tighter twist. Sunnydale High had lately decided that the answer to massive, catastrophic subsidence was a dress code and uniforms.

She hitched herself a little on the vanity bench but didn’t get up because that would mean conceding the problem of Michael wasn’t just Spike’s but theirs and that it was impossible for her to look him in the eyes, and listen to him, and remain self-righteously furiousfuckingmad at him.

Spike made an automatic gesture toward his pocket, caught himself, and looked sourly around at Buffy’s frilly, girly bedroom. Then he bounced up. “Change of venue. Can’t go outside, you wouldn’t find it half as much fun to watch me combust as you likely think you would. Basement. Come on.”

Still barefoot, he took off down the stairs, and Dawn followed him glumly. She no longer had any stomach for an apt revenge, even imagined, on him for turning on Mike that way. She knew the provocation. And she knew that display, for Spike, had been the spirit and soul of moderation under the circumstances. Just as he’d said.

At Willy’s she’d seen Spike kill a minion for bumping his elbow and spilling some of his beer. Not normally heavily into self-restraint.

One slow foot after another, she descended the basement stairs, automatically slapping the light switch to turn on the single bare bulb at the bottom. Spike was moving the wooden dryer chair against the wall where the chains and manacles still hung. He collected a lawn chair from the stack by the camping gear, opened it with a practiced jerk, and placed it facing the wooden chair about the same distance as the vanity bench had been from the bed. By the time he had a cigarette lit, Dawn had taken the lawn chair, drooping and dispirited. He dropped into the other.

“So we know pretty well where Michael stands with this,” Spike commented quietly. “What’s not been said is what Michael is to you.”

“You first,” Dawn countered. “He loves you: that’s no news. What’s he to you?”

“I’ve thought about that.” Spike slid lower in the chair, legs stretching long. “And I believe I can actually tell you. He’s my hope. That there might be a way to be a vamp, and no chip, no soul, just what comes raw out of the grave in the fright face, and still not be a monster. Like I been. Like every
other vamp I ever knew has been. Be like you said to me once: a vampire person, and not something
the Slayer should rightfully dust, first chance she got. And if you let him kill you, Dawn, all the hope
is gone. So what is he to you, and will you dust him when you must or leave me to do it. Afterward.”
There was a long silence. Neither of them looked up or moved at all. Finally Spike added, “Because
I don’t believe he can keep himself from it. I know I couldn’t, was I him. Even now.”

An even longer silence. “I don’t know, Spike,” Dawn said at last. Then she went to the next agenda
item. “There’s something you don’t know because there was no reason to tell you. You’d have
noticed eventually, so why say? You know what I am. Mostly. But not all.” Spike nodded
attentively, waiting. “I was scattered back into the Powers That Be. What I called Lady Gates, to
give you a way to think about it and deal with it. One of the Powers. Dimensionality. Keyness. I’m
part of that. And when I was collecting the parts of me, waiting for you to come back and make them
let me go, I had choices. Of what to collect. What would be me. This-- (she waved vaguely at her
white bloused torso)”—looks human enough. It would test as 100% human by any scientific method
available or probable. It would take very sophisticated magic to know it’s not. It will never change,
Spike. I chose it for you. So I could be Bit for you always. Even when I was ninety and the scandal
of Paris and whatever.”

She sniffed determinedly, locked her jaw a moment, squinted her eyes tight, and did not cry a single
molecule. She didn’t look at his face to find how he was taking the news that barring accidents, one
Summers, at least, would be the companion of his journey until the end. As surely as if she’d been
turned, but without the more squicky side-effects.

“Be awful sick of me in sixty, seventy years, pet,” Spike observed quietly. “Might want to
reconsider.”

“Dru put up with you for longer than that.”

“Can’t hardly go by Dru. Mostly loved me well enough, but she’s a nutter through and through. If
you wanted, could you take that part back?”

“You want me to?” Dawn asked, vaguely indignant.

He tilted his head and blinked at her the way he did, like an intelligent dog. “Don’t want you doin’
irrevocable things for me without considering yourself, love. Stopping as you are could get old real
fast, even if you didn’t. Happens to vamps—a lot. Get bored with yourself maybe. Want a change.
There’s arguments on both sides, mostly theoretical because there’s not many get a choice.
Considering what’s happened and all, I wondered if you thought you’d made a bad bargain and
would rather return that particular gift.”

“Well, that’s the second thing I haven’t told you. I probably could. If I wanted to. Not indefinitely--
Lady Gates wouldn’t be patient with me flip-flopping back and forth, making demands. But for a
while, she might let me revoke that option. Return to the default—growth, mortality. Maybe once.
She has no stake in pleasing us: every part that loves you is here. None left in her. Maybe that was
dumb. But it’s not a thing you get to practice.” Dawn made a wry face and sighed. “I haven’t been
me again very long, and the connection to the Powers is still wide open. It hasn’t diminished to
casual contact, benign or indifferent neglect. What I know, she knows. What I see, she sees. As
much as she bothers to. And it seems, with shutting the Hellmouth and all, she’s taken an interest in
you--”

Spike spat out a few highly flammable syllables and then said, “I know.”
“More dreams?”

“Not since the locket. You keep that close, Bit. Had the First in my head. Be damned if I’m gonna let Lady Gates stomp around in there. Not me and not you.”

Dawn gave him a wan, sad smile. “Don’t think it’s gonna work, Spike.”

“Worked so far.”

“Not forever, though. You made yourself too useful. They’ll want to use you some more. Like they do Angel.”

“Fuck her. Not gonna let her do me like that. If the locket won’t work, I’ll get Red to magic something else up for me. For us. Someday, maybe. When I don’t care anymore. Let ‘em take me then if they want. Who the hell fucking cares, when she’s gone. Let ‘em use me up closing some other Hellmouth. Some other prancing bimbo of a Hellgod. Whatever nuisance they take a disliking to enough to nudge one of their goddam minions, their champions, into place to dispose of for them. Won’t matter then. Didn’t expect to last, this last time. Now I got past that, I’m nobody’s dog but my own. And yours. And Buffy’s.”

“Too many hostages, Spike. Too many people you’ve let in. Every connection is a wound they can make you bleed from. They’re like Angelus. If they can’t get at you directly, they’ll come at you crooked, on a bounce. Through the people you care about. Hurt them to force you. Until eventually you’ll cave. Because they don’t care, Spike. And they have time.” Dawn got up, took two steps, and curled up in his lap. Slightly too long-legged for that, but she still fit, spine rounded and head tucked under his chin. As always, his cool solidity was comforting. As his arms came around her and held her close, she whispered, “They’ll break your heart and grind you to dust.”

“Are they pushing Michael, d’you think?”

“Maybe.” Dawn hadn’t thought about that before. “Probably. Yeah. They push everybody. More, the ones they find convenient. But everybody.”

“I’ll get him a locket.”

“All right. We can try. But it’s not gonna work, Spike.”

He gave her a squeeze. “Yes it will.”

“No it won’t.”

“It will. Because it has to. Because I won’t let it be otherwise.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Mean stubborn vamp won’t budge.”

“Well, I won’t. Got you back, didn’t I, and didn’t know what the hell I was doing then neither. Didn’t forget when they wiped you out of everybody else’s heads. Had you written into my arm so even if they wiped you out of my head too, I’d still have an end to catch onto and get it back.”

Dawn’s finger couldn’t help but touch and trace on his hand the start of the tattoo, the spiral that meant Dawn, that curled up the whole of his left arm, knuckles to shoulder, as a line of green poetry.
Spike continued, “Between what you know and what I know and the Slayer on top of that, we got a fair fucking chance, Bit. And a high-powered witch besides. Have some faith here. So. You figure to grow up and be a fuckable wench for Michael or stick at sixteen and three-quarters for boring old William the Bloody?”

“Dunno, Spike. Haven’t decided.” She untucked enough to lean away and look him in the eyes. “When I know, I’ll tell you. First thing.”

“Second thing’s good enough. Don’t need first, you know that. You gonna have that talk with your sis, like I said?”

“Yeah. When I work up the courage. Will you sit in?”

“Couldn’t pay me enough to get me into that. Afterward, though. If you still want. Or she does. Because I know she’s gonna want to pin me down about Michael then, chapter and verse. A right catechism. Why have a pet vamp if you can’t twist his arm for information every now and again?”

“Does she? Twist your arm?”

“Among other things. Been known to happen.” Another squeeze, “Can you keep clear of Michael awhile? Because I’m sure he’s all put out, and hurt, and furious, that I warned him off. And sent him off. Sometimes folk do the most amazing stupid things when they’re all wound up like that. Vampire people, too. Same as anybody but generally messier in the consequences department.”

“Been known to happen,” Dawn echoed, tucking her head again and lifting a hand to brush her hair away from her face. “Jealous much, Spike?”

She felt him shrug. “No more than I can help. Vamps, we’re real possessive about what’s ours. Don’t have much. So what there is, we hold onto like grim death and mostly never turn loose. You might have noticed that, a time or two.”

“That’s what Lewis says. As in C.S. As in Narnia. That once a vamp’s got you, it’ll never let go.”

“Believe that was werewolves, pet. They’re the ones with the cold voices. Vamps, we’re just cold.”

“Warmhearted, though.”

“Sometimes. Some of us. Intense, anyway, or so I’m told. Light up a treat, too, if you stick us in the sun.”

"Don't joke about that, Spike. Specially not with your arm peeling." She picked at the edges of flaking skin on the wrist of his non-tat arm, below the unbuttoned sleeve, until he cuffed her hand away.

“So you still haven’t said, love: what’s Michael to you?”

Dawn frowned and started picking at his wrist again. This time, he let her, waiting, and she knew he’d never leave off about it until she answered him because he was like that. Implacable.

She formulated unhappily, “I like vamps. Mike is a vamp. So I like him. But not the way he likes me.”
“I know you been visiting him, over at his place. Was over there yesterday, a thing about Rona and Kennedy and all…and I noticed. S’not sensible. Told Rona the same. No vamp knows where the limits are, with a human. Your sis punched me down many a time before I could catch hold of the idea, much less try to abide by it. Doesn’t make any sense a vamp would understand. Not how we think or how we do. Just have to accept that’s how it is and learn it, and even then half the time you’re wrong.…. Imagine it’s quite trying for the human, too. And you can’t hold your own, Bit—not the way a Slayer can.” He fingered through her hair, then tapped her forehead twice, lightly. “Brain muscles are not really gonna make the same impact.”

“I have my taser,” Dawn countered, and slapped her empty pocket, belatedly remembering she’d left the weapon in her bookbag.

“And it’s good you do. And I know you’d take me down in a second if you had to, because you done it, bam and done, just like you should, when I was too off to properly know what I was doing. But we go back a ways, and you know I’d not hold such a thing against you, or be much hurt by it once it wore off, or feel I had to come back at you for doing it. Would you do Michael like that if there was need?” When Dawn didn’t say anything right away, Spike asked, “Do you wish he’d just leave you alone?”

“No,” Dawn said firmly, except that once out of her mouth, it sounded like a question. And it shouldn’t be a question, because she knew Spike was attending to the tone as well as the words and would act accordingly. Mike, she realized, was her pax bond, whether she wanted it that way or not. Whatever she said wrong or uncertain or even unconsidered, the hurt of it wouldn’t come down on her: it would fall on Mike. And on Spike. Because even though he’d never admit it, he cared for Mike. But that wouldn’t stop him.

Vamps were like that. Strong feelings but not in the least sentimental about them. Not emotional about their emotions. Ruthless as sharks. And none of them inclined to patience or considering someone else’s point of view.

More steadily, she continued, “But I don’t have to encourage him. He’ll have to lair someplace else, now that you claimed the area as yours and banned him from it. And when he throws gravel at my window, I don’t have to go down. He’s never been invited in, so no problem there.” She decided, “It’s nothing that you need to be concerned about, Spike. I just haven’t been clear to him. Haven’t set limits and then stuck to them, made him mind. I know I have to do that now.”

“Ahuh. Well then, that sounds like a plan. You tell me how it works out for you, all right?”

“All right.”

“You promise?”

“Yeah. I promise.”

He said, “Well, that’s all right, then,” and touched lips to her forehead—cool, quick, and casual. In a tone that said the previous subject was closed, he went on, “Speaking of Rona…. I got this situation now with Kennedy. Came up yesterday, like I said. And I’d like to know what you think about it. Rona, she comes into it. And Kim. ‘Manda, indirectly. And I’d like not to see them get hurt, if that’s possible. There’s money in it, that would have to be explained away. And I don’t know if Willow should get a say or not, because she’s in the mix too. Can’t get my mind around all the angles, what they all want and what I should do about it, big ugly ball of twine. Cat’s cradle: pull the wrong bit, it all unloops and falls to pieces.”
“Tell me.”

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Holding her tote steady over her shoulder with one hand, Buffy peered up under the other at the cab of the tallest crane she’d ever seen. The low afternoon sun was blinding, and the cab near the short end of the long cross-beam seemed the size of a cigarette pack. No way to see, much less recognize, the operator. Except for the lifting cable, carrying the buckety-thing and its contents from the depths to the first of a line of big dusty trucks, there was no way to be certain the crane was even manned, not operated by some lunk looking at a monitor miles away.

She dug in her tote. Unshipping her cellphone, she hit the #4 speed dial. Cradling it against her cheek, she continued looking up, squinting against the brightness.

“Acme Wrecking,” came Xander’s cheerful, attenuated voice. “You name it, we wreck it. Helll-lo!”

He must have his caller ID on.

“Hey, Xander. You see this gnat-sized speck about level with your big toe, Mr. Transformer Guy?”

“I come fully equipped with all the latest gadgets including binoculars. Well, if it isn’t a yellow Buffy. Oops! Give me a second here, Buff, OK?”

“Kay.”

The toothed, diamond-shaped bucket adjusted itself over the truck, lowered a bit more, then opened, depositing what looked like a full load with a crash and an uprush of dust. Lifting again, closing as it went, it began its slow traverse back to the pit.

“All righty,” said Xander, “the Monster Trashmasher scores again! Buff, do you have any idea how satisfying this is? Dismembering Sunnydale High? Again? Emptying one hole and dumping the contents into ye friendly neighborhood landfill a few miles off and paid union wages for each and every happy chomp and spit? And still with the contract for the rebuilding, on top of it? Literally: on top of it! Personally I think if I was on the school board, I’d plump for change of venue. Hasn’t been a really fortunate location somehow. The Feng shui not well aligned or of good omen. I’d hire one of those little raggedy-ass dowsers Will knows at Magick Group and find a better piece of ground.”

Buffy listened through this cheerful burble with an expanding grin. Detecting a pause, she said, “Xan, I heard from Giles. He’s en route to the Cotswolds, wherever that may be--Vi’s aunt--and anyway, he expects to get in to LAX on Thursday. So, Scooby council meeting Friday? To let him get his beauty sleep? Have the whole ‘Where do we go from here’ discussion.”

“Ahhhh-- All right, there could be a work-around. You’re on.”

“Xander, is there something you’re not telling me? And what’s her name?”

“Can’t get anything past you, can I? Maria. Met her bowling. And no, no spooky eyes, anomalous appendages, or facial varicosity noted yet but I haven’t had a chance to check out, ah, the entire package although I live in hope. Continually. First date, ergo no expectations to fulfill or disappoint. I think that terrifying encounter can move to Saturday without a major rupture in diplomatic relations.”
Buffy’s grin widened: her cheeks had begun to feel tight. Even though Xander dating meant he and Anya must have had one of their periodic tiffs and they’d be sniping at each other all through the council meeting and the inevitable party that followed. Nothing unusual in that, sad to tell. “So what do you have planned?”

“I thought I might expose her to something really exotic. As in…bowling? That lady has a sliding hook ball into the one-three pocket that has to be seen to believed, and the pins jumping and the crash? Music. Absolute music. Rolling thunder. Background beat groove for the Sex Pistols.”

“Speaking of that, before you and Ms. Pin Exploder get too thick, tell me an evening and bring her by. We have the whole house to ourselves again, no patter-crash of little SIT feet, or hardly, so we can make like normal again, right? Or new normal, if we can’t remember what old normal was like. Video de jour and pizza, OK? Check her out. He can’t whack her in the nose anymore, well he can but not tell anything useful from it, but he could smell her and deliver a private ruling on the whole human-demon thing.”

Silence. “I’m coping but still inhabiting don’t ask, don’t tell major denial territory here, Buff. Someday I’ll be sanguine about how you get your freak on, but still a little soon for that. Major world saveage, that gets him street cred by me. The Xan man gives ground graciously. But slowly. As in glacial. As in tectonic. And got to play now with the many, many highly symbolic levers arrayed before me here, so if we’re good for Friday…”

“Yeah, then. Bye.”

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Hearing the front door bang shut, Spike went up and found Willow slamming bowls and utensils in the kitchen, apparently all of a swivet at getting a mere A- on her Western Civ. midterm.

“I mean, that whole Manifest Destiny question should have been a gimme,” Willow ranted, rooting in the back of the refrigerator. Rising and shutting the refrigerator door, she pitched a couple of small zip bags onto the kitchen island and yanked its door open, stooping to look in there. “I don’t think there’s much to debate about the outcome. We saw it, we wanted it, we took it. It’s not open to debate. Whether might makes right, yeah, you can get together a lively little bloodbath of a discussion on that on any street corner but the facts themselves are beyond dispute, and how Professor Boyd could say I’d scanted the economic influences—!?” She whacked down a cookie sheet as though swatting a cluster of particularly vicious flies.

“Wanker,” agreed Spike sympathetically. “Give me a description and I’ll look him up some evening at one of the poncier bars. Explain to him why Western Civilization is your basic oxymoron and he should be more open-minded about it. Tap him on the breastbone every other word, let my eyes turn, give him a bit of a peek at some other influences he’s maybe not taking into proper account.”

The witch paused to give him a prolonged, amused, evaluating sidewise look. “Offing your professors is not a generally approved method of improving academic performance evaluations.”

“Didn’t say I’d do the bloke. Never said anything like. Just lean on him slightly. Help him reconsider where his best interests lie. No? Well if you change your mind you know where to find me. Always eager to be helpful, here. Pull my bloody weight, make myself useful, an’ all that.”

One side of her mouth pulled down in a tight grin. She began doling scoops of flour into a large glass

“Oh, we’re into subtext here, are we? Figure there’s a quid pro quo every time I open my mouth? You wound me, Red. Another locket, actually. Make time for it after the guilt cookies?”

“Rage cookies. And this time you provide the container. Anything except aluminum: skews the spell into something fairly uncomfortable.”

“Plastic?”

Willow bobbed her head, auburn hair swinging. “Plastic’s fine. No interference there. And get your sneaky fingers away from the chocolate morsels. Remove or lose.” She brandished a large spoon.

Popping the pinch of chocolate chips into his mouth, he smirked at her ingratiatingly, then turned and went into the hall, intending to check on his afternoon soaps. He’d lost almost a year in the remarkably complexified lives of his favorite imaginary people: it would take awhile, and fierce concentration, to cog himself properly to what was happening to them all now.

Except for the occasional pregnancy, it was almost like watching the shifting alignments and power games in a vampire clan. Nobody much died or left or admitted to aging except if they’d been out of town for a very long time, and returning might be played by some different actor. Actors passed; characters and relationships endured. The characters had continuity and old, old enmities that could surface years later, all wildly intense and passionate. And if you paid close attention, it all made sense. Fascinating stuff.

Willow’s voice caught him by the front room arch: “Oh, and Spike?”

“Yeah?”

She leaned out the kitchen door, stirring a bowl. “Buffy called in and says Giles will be back Thursday night, late, and there’s a meeting on Friday. She tried you, but your cell was turned off. Again.”

Spike made an annoyed gesture and Willow rolled her eyes, frowned rueful admonishment, and disappeared.

When Spike turned on the TV and dropped onto the couch, he found he’d hit the first post-opening string of commercials. His mind wandered, reviewing parts of his conversation with Dawn; thinking about the Powers and about Restfield. And blood. Thinking about Dawn herself, and Mike, and what the lad was most apt to do now, and how long it was likely to be before Buffy got home, and what might be arranged with Giles. Also blood. Then he considered the question of what he’d do next. He seldom thought farther than that. Not into long-range planning. No use to it. Things changed too fast, and then it was all to be done over. Best to do it on the fly, as things developed.

And he needed to figure out what to do about blood.

By then the commercials were over, and what a raft of them they were sticking in now! As the program resumed, Spike leaned forward intently.

When the next batch of commercials intruded, he rose and crossed the room, set the corded phone
aside, and took a quick inventory of the contents of the weapons chest.

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Gripping grocery bags, Buffy returned to Casa Summers to find Dawn pacing up and down the hall, wearing blue pastel overalls over a pink T with an appliqué of yellow birdies, a cellphone clutched to her ear, her voice in the upper ranges of wheedling teenaged whine that could strip paint. In the front room, Spike was on the couch with Rona and Kim on the floor, the TV blaring unnoticed, the three of them apparently deep in a discussion of the merits of blade-up stabbing, underhand, as compared to blade-down stabbing from above. As Buffy finished shutting the door by bumping it with her butt, Rona had just leaped up for a mimed demonstration, sans an actual knife. Spike wasn't watching: he'd risen and turned to meet Buffy's eyes, and they smiled at each other. For about five seconds everything else went away. Then Buffy felt one of the bags beginning to tear and hustled past Dawn to hastily plop it, and then the more secure one, on the kitchen counter, grabbing the sweating-cold milk jug as it threatened to topple through the tear and setting it aside on the kitchen island Xander had built when mass-produced meals for thirty had become mandatory.

At the sink scrubbing a cookie sheet with fierce determination, Willow remarked over her shoulder, “Everybody’s entitled to three before supper, absolute limit, and looters will be suspended by their heels over termite mounds. Of course termites don’t actually bite, so it’s not a really dire threat, but I’m not currently into dire. Bad enough to imagine all those tiny little legs churning. And they’re not even white but sort of colorless, never come out in the daylight. Vampire termites.” Willow gripped her elbows tight to her sides, shuddering, eyebrows worriedly clenched. “OK, that’s scary. Quitting now.”

The house was filled by the wonderful smell of her labors: Toll House cookies with pecans and butterscotch bits (the chocolate chips were a gimme), fragrantly stacked on a large blue-rimmed plate on the front right stove burner where it could be guarded from predation.

Grabbing one of her allotted three cookies and biting ecstatically down on the splendid expiation of Willow’s guilt, Buffy inquired, “Mmmff?”

“A- on the Western Civ. midterm,” Willow explained dispiritedly. “Spike offered to intimidate the professor with long words and grammar so good it sneers. Whom used correctly in compound-complex sentences. But I was firm, I said No. I don’t think that sort of thing should be encouraged.”

Not guilt but rage, then. Same difference, when it all came out in cookies.

“Mmmff,” Buffy agreed, over a Dawnscreech from the hall and the seismic bangs as Dawn jumped up and down, followed by “Yes! Yes! Yes!” as her wheedling achieved climax.

Buffy and Willow traded an eyebrows-raised glance.

Having secured her second cookie, Buffy put away a box of pasta, then leaned into the hall to make sure the floorboards had survived. Dawn, still phoned, was bent over a notebook open on the hall table, alternately writing intently and slapping at her hair. And Spike was coming toward the kitchen. A glancing, nearly impersonal kiss—barely a two on Buffy’s personal scale—and then he was sizing up the merchandise to identify the jars and canned goods that lived on the upper shelves of the cabinets.

Buffy went back to putting away the things that lived on the middle or lower shelves, bottom cabinets, or under the sink, aware of doing with Spike a coordinated dance of bending and reaching,
weaving back and forth across the kitchen, smooth and automatic as a fight. A motion study would have been a smooth interlace of red and blue lines. Buffy smiled at the precision and the unspoken understandings.

Unlike a normal guy, Spike wouldn’t come grab bags from her, all macho despite her having dragged them from the store and then to the house on her own. It wouldn’t even occur to him: the Slayer needed no help handling about fifty pounds of dead weight. But he’d turn up to take care of storing the high stuff that was difficult for the vertically challenged without resort to the kitchen step-stool.

Quietly watching his chance, he swiped an unauthorized cookie and disappeared it into his mouth in less than a second, absently scratching the peeling skin on his right ear while turning his back so Willow wouldn’t notice him chewing. Buffy ogled the back of his neck for a savoring moment. Smiling the smile of the contentedly successful thief, he began sorting aside the laundry products that would need to be toted down to the basement. He might take care of that, or Buffy would. Whoever finished with the other groceries first. All just as simple as could be.

As she finished her own second cookie with luxurious finger-licking, making sure every smear of chocolate was completely removed from each of the fingers, Buffy’s eyes caught Spike’s and there was another of those rapt, suspended moments between them, this time with the devastating heat of the full-body blush followed by a mutual gulp as they came out of the trance and shakily went back to work.

Oh, yes.

Spike could be sexy about cookies. Buffy suspected he could be sexy about second-hand lawnmowers and molting Pekingese. Pretty much hard-wired, no thought whatever required.

Buffy put a loaf of bread on the kitchen island with the cluster of items waiting for mass disposal into the refrigerator because Joyce Summers had been adamant about the unacceptability of opening the refrigerator door more than once in any given ten-minute period and letting out all the cold air. It was automatic: you minimized your refrigerator openage. Even Spike did it.

The spirit of Joyce Summers presided over the kitchen and such details as these, like no smoking in the house and no weapons left laying around, except following emergencies. Buffy considered it entirely of the good.

Buffy asked him, “You know about Friday?”

“Yeah,” Spike confirmed, and slowed in his motions: waiting for something.

Almost instantly, Buffy knew what it was. “Left your cell turned off again. Or did you forget to charge it?”

“Sorry, love,” Spike responded insincerely, in lieu of an actual answer.

No use going there. He knew perfectly well how to use the cellphone rented for him at frightening
expense. He used it for outcalling all the time. But he wouldn’t leave it available for incalling. Hated it with the unspoken passion he accorded to wrist watches and nearly anything digital. Unsuitable for a vamp to be lumbered with a bleeding chunk of puce plastic, carry it around all the time, leashed to it like a bloody poodle, unquote. Spoiled the line of his jeans in a way the cigarette pack and lighter evidently didn’t.

Nice line.

Buffy grabbed the refrigerator stuff and would have earned perhaps an 8.5 score for fewest possible seconds required for the transfer. The sweating milk jug was slippery. And at least a second lost while she noted the continued complete absence of any gallon milk jug usefully recycled into storing blood. The new normal, vaguely disquieting and problematic.

Spike left, toting the laundry stuff. Joint team score at least a nine.

Stacking the last dripping bowl in the drying rack, Willow asked, “What’s for supper?”

“Spaghetti, that’s usually safe, with cubes of leftover meatloaf masquerading as meatballs. Choice of marinara or chunky garden sauce. Tossed salad featuring grape tomatoes. Garlic bread.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll turn on the oven and get the water started.”

“Thanks, Will.”

“Patrolling tonight?”

“Short one. Just hit the worst hot spots. Lick and a promise, my mom would say.”

Pulling out the big salad bowl, Buffy performed refrigerator openage and snatched salad ingredients into the bowl. Would have been a clear nine except for violating the specified resting period.

Dawn gloomed in, staring appalled at the notebook. She announced, “I got, like, seventeen tons of homework.”

“Then you should get started,” Buffy responded in her best mom voice. “Twenty minutes or so till supper.”

“Yeah.” Dawn somnambulated out again. From the hall came the afterthought, “You should start nagging Spike about getting contacts.”

“I heard that,” came menacingly from the other direction.

Brutally wrenching lettuce in firm handfuls, Buffy remarked, “Xander’s got a new girlfriend.”

Spike leaned in the door. “Have him bring her over, pet. I’ll check out the demon quotient.”

Buffy smiled to herself. “Maybe.”

“Anya will be pissed,” Spike reflected, and moved off down the hall.

Proper vamps did not offer to help with cooking. Though he’d undoubtedly eat some. And at least half of the garlic bread. So much for legend.
Sometimes the new normal and the old normal coincided.

Digging in a drawer for the veggie scraper, Buffy collected her third cookie.
Because it was to be a “hit-and-run” patrol, dropping briefly into three neighborhoods where the highest count of vamps had been found the previous time, Buffy had the bright idea of using the SUV for more hit, less run. She was both pleased and vexed by her ingenuity. Pleased because, although beneficial for slimming, toning, endurance, and wind, a three mile jog just to reach the target area constituted at least 98% of the time as compared with the glittering seconds of slayage. The SUV cut the traveling time down to nearly nothing.

Conspicuously laden with swords, crossbows, battle axes, and so on, she found public transportation not really an option. It was still possible to be suspiciously odd, even in Sunnydale.

She’d never used a vehicle for routine slayage transport pre-First, but (a) she hadn’t carried, then, a mental map of the prime nest sites (from a vamp point of view) that would be claimed by some new pack as soon as they were left vacant by one she’d eliminated, allowing her to target patrols where she was pretty certain there’d be repeat business rather than just wander around at random on the chance of encountering nasties and (b) she’d been too young to drive. Now she wasn’t, and she’d thought of the new idea all by herself. Neat!

A quicker patrol with a good kill count meant more of the night left, with a clear conscience, for the other activities she had planned.

Her annoyance was because she hadn’t thought of it sooner. She’d felt a definite “Duh” moment when she realized she’d set aside the SUV key bundle to open the weapons chest at least four or five times, since too many SIT bodies to fit in anything short of a bus was no longer a factor, before the penny dropped and she’d stared at the keys as the obvious dawned on her.

She figured foregoing public bragging over her SUV epiphany meant she didn’t have to admit to the Duh, so it all pretty much evened out, insight-wise.

Reaching the first location, a neighborhood bounded on three sides by cemeteries—in Sunnydale, realtors called that “green space” and regarded it as a plus—the five of them (Amanda couldn’t make the patrol, pleading excessive homework) went directly from the SUV, conveniently parked, to the target nest site, a crumbling mausoleum.

No joy: empty.

Strolling back toward Buffy, Spike commented philosophically, “Everybody out to lunch, looks like.” He gave the surrounding headstones and monuments a quick, experienced once-over. “Check this one again some midnight, then, when the tossers are home.” He lifted his head, eyes shut, concentrating on what the air told him. “Been here, though: three or four, anyways. Haven’t laid claim to it—just squatting. Fledges, most likely. Probably get rousted by some of Manny’s pack. They’re consolidating.”

Buffy called briskly, “Everybody back on the bus,” and started away before Spike could present any further details of Sunnydale vamp politics she supposed were useful but didn’t want to hear.

Anytime he spoke of other vamps by name, it bothered her. For the charged seconds of an encounter, Buffy thought of her opponents as Blue Check Shirt Ugly or Ms. Ex-Trailer Trash or simply The Big One on the Left—minimal and nearly impersonal identifications that lasted only long enough for
the dust to settle and another checkmark on her mental tally. Spike waded in with identical glee and precision whether he faced some anonymous fledge or “that Raymond, used to clerk at the SuperQuick,” or Albert, a sometime poker acquaintance.

Buffy didn’t want to know; Spike didn’t care.

En route to the second target, Spike leaned from the seat behind to close a hand on Buffy’s shoulder, pointing with the other: “Look, love.”

About a block away, a house was burning.

“We’re not the fire department.”

“No, pet, they been doin’ it that way, and explaining will take-- Stop, just stop, all right?” he directed harshly, and had pushed past Kim and was out the door and running before Buffy had more than touched the brake.

No choice, then. Buffy slammed the brake down, screeching the SUV to a halt in the general vicinity of the curb. The three SITs piled out, trailing Spike. By the time Buffy caught up, Spike and the SITs were engaged with at least six vamps in front of the burning house--the vamps whirling and dodging, the SITs in formation and methodical: Kim and Rona flanking defensively while the lead, Kennedy, engaged and dispatched. Kennedy’s opponent fell, undusted: she’d used her taser. The trio split, engaging singly. Off to the left, Spike was brawling unarmed with two vamps, Fatso and Ms. Forbes (a vague resemblance to Buffy’s kindergarten teacher).

The well-tended yard also had three drained corpses in nightclothes and a bleeding woman in pink babydolls crawling toward the burning house.

Fatso was trying to occupy Spike while Ms. Forbes came at him from behind. Spike dropped into a sweep kick that dumped Ms. Forbes. Buffy staked Fatso as he bent, intending to hammer clasped hands onto Spike’s neck but exploding into dust before the blow could connect.

Saying curtly, “Bint’s yours,” Spike took off toward the crawling woman, now nearly within reach of the flames.

Buffy and Ms. Forbes regarded one another--Buffy in a wide-legged stance, the game-faced, frizzy-haired vamp crouched, for a fatal second undecided between fight and flight, flicking a glance back at the street. They jerked into motion simultaneously, and Buffy’s stake was faster than the vamp’s lunge.

When Buffy whirled to check the fight’s progress, Kim had just dusted the sprawled vamp Kennedy had tasered, Kennedy and Rona had teamed up on the final vamp, and Spike was spinning around in place heedlessly close to the flames, yelling, “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” and waving both arms in the air. The woman must have gotten past him.

As Rona staked the vamp, Buffy heard the first distant siren. The three SITs looked to Spike: barely holding himself in place. Wanting, in each twitch and aborted lean toward the front door where the woman must have disappeared, to take on the fire--beat it down. The opening puffed a lifting tongue of incandescence as though the house were panting. Then the large front window blew out--nowhere near Spike, but enough to make him force himself decisively away. As he came striding back toward Buffy, she saw three deep gouges slanted across his face from eyebrow to lip, blood dripping off his chin.
Passing, he bit out, “Child of some sort left inside. She went after it. Wouldn’t stop, so I belted her. Still wouldn’t stop, silly great cow.”

The siren was closer and another, wailing on a different tone, had joined it. Overtaking Spike, Buffy got the SUV open on the right, then clambered through to the driver’s side. As Kennedy yanked the door shut, everyone inside and accounted for, Buffy pulled away at a sedate 15 mph, barely touching the pedal and turning the next corner before she risked switching on the headlights.

In the back, Spike had pressed to his face a wet towel Kim had fixed up from the first-aid chest that usually lived in the basement (another good reason to take the SUV) and muttering words—\textit{harpy; Niobe; fucking troll}—in furious blurs: still wound up about the woman.


Spike growled, “Shut your holes. I get to say that. You don’t.”

“Well, geez, sorry, Spike,” Kim rejoined. “Didn’t know I needed a license.”

“Now you do,” Spike snarled back. “So shut the hell up.”

The sound of anger crackling so close, in familiar voices, made Buffy frown and pull her shoulders tight, concentrating all the while on the road and checking the mirrors for any following lights. But she didn’t think of intervening any more than she’d thought beyond a second of seizing Spike and pitching him away from the much-too-close fire while he fretted on the edges and tried to make it come out and fight.

Some things, she left completely to him. Not Slayer concerns. That was one of the things that made it a partnership. Buffy had learned to delegate.

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Within five minutes Spike had discarded the towel and was holding forth on this new tactic. “Hunting’s been harder. So some older nests, packs, been doin’ this. Scout out a house with its neighbors empty, torch it, drive the prey out.”

Buffy commented, “Vamp version of a cook-out.” Despite the flippancy, this new tactic troubled her and she was casting around in her mind for ways to counter it.

She stopped for a red light.

Kneeling in the front passenger seat to talk behind, Kennedy theorized, “Fledges wouldn’t have the patience.”

“Too much planning, collecting materials,” Rona commented. “Not just Grrr and bite. Spike, are fledges ‘fraid of fire?”

“Too fucking dumb. Good half of ’em burn, their first sunrise. ‘Less they’re waited for, fetched in safe. Demon doesn’t know this world enough, right off, to fear fire.”

As the light turned green, Buffy turned her head to inquire, “Then what’s your excuse? Think closing the Hellmouth made you immune? Or did it just lower your insanely careless/reckless
threshold? To maybe China?” The fact she hadn’t yanked him away didn’t mean she wasn’t gonna let him hear about it. She could smell the burnt hair: eau de singed vampire.

“That was light,” Spike responded after a moment. “This was fire. Entirely different thing, pet.”

“That’s still two burns in two days, Spike. I better not see a pattern here. Does the phrase ‘Playing with fire’ strike any kind of a chord?”

“’M fine. Entirely fine. Hundred percent. If you’re gonna go all nancified about every little scratch, I’m not the one who has a problem here.”

“Better not be,” Buffy responded. “I don’t have any spares.”

“You better not,” Spike riposted, and she could practically hear the eyebrow raise.

Then she felt him: leaning forward between the two front bucket seats, at her right shoulder. Not, this time, to point out a fire: seeing where they were, where Buffy had brought them.

Maybe a whole minute’s silence, while Buffy pulled up at the west margin of Restfield Cemetery.

“That’s fine, pet. You can just drop me here, then.”

Buffy doused the lights and turned off the key.

“Slayer,” he said. “We need to have a word.”

As Buffy opened her door, Spike told the SITs to stay put and climbed out the other side. He had a cigarette lit by the time he joined her on the sidewalk that ran parallel to the wall. Scuffing his boots. Moving slow. Braced. Glancing at her and then away. Trying to be non-confrontational.

The scratches were completely gone. Burnt hair smell remained.

“S’not where you said we were going,” Spike mentioned, all flat and diffident.

“Thought we’d surprise you,” Buffy responded, presenting a smile. Got no smile back. Only another quick glance.

“Not a good surprise, love. Can’t bring the children into this. Can’t even bring you into it.”

“I don’t consider myself ‘brought.’ My idea. I call the patrols. I name the targets.”

“So you do. Except this time. Not with me along, anyway. Don’t think you’ve entirely considered the implications. Ramifications.” Cigarette tilted in a corner of his mouth, he pushed hands spread-fingered through his hair. “Claimed this patch, I did. By now Michael will have been to at least sixteen bars and specially Willy’s complaining of how I done him, pitched him out, when he’d given me no cause. And that I formally claimed it doesn’t just apply to Mike, now. It means no vamp sets foot on it without I say so, or they answer to me. Not the children. And most specially not the Slayer. The Slayer enforcing a vamp claim, a vamp territory. You don’t want that, love. Then you’d be playing by vamp rules, and the next time some sire that fancies himself a master pours gas in a bottle, it might come through Bit’s window. Or Red’s. Or yours. Ours. It would be a declaration of war.”
“What’s this been, the past seven years: kickball?” Buffy demanded heatedly.

“What’s this been, the past seven years: kickball?” Buffy demanded heatedly.

“Fledges got no rules. Don’t know nothing. But for all but idiots, there are rules of engagement. The First didn’t try to take out Potentials with a high-powered rifle. Didn’t jigger the brakes on your van. Didn’t set a great huge bomb by Casa Summers just past where Red’s protections hold. No poison gas. A matter of balance. There’s been rules, limits, even if you’ve never noticed.”

Carefully, dangerously, Buffy inquired, “Did you just call me an idiot?”

“Didn’t notice, pet. Have you earned it?” A direct look went with that, followed by a tight, unamused smirk. Then Spike made himself look away, disengage, and paced a few steps: not away and back, just side to side. He continued, “Slayers don’t go out armed with bloody automatic weapons or flamethrowers.”


“Once. Not your regular arsenal. Don’t interrupt me, my dove, when I’m educating you. Basically, you versus vamps and what-all, it’s always been hand to hand with the occasional blunt instrument or blade and maybe the odd spell—same as all the Slayers before you. But against the Turok-han, and the Bringers, and the First, Michael and me, we came real close to breaking that balance. Big threat, bad odds, and I wasn’t about to get those children killed if a taser, or an incendiary grenade, would keep them from it and give ‘em a fighting chance. Never been a fight like that on a broad front between humans and vamps, with a Slayer leading it. Don’t want one now. First’s shut out, so we put the toys back in the boxes and forget we ever played with ‘em.

“This isn’t just one more boneyard you sweep whenever you please. If I’m alongside, it’s a claimed vamp territory. If we clear out the nests side by side, every master in town trying to carve some piece of real estate for his pack is gonna assume the only way he can get back to business as usual is over your dead body. So if you do this, I’m not with you. I back off.”

“Then back off,” said Buffy. “Do you expect me to stand by while you try to take out two whole nests on your own? Maybe ten, a dozen to one?”

“Wouldn’t be that bad,” Spike argued. “Not a pitched battle. Whittle ‘em down. Take out one or two whenever I get the chance. A little at a time. Make ‘em want to move, relocate. Find someplace else. Town’s wide open: lots of other places they could be. Raise the stakes just high enough to make it not worth their while to stay. Not enough to make ‘em desperate.”

“*Magnificent Seven* strategy.”

Spike paused in his pacing and looked around. “Near enough, yeah, though Kurosawa’s better. Hell of a fight, worth the subtitles. Just leave it with me, love. I’ll see to it.”

“And when you come the second time and it’s an ambush?” Buffy challenged.

“Just have to be cautious, is all.”

“Cognitive dissonance,” Buffy responded, adopting one of Willow’s phrases. “Does not compute, you and cautious. Who are you kidding? Because it’s not me!”

He pitched the last of the cigarette and faced her with folded arms, taking a stance. “All right, take it from the other side. If you do this alone, just you and the SITs, everything I’ve done for the last six
months, since I got back, is wasted, gone. In terms of winning back what I lost in this town when the soldier boys shoved that chunk of fucking plastic in my head. Since I turned traitor, the way the cousins, vamps, look at it. Doing my own. Siding with you and the Scoobies and then the Potentials. Lately I’ve earned back some respect. I took a few minions, made ’em submit, made ’em come and go to my word. Was somewhat less fucking insane some of the time. Less of an embarrassment all ’round. Proved I can fight my way through anybody or anything that comes against me and come out the other side. And all on my own--without running to the Slayer to bail me out, though we’re a widely known item. You show you don’t need me no more, just waltz into a claimed territory that’s mine and wipe out whatever you find, then you might as well stake me yourself because I won’t last a week. Won’t nobody respect me if you don’t. Don’t pay heed to anything I say. Don’t even bloody listen. I do this. Alone.”

Buffy blurted, “I’m not gonna play vamp politics and power games!”

His response was a long, expressionless look. “Love, if we’re together, you have no choice. Though I don’t claim it, you pay it no notice, and I’m long past enforcing it, I’m Master Bloody Vampire of Sunnydale. Successor to that git The Master, ol’ Fruit Bat himself. Because there’s nobody else, an’ nobody’s taken it from me. Cousins got long memories, love--those that survive. To the cousins, that’s who I am and what I am. And that’s not something you can afford to ignore.” Finally breaking his stare, he twisted his face and head away as though his neck hurt…or, she realized, like shaking off game face. Trying, she could see, not to lose his temper or force the issue beyond hope of agreement or compromise. That was never easy for him, she knew. Not his natural inclination. He was trying to be patient with her, this hundred-and-twenty-some year-old vampire, and she absolutely hated it.

“Do one thing,” Spike requested, occupying himself with the process of lighting another cigarette. “Wait till Giles gets back. He knows somewhat about vamps, how they behave, how they look at things. Not much, but some. Put this to Giles first. Do some other graveyard tonight. Let this alone for now.”

Frowning, Buffy thought for a moment. “Do you swear not to slip out some night and just go ahead as planned?”

His smile wouldn’t have fooled a five-year-old. “Know me too well, love. Sure, I’ll give you my word on that. Till after we’ve talked with Giles. Good enough?”

“Good enough,” Buffy decided grudgingly. Then she opened her arms.

Maybe it wasn’t the most graceful or coordinated hug today, but it was the one she had and she was keeping it. And nobody cracked any ribs.

Walking toward the driver’s side of the SUV, she remarked without turning, “Love fighting you. And hate fighting you. Makes my fillings all lock up.”

“Got something at stake, now.”

“New rule: no vamp quippage. Exclusively my deparment.”

“Whatever you say, Slayer.”

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Spike waited until Buffy’s breathing had slowed and her pulse dropped to a sleeping cadence. And a little beyond that because he liked to watch her sleep, all soft, relaxed, and peaceful. Warm, too, and smelling so fine. Didn’t get up first thing and wash the scent of their little shagfest off herself because she knew he liked it in the after time. Liked to smell her that way, and himself on her, their scents inextricably blended. Not always the quickest on the uptake, his girl, and pig-stubborn sometimes but kind and thoughtful about the un-her stuff she’d got her mind around. Best she could, she took him into account and accepted how he was even when it made no sense to her.

One of the uncountable things he loved her for.

After a few more minutes’ peaceful contemplation, he slid out of what he thought of as her “virgin bed”—really no room for two unless one pretty much on top of the other, and that had its nice aspects, too, but terrible for sleeping: have to see about relocating the monster brass bed from Casa Spike if he was to stay here long-term—and tugged the sheet and light blanket back up over her shoulder without touching or disturbing her.

He dressed quickly and pulled a wide-toothed comb through his hair until it felt as it should. Finishing with his boots, he scooped money and keys from a small bowl on the dresser. Cigarettes and lighter, all set. Then he paused, balefully regarding the cellphone assigned to him: on the dresser-top beside its charger. Already carrying too much junk around: since when did a vamp have to bother with keys, cash money? Well, be fair here, he admonished himself: Before I gave the motorbike away, that had a key. And since when is it a virtue to be skint? Get over yourself, you berk. He shrugged and collected the cellphone, set it to receive, and poked it in a pocket.

He didn’t have to account to anyone for his comings and goings. But of a certainty Buffy would wake sometime during the night and find herself alone. She’d suspect he’d broken his promise and was off clearing Restfield. And Spike hadn’t the least clue what the hell she might do then.

To head off that nightmare scenario, he located his notebook on the corner of the vanity, pulled out a page, and wrote, Gone to Willy’s. Back by dawn. No, I didn’t, and shame on you for even thinking it. Yes, taking the cell. Good vampire here. Now go back to sleep, you idiot. Love, S.

Whipped, he thought. You’re so bloody whipped.

Finding no tape, he propped the note against the vanity mirror, where he was certain she’d see it.

That was all right, then.

He halted a minute outside Dawn’s door, checking that her heartbeat was OK and everything as it should be, then silently down the stairs and outside. Stretching as he reached the street, enjoying the night and opening his senses as wide as he could in every direction as though starting a hunt. Well, might do that too if the opportunity popped up. Hadn’t altogether made up his mind about that for the long term, but short term, sure—wouldn’t say no to that. He was a goddam vampire after all, for crap sake, not some half-assed human wannabe ashamed of his fangs, like Angel, Boo bloody hoo, I’m an eeeevil vampire. Spike expected his unapologetic vampirism to be taken into account by others, just as Buffy expected her friends to walk wide and respect that she was the Slayer. Shouldn’t be so hard to understand, should it?

Settling into his distance pace, he let himself blank into motion, letting the doing, the being, be all. Felt real good to let it all go. Of course, as much as he had on his mind, it all came creeping back.

Missed his motorbike. Running was fine, he could run all night and not tire, but wasn’t the speed to
it, was it? If that arrangement worked out as Kennedy wanted, he’d come into some dosh. Maybe buy him a new bike, a real bike—not a piddling little Yamaha, though she’d run smooth enough and needed no more than suspension work. Big Harley—one of the few things the Yanks had done right. Red, maybe—screaming scarlet. Noisy as hell if you tuned it that way. Built-in sound system, play any media through tiny headphones. Long saddle, leather not vinyl, good room at pillion for Bit or Buffy or both if they squeezed tight. That’d be a treat.

He flashed to game face, thinking about it. The run clicked up a notch, and his senses reached further outward.

Far out, a building was burning. Spike’s eyes flicked to the spark and away. Not on Scooby duty at the moment. Therefore the fire was nothing to him, none of his concern.

Near Willy’s, he slowed and strolled the last couple hundred yards, noting the vehicles present in front. Particularly the Yamaha bike poised neatly on its kickstand like an obedient pony.

Spike made an entrance, a deliberate bounce to his step. He went straight to the bar without pausing to acknowledge known faces, pleased to hear the pitch and volume of conversations change, not attending enough to catch any of the words. Time was, he could silence a whole room just by looking around, but had no interest in that now anyway. He kept his attention close and perked up but all peaceable. Not hunting a fight, particularly.

He slapped down enough bills and pointed, saying, “Double. Neat.” Reaching for the indicated bottle of Jim Beam, the vamp bartender—Huey, one of Spike’s minions for awhile—commented, “Got courting Sh’narth wyrm’s coming through.”

“Yeah, done one, couple days back,” Spike responded, while Huey placed a glass and poured. “Pity about their being so big. Otherwise I’d be inclined to let ‘em alone, if they didn’t do such damage. Can’t have that.”

Changing topic, Huey remarked, “Still got decent odds.” He nodded in the direction of the chalk board high on the wall at the far end of the room. “But could be better. Lot of refusals bringing it down.”

Approaching with a tray of scummed-up glass beer mugs, Willy said, “Spike,” and Spike greeted him in turn—not cordial, not anything. Human Willy knew he had no friends here and generally knew to the millimeter how far he could push before a customer snapped back at him. He’d survived, running a demon bar in Sunnydale, longer than Spike had been in town. If you could sometimes smell fear off him, it was a side effect of sweating, a human thing, and only to be expected.

Willy and Spike were cooler toward each other than when Spike had been in Huey’s place, combination bartender and bouncer. More precisely, since Spike had been annoyed by Willy’s niggling rules and popped him a good one, and Willy had retaliated the next day by firing him.

Savoring the burn of his first big swallow, Spike responded to Huey’s last comment. “Got other things to see to. Odds against come down, all the better.”

Having set the tray on the bar, Willy was still there, hanging about. Spike gave him an inquiring look, very cool and aloof.

“Might be able to set something up for Saturday,” Willy said. “Got an offer.” Willy turned his head to indicate and, no surprise, there was Mike at a table near the window, all by his own lone self. Not
letting on he knew Spike was there. Spike included him in the range of a casual scan, showing no reaction.

“Might. If I’m not busy. Let you know.” Spike took another swallow of his drink. “That reminds me. That Michael, he’s all pissed off. Might have made more of it than it was, blowing off about it. I got no interest in holding a territory, what with the Slayer an’ all. Just threw him out, warned him off: he’d got on my last nerve. But that’s not to be construed as a formal claim. Should anybody wonder, you might pass that along…. I’d be obliged.”

The three of them traded looks.

“Might be I’d know somebody interested,” Willy allowed, and Huey said the same thing with a glance without having to put words to it.

Spike added, “You know me, I like a fight well enough. But not everybody goin’ to the mattresses, so to say, over some dumb misunderstanding. Always feel like you been played when that happens. Nobody likes bein’ played.”

That Spike had mentioned the matter twice made his request emphatic—a demand for active rather than passive gossip mongering.

Willy nodded to show he’d gotten that. Huey—a lean, bony vamp with a creased face in his human aspect, hair long, dirty, and carelessly tied back with twine—only smiled, not needing to be human-obvious.

Finishing his drink, Spike told Willy, “I’ll let you know about the challenge fight.” Again, the repeat meant Spike would actually do it, not just say it and then blow it off. Nearly as good as a yes. That would let Willy get started spreading the word and adjusting the betting and the odds, considering Mike didn’t even have a place on the board yet, without committing Spike to anything. Better that way, from Spike’s point of view: never knew what might come up.

Setting the glass down, Spike went back outside and soon fell into an easy jog. Liquor wasn’t actually warm but felt so going down and awhile after. Next best thing to blood. Moving felt good.

There were four more bars to leave word at before he’d feel he’d defused the situation as much as he could. Might not need Giles to get into it after all, which would be better. He was already more beholden to the Watcher for past favors than he liked.

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Leaving the third bar and starting toward the fourth, Spike did an automatic assay of the night, all the complex signals, confirming he didn’t yet have to worry about getting back to Casa Summers before sunrise unless he let himself get distracted. After several large drinks he was coasting nicely now, everything loose and comfortable. Not actively hunting but aware, in the emptiness of the early-morning streets, of everything that moved. Humans in cars too much trouble, even though half the people didn’t bother locking their doors as they drove. He blinked and watched the occasional passing car placidly. Then his head came around sharp and he went to investigate what had caught his attention. Drunk passed out in an alley behind some boxes. Head cocked, Spike considered, but this was far too easy to be passed up.

He sat back on his heels by the man, analyzing the smells. Had eaten fairly well not long ago. No taint of illness. Relatively clean clothes. Hands and fingernails clean. Only maybe a day unshaven.
“Well, mate, are you with us here?”

Nothing. Too easy.

Spike went to game face and leaned in.

The living blood hit the back of his throat like a hammerblow. He was rapt with the heat and the taste and the hot immediacy of it. After three brilliant gulps he shut himself off, shuddering because his demon wanted more, wanted it all, and fought being forced away. But he didn’t give it leave and held himself still until it withdrew and subsided. Then he licked the punctures shut, setting a hand against the wall as the additional alcohol hit his system.

Soul was about as appalled as the demon had been avid. Spike pointed out to it that not only had he not killed the bloke, he hadn’t even patted him down and stolen whatever money was on him. Hadn’t done the tosser even as much harm as the liquor would, eventually, and the soul should shut the hell up about it. Settle and leave off pushing the punishing wrench of nausea and unease that mostly followed his feeding now. Except with the Slayer. Soul got all blissed out on that too, didn’t even bother trying to make him feel bad about it anymore, for which Spike was intensely thankful. First and only sign he’d had that the soul was in the least reasonable and might be expected to come around, given time, to the plain fact that he was a vampire and not apt to change.

There was a shrill electronic noise, close, and it took him a minute to remember the bloody cellphone. Dragging it out of his pocket, he sat back against the wall next to the drunk and got the phone to his ear. “Yes, pet.”

“You pig,” said Buffy’s voice.

“Yes, pet.” He giggled.

“And you’re drunk!”

“Yes, pet.” He leaned against the drunk and giggled harder. “Was there maybe a point, love? Or did you just want to talk dirty for a bit.”

In the fuming silence from the other end, he was imagining her face coloring up, all hot and rosy like it did. He loved watching that.

“Get home, all right?” Her voice had finally softened, gentled.

“Be plenty of time for a nice, slow shag and then a shower before you have to leave.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. Go back to sleep now and I promise to wake you up real nice when I get in.”

“Yeah. Mmmm. ‘Night, then.”

“’Night, love.”

He carefully pushed tiny buttons to terminate the current call and put the phone back in receive mode, then returned it to his pocket. Concentrating to get a cigarette lit, he reflected that the cell didn’t actually take up that much space. Hardly more than the cigarette pack. Weighed next to
nothing. Stupid little play-toy might not be as much nuisance as he’d thought, toting around. He might reconsider.

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He’d been hearing the bike for awhile now. Nowhere close. Just around someplace in the middle distance, clearer or fainter according to the angles and surfaces of the buildings between.

He’d made the final stop, at the Wander Bar, and decided against another drink although it wasn’t polite to go in and spend nothing and still expect Frodo Fourfingers to serve as an information drop and relay. Spike had left a five on the bar just for the sake of manners. Didn’t need anything else to drink tonight. All full up and content.

Although the Wander Bar wasn’t officially a demon-friendly establishment, if a patron thoughtlessly went a little bumpy in the forehead or their eye-color skewed toward yellow, nobody screeched or fainted or ran yammering to 911. Do it too often and you could get yourself banned, and fledges weren’t welcome for obvious reasons, but a mature vamp with halfway decent control and manners and bills to bring to the regularly scheduled poker game would have no problem. Unless he won, of course. Then he’d better watch his back.

Reaching the string of fast-food places and convenience stores that separated Sunnydale’s downtown from the residential areas, Spike stuck his hands in his pockets, wondering if he should have brought a taser. But no: he was gonna cut back on that, lest the cousins set about acquiring comparable armament, and that would be a right mess. No good getting used to that. Have to go back to what he knew. He stopped at the next realtor’s sign he saw, broke it, and had two serviceable stakes tucked handy inside his shirt when the noise of the bike came again and didn’t fade.

Mike throttled down, pacing him slow.

“Headed home?”

“Ahuh.”

“C’mon, then.”

Spike stood and thought a minute. Mike stopped the bike, waiting. No way Mike was gonna stake him from in front. Nor do much of anything, actually. Vulnerability was all the other way: to Mike, from behind. So no reason why not.

Spike mounted pillion. As the bike started rolling, still slow, Spike steadied himself with a hand on Mike’s back. Then his body caught up with the motion and he no longer needed the contact.

“There was no need to do me like that,” Mike said without turning.

Engine made some noise, but they were both vamps and could hear fine past that.

Finally Spike said, “You’re a knife at her throat, Michael. T’isn’t up to me, it’s hers to say, but I can’t look aside anymore, like it doesn’t matter. Like I don’t know.”

“Never done her no least harm!” Mike protested.

“What’s harm to you is not the same as what’s harm to her. You tell me you don’t have her in your
mind when you’re feeding. You tell me you don’t have somewhat of hers you nicked for a posy. For the smell.”

“Ain’t hurt her,” insisted Mike stubbornly. “And she ain’t yours, Spike. Not that way. You got no cause and no right to warn me off, tell me No.”

“You got no least notion of what she is. Or what you want. Just that you do. This is fine, Michael. You let me down here.”

Mike stopped, and Spike stepped down. They faced each other.

Mike said, “I’ll go through you if I have to.”

“Might try,” Spike responded, all peaceable. Mike was a good lad and Spike wished no harm to him. “Till I’m sure your notion of safe, and hers, and mine all come together someplace close, you’ll have to. Don’t think that’s gonna happen, Michael. I’ve talked it out with her, some. She’s not lunch. She’s not yours for the eating no matter how sweet she smells. When you next see her, and I know you will, you listen to her. Listen hard. You take her or even try, you won’t have to worry anymore about the sunrise.”

Mike was silent awhile. Then he asked, “That thing Saturday. You gonna do it?”

“Considering it. Inclined to it. Don’t mind giving you your shot, if that would make you easier in your mind. But don’t make me go around cleaning up after you again. You’re warned off, and that stands. But there’s no use to you making trouble, saying I’ve laid claim to the whole of a prime site. That’s a nuisance, and could blow up past anything you figured or intended. Already had trouble on that account between me and the Slayer. You think I’m past the line, being protective of Dawn, you don’t want to see me if you get harm aimed at the Slayer. Whether you meant to or not. You be angry with me all you like. We’ll settle it. Leave the Slayer clear or you’ll push me where I don’t want to go, with you.”

“See you Saturday, then,” said Mike, and pulled away.
Conversations

After supper, in the first twilight, Dawn went down the steps and out to the sidewalk, eyes front all the way. Spike and Buffy were in the front room pretending to watch the news but mainly snogging. Passing the arch, Dawn had caught his eye. So he knew, and he’d hear if she did one of the whole long list of things she’d almost rather die than do--like screech really really loud. She had her taser clenched tight in a pocket of her Hello, Kitty overalls. Nothing was gonna happen. Nothing bad, anyway. Michael wouldn’t do bad things to her unless he didn’t understand. That’s what she had to do: make him understand.

She paced nervously, one sneakered foot up on the curb and the other down in the street. Left as far as the street light, then back to the front walk of Casa Summers. She’d just come to the turning point at the light pole when Mike was beside her as suddenly as if he’d erupted out of the earth. She hadn’t seen him approach, hadn’t heard the motorcycle, hadn’t seen him coming at all. Standing maybe a foot away, big hands hanging, a wing of raggedly trimmed brown hair across his forehead, shadowed hazel eyes regarding her with vampire intensity, as though it was something she was doing, commanding every scrap of his attention.

A head taller and at least double her weight, Mike could produce a small inward eek from her anytime he did the sudden materialization thing. Not that she was in the least scared of him, of course. It was just the unexpectedness and his tendency to loom. That, combined with his fondness for wearing factory-seconds T-shirts displaying the Spice Girls, Yosemite Sam, or imprints like Yoder Cheese Puffs Corporate Games, 1993, Paducah, KY, would startle anybody.

“Hi, Dawn,” he said, whispery soft--a voice like a tentative pat. Careful; a little shy.

“Hi, Mike. Are you all settled now?”

Instead of answering, he bent his head toward her neck, touching nothing, and breathed her in. And it was as if she could feel him doing it--her own substance, essence, being drawn in and savored. Almost as strong as when he tasted her, on the mark. And nothing was taken she didn’t want to give because they were both so happy with it and how could you explain a thing like that? To anybody?

“Thought maybe he’d have made you chary of me.” The words were a quiet rumble just by her ear, and she could smell him too. She could only describe it, even to herself, as a clean vampire smell. None of the fluids other bodies exuded and none of the artificial scents people used to cover them up. His breath was sweet, untainted. To talk, he took the air in and gave it back unchanged. She thought, He smells like first snow. And like morning. Which was ridiculous because she’d never seen snow, much less smelled it, and he would never know morning. So she decided, He smells new.

Though the idea of him was dangerous, wild, alien, in his presence Dawn could feel none of that and dying seemed a distant thing of little consequence. Besides, it was difficult to get all spooked when tonight’s T-shirt proclaimed the virtues of breast-feeding with an appropriate logo.

“He’s worried that we haven’t put in the time to make sure we both know what the limits are,” she said dutifully, without much enthusiasm.

“Limits,” Mike echoed scornfully. “He’s let himself get all cautious, not straight ahead and flat-out. Too old for power games. Shouldn’t have started them, then. Thinks he can make a big noise and I’ll just back off, meek as can be. Might be I’ll tap him on the shoulder and say, ‘Hey, now.’ Surprise
him a little. Make him reconsider."

"We need limits, Mike. When a human and a vamp…hang around together much, one of them mostly ends up dead. He doesn’t want--"

"But we’re neither of us human,” Mike pointed out. He’d straightened to look her again in the eyes. Now he lightly took both her hands, his thumbs rubbing the backs. “Wouldn’t like you half so well if you were. Humans don’t smell like you do. I knew, first off. Any vamp would. Maybe not know what name to put to it, but they’d know. Couldn’t help it, any more than you could see a flower and not know how lovely it was, all straight and bowing to the breeze, even if it was a kind you never seen before and had no name to go with.” He lifted her right hand to his mouth. Partly a kiss but also a tongue touch: tasting her. It made her shiver and want to turn her head away, but then again not.

He said, “Takes a vamp to appreciate you right. A thousand flavors, Dawn. A thousand kinds of wonderful and all wasted, or nearly, on some human. And Spike all jealous, that you’d let anybody have what he don’t want.” Mike regarded her earnestly. “He’s the Slayer’s. Ain’t known him any time he didn’t have her smell on him and proud of it, too. That she’d let him. Claim and care for what he is, despite what she is. Bear and show his mark. Just like you bear mine, and no hurt from it. Nothing that’s anybody’s business but yours and mine. Nothing he has any right to forbid or put limits on but what we choose.”

"Then what are the limits?” Dawn asked, desperately keeping herself to the point. She pulled her right hand away and poked it in her pocket: onto the taser she’d momentarily forgotten. “What would keep you from feeding on me until there’s not enough left to keep me alive? When you really want to do that and all you care about is how hungry you are and how good it tastes and feels?”

"Now, I ain’t done that yet. Now have I. And I’ve tasted you more than once. And never didn’t stop, never didn’t let go and leave you with all you need to be you. Now ain’t that so.”

"Yes, but--"

"Second you started being afraid, I’d know. Taste it. Smell it. Know it. Would taste different if you started being afraid, Dawn. And I understand that now, what it would mean: no Dawn, never no more. I can imagine how that would be, to have you gone. I understand never and forever. I remind myself how much I don’t want that when your blood is singing to me so sweet, like it does. I don’t forget.”

"But we got to get real about this, Mike! I don’t know how to be afraid of you. I forget. I don’t know forever, I only know now. I don’t know how to be apart from how it feels when you touch the mark and open it, and we’re connected that way, to stand off inside my head and be scared, or say that’s enough or too much. If you’re depending on me to keep myself alive, I can’t do that, Mike. It’s so intense. And when it starts, I don’t think anymore of how it could end.”

Mike put his arms around her and tucked her close. She was just the right size for that. They fit together just exactly right: each of his arms clasped all the way around to her opposite shoulder, a full embrace. “Hush, now. If you’re tryin’ to scare me, you done a fine job of it, sweetheart. If we’re both waiting for you to warn me off, that’s no good. And so sweet I almost don’t care. Truly don’t ever want to have you be afraid of me. Sometimes, that’s good…in a human. But don’t need that from you. It’s beyond fine, just as it is. Don’t need nothing else. And I know what to do about that.”

“What?”
“Won’t never come to you except when I’ve fed. Won’t need you for that. Only want you. So don’t look for me no more at the last of the light. Might be, I’ll come and wait for you awhile after that from now on.”

A part of Dawn rejoiced at the solution. And a part of her sagged, heavy with guilt. “I’d feel awful, knowing somebody else had died to keep me safe. So you’d have to promise to stop for them too. Leave them enough to stay alive, after. Like Spike does now.”

A long silence. Then Mike kissed her forehead and was silent some more. Finally he said, “Don’t know if I can promise that, Dawn. Master vamp can do a lot of things a fledge can’t. Got his beast under good control. Or demon, like he says. I’m not a fledge no more, but my demon’s still strong and doesn’t always listen…and lots of times, whatever it wants is what I want. I’m not apart from it. Over time, a vamp gets more…economical, seems like: doesn’t need as much, doesn’t get as much from the kill. Kind of…detached. Can take it or leave it. Choose. I expect that’s a good way to be, but I ain’t but six. I don’t feel that. It’s different, the last of it…. When the body knows it’s the last and gets stronger for a second or two and then accepts and goes all quiet…. Submitting. Demon, it wants that. Won’t quit until it’s had that. When I’d have to stop if I meant to turn the food. Never done that. Would feel…incomplete. Not old enough for that yet…. But maybe it’s time I learned. It’ll be sometime, so maybe I could make it be now. Learn to want that and be content no matter what the demon wants. Dawn, I’ll try. If that’s what you need from me, I promise to try. Do my best to get older on purpose, not just with time. Right at the first, won’t always be able to do it like that. On account of it’s hard, right then, to want anything different from the demon.”

“Then you’ll know,” Dawn said. “And not touch the mark except when you’ve stopped and left the food alive.”

“That’s fair. I can promise that. And I do. Not mad at you, setting conditions and limits. Spike, he says I don’t know what’s safe for you, and I expect he’s right. Trouble is, you don’t know that any better than I do, seems like. Bein’ safe is not the whole thing, here. You ain’t scared enough, and I can’t really be scared for you. That’s not what I’m feeling when we’re together…. Spike, he has the soul to get after him, warn him off. And the Slayer to flatten him if it doesn’t. I ain’t got that and sure don’t want it, as much nuisance as it seems to be for him. And you’re not the Slayer. If you were, you wouldn’t be you, and we’d have to be fighting all the time to settle the dominance and that’s not something I want. Not always looking out to fight or, or anything—”

His abrupt verbal stumble gave her the word he’d tripped over: "fuck."

“You can say it,” Dawn told him with a small grin. “It’s Spike’s favorite word.”

“Yeah, then, take it as read. Spike has a foul mouth on him. I don’t talk like that in front of a lady. Anyway, I’m not looking to do that with everybody that chances to cross my path. I’d say I’m pretty easy-going, compared to most of the vamps I’ve met. So what he does, they do—him and the Slayer—to get along is not gonna work for us. Have to find out some different way….”

Dawn told him proudly, “You’re of the blood and the Order of Aurelius. They control their demons.”

“They do? Spike never taught me that. Whole lot there hasn’t been time yet for him to teach me. Seen a lot of fledges couldn’t shed game face. Nothing there but the demon, and it dumb as a box of rocks…. Wasn’t like that for me. Not ever, not even at the first, when I came to myself, all confused, not knowing nothing of what I was or why everything was different, all so different…. I expect it’s true, if he says so. Because he’s of that blood himself, so he’d know. Sorry to be on the outs with
him. Wish I could learn more. But not for awhile—not until I’ve made him back off and let us alone.”

His eyes had shaded toward amber, that always made Dawn think of a lion’s eyes. His game face was like that too: not deformed or ugly but fierce, severe, intense. Like the final form of everything he was made manifest. Trueface, some vamps called it, whereas humans preferred to see only the human aspect and regard that as normal.

Dawn knew Mike was both. Had both within him and showed whichever circumstances and his own impulses called forth. Not an either/or but a continuum. A matter of degree. Aurelian vamps were like that—not easily divisible into human and demon except by an unrelenting effort of will, as Angel had done. Not Spike, though. He integrated his monster and refused either to be defined by it or deny it. Over time, Michael would too. Dawn believed that.

“Could go to Angel, maybe,” Mike remarked, the yellow fading in his eyes as his mouth pulled into a wry smile. “My sire. To learn more, not just keep blundering ahead any old how…. But I expect I’d have to get all submitted again before he’d take me on, and once is enough for that. Sort of like curing a headache by getting a lobotomy, taking a Mixmaster to your brain. Price is a bit steep.”

“Mixmaster?”

Mike smiled broadly, happily. “Say now: I’m old enough, some of the things I know, you don’t. That tickles me. Imagine, after a hundred years.”

“Mixmaster?”

“Oh, a kind of a blender. Eggbeater, as near as makes no never mind. So for awhile, I’ll get by on what you can teach me,” Mike proposed. “You game for that?”

“Can I assign homework and stuff?”

“Depends on the homework. But yeah, sure. Try it, anyways. Sometime. But not now. Left the bike down the way. Come on: want to show you something.”

Doing the little accustomed dance step whereby she took the inside and Mike the road side of the pavement, likely so she wouldn’t get splashed by buggies, Dawn warned, “Have to be home by ten or I’ll get grounded. It’s a school night.”

“Well, I dunno if I can judge time quite that precise—”

“I thought of that,” Dawn blurted, “and I got something for you.” They stopped while she dug it out of her other pocket and presented it: a gold-cased stem-winder pocket watch. While Mike turned and admired it in his hand, then held it to his ear, Dawn warned, “Three things. You have to remember to wind it every night, last thing before you go to sleep. And Willow put a spell on it so that as long as it’s running, it will keep good time. But for the spell to work, you have to keep it on you 24/7—even while you’re sleeping. And the third thing is, you can’t get dust into the works. So don’t open the back.”

“Now, that’s real fine. Can’t remember when anybody gave me a present as fine as that. Did you listen to it? Got a real nice sound, working away in there, marking out the time.” Mike cupped it to her ear to let her hear the tiny plinks as the delicate wheels turned at their different speeds in perfect balance and precision.
Dawn knew what it looked like inside: she’d watched while Willow worked on it, preparing and then inserting the shaped, be-spelled wafer into the back of the case. Which Mike wasn’t to be allowed to open. Or to read the words there, engraved in three concentric arcs of curly letters: *To William, upon his 12th birthday. Be industrious in righteousness. From Papa.*

Spike had donated it without comment. And neither Dawn nor Willow had asked about it, although Willow had given him a look.

It would have been hard to get a guy to wear a dinky little locket. A watch was much better, as long as there was room to insert the charm. And it wasn’t entirely lies, what she’d told Mike: you *did* have to remember to wind it.

“That last, he said over his shoulder as he mounted the bike. Dawn settled behind and held on tight, trying to imagine the wondrous creatures he described. She had no trouble believing that some monsters were beautiful.

**********

Friday morning, Spike reluctantly sought out Willow after Buffy had left for work and Dawn for school. He found her in the kitchen, dawdling over the last of her breakfast. Waking up, for Willow, was an unpleasant chore that generally took a couple of hours. Night owl, by inclination.

He didn’t have fixing a cup of blood to putter around with anymore so he stole one of her slices of marmalade-slathered toast and bit off the corner. She wasn’t awake enough to do more than glare briefly and pull a face that yielded to a yawn.

“There’s something,” Spike began, “has to be decided. Dawn, she thinks I should tell you about it, ask what you think. Before that meeting, tonight. Even though what you decide may well depend on what goes on there. Give you time to mull it over, like.”

Willow stood up from her chair to drop more bread in the toaster. Depressing the lever, she prompted, “Noun, Spike.”

“Getting to that. It’s about Kennedy, mostly. Seems like you been expecting her to go on home. Same as the rest of the Potentials. Is that because you figure she wants to go, or ought to go, or because you want her to?”

Willow dropped back into her chair, both eyebrows high and surprised and her eyes more alert and not altogether friendly. “How is this your business?”
“I’ll explain, if there’s need. First, though, I need to know what your take really is about her leaving.”

Willow put off saying anything more until the toast had popped and she’d applied marmalade with precise strokes of the knife. Slicing the piece diagonally, she gave the plate a little push toward him. He took half with a nod of thanks.

“The Potentials,” Willow said, “didn’t come for our benefit. To be fighters, although that’s how it ended up. Mostly because of you. They came so we could do our best to protect them. Because Bringers were methodically slaughtering them and their Watchers. It was for their benefit, not ours. Now that the First has been forced away, there are no more Bringers. No more threat to the Potentials. The reason for their being here is gone. They don’t need our protection anymore. They can go back to their own lives, just as if none of this had happened.”

“Can. But what if they don’t want to?”

Willow twitched a little grin at him. “Ken’s been whining to you too, huh?”

“Something like. But I figure it’s your call. Don’t much care, myself, if she likes it or not. She’s used to getting her own way. She’s a brat, and proud of it. And except that sometimes it annoys the hell out of me, I don’t really fault her for that. What she wants, she goes after, makes no apologies to anybody for it. In her place, I’d do the same. An’ have done.”

“Brat,” Willow accused, still smiling.

“I expect. Not the worst I been called by a long chalk. Like they say, ‘Takes one to know one.’”

Willow left the high chair to lean out the doorway—checking the hall and the stairs. Then she came back and resumed her seat, poking at her tea with a spoon. Spike, who’d been leaning on the kitchen island, took a seat opposite. Willow said quietly, “When I needed somebody, when I was scared or depressed, she was there. All chirpy and confident. Cheering me up. Encouraging me. Courting me. Makes you feel kind of special, you know?”

Spike wet a finger to dab up toast crumbs. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“Yeah,” Willow said gently. “But the thing is…. The thing is, she’s not Tara. She’s nothing at all like Tara. Ken’s like this puppy, all bouncing around, wanting to go for walkies every ten minutes. Tara, she was quiet. Peaceful. You know.”

“Fine lady, Tara. I’d never say different.”

“And you had your eye on her too, and you better not claim otherwise!”

“Don’t twinkle at me, Red. Makes me nervous. Whatever gave you that idea--because one time I punched her in the nose, gave myself a fucking headache?”

“You were kind to her. Nobody could help wanting to be kind to her. I messed it up--” (Willow shrugged.) “--but that’s me, you know? Can’t resist messing up any good thing, to prove to myself it’s still me, Willow Rosenberg, the gigantic insensitive klutz.”

“Anytime you want me to punch you in the nose, set you straight, you just ask and I’ll oblige. Save
you the trouble of beating up on yourself. No charge.”

Willow looked up, and Spike found they were easy with one another in a way they hadn’t been before. *Bit was right,* he thought. *It was right to come to Willow direct about this, not try to go around her.*

“You’re what,” Willow reflected, “about a gazillion years older than Buffy?”

Spike hitched a shoulder. “Something short of that. Half a gazillion, maybe.”

“But you think about the same. React pretty much the same. It shows. There’s a…harmony in the two of you, together. Even when you’re bickering. Even outright fighting, and I know you still do that.”

“Have to keep the girl in her place,” Spike explained, as if he meant it.

“And what’s her place?” Willow challenged skeptically.

“Generally on top. Though that varies.”

He got a blush out of the witch with that one.

“Not gonna touch that on a dare,” she declared primly, and Spike chuckled. “Me,” said Willow, “I’m not kind. Kinda ruthless, actually. Goes with being a control freak, which I am…. And Ken, she wants to control me. Like she’s always controlled everything else in her life. On strange ground, under threat, she needed more than ever to feel in control. So she picked me. And maybe that was what I needed then. Somebody to boss me around, take the responsibility for what we did. Take the initiative, pardon the word. Maybe in time she’ll have bounced around, *been* bounced around, enough to temper her arrogance a little. Like mine has been. Absolutely chock full of humility here. Something I’m really proud of.”

They traded a grin at her arrogant humility. She poked at her tea some more.

“Lost the noun here myself,” she commented. “I’m only a couple of years older than Ken. But it feels like a gazillion. She makes me feel old, Spike, and worn out, and tired. I give in because so many things don’t feel worth expending all that energy to argue about. She can nag, and push, and encourage. But she can’t slap me down when I need to be set back on my heels, stopped before I go completely overboard with something. Which has been known to happen. And…there’s no magic,” Willow added, very softly and sadly.

“Guess that would be important. To a witch,” Spike allowed, bidding goodbye in his mind to the imagined Harley. “All right, I think I got enough of an idea to know how to play this now.”

“Play what?”

“Doesn’t matter, ’cause it’s not gonna happen. Some details to be worked out, but that’s nothing to do with you and none of your concern. And the next time you think up something pushy and private you want to know about from me, don’t bother because I still won’t tell you.”

Willow’s gamine face lifted, watching him slide off the high chair to standing. “Oh, I don’t know about that. We wiccas have our ways.”
“An’ so do vamps, so you watch out.”

“Michael,” she said, still watching him. “What’s going on there?”

Spike put both hands flat on the island’s countertop, leaning straight-armed, head bent. “Hell if I know. Bit’s promised to talk to Buffy about it. Maybe Buffy will know how to sort it. All I know is judiciously applied force, and half the time, that’s the wrong thing…. Gonna have a try at making him back off some, ease the pressure off Bit. Who’s mostly levelheaded, but she’s wafting out this ‘come hither,’ and Michael, he’s…. Well, it’s hard to say what they’re doing. Tisn’t sex, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Sex, that’s easier to understand.” Willow agreed. “The grown-ups have all the appropriate ‘Eeks’ and ‘Quit that’s’ pre-loaded and ready. But somehow I didn’t think our little Ms. underage OOh, My Eyes! would be one to rush into that sort of thing…. I don’t imagine puberty hits quite the same way for vamps or for dimensional keys…. That’s still part of her, isn’t it.”

“Yeah. After a fashion.”

“And the watch, and the lockets. What are you trying to keep out, Spike?”

“Whatever wants to come in,” Spike responded grimly. “A precaution. Don’t like having my head messed with. Believe I’ve told you that, a time or two.”

“And Dawn? And Michael?”

“A precaution.”

Willow took up her cup, remarking, “If I had better information, maybe I could be better help.”

“If this don’t work, trust me: you’ll hear about it. A whole lot more than you’ll want. But let it be, for now. See if this is enough.”

“Just one thing. It’s not still the First, singing you little interdimensional ditties?”

“Hell, no. That’s done. Bit’s blood spell put paid to that.”

“But something,” Willow persisted.


“Go to hell,” said Willow amiably.

“Many thanks, I’m on my way.”

**********

Buffy greeted Giles with a long hug and a longer smile-and-stare, then took his hand and led him through to the kitchen and set about fixing him some tea. In a ceramic teapot. No teabags, even. With a tea infuser shaped like a fat acorn that dangled into the pot. She pointed each of these appurtenances out to him proudly.
Giles assured her he was suitably impressed. “I wasn’t aware it was possible to buy a tea infuser in Sunnydale,” he remarked, settling a hip on one of the high chairs by the island.

“It isn’t. We’ve discovered the glories of buying stuff on the internet. Spike knew what it was called and what it should look like, and Willow located it. Three days later, it was in the mailbox. All for you!”

“Well, I hope it wasn’t too much trouble. I won’t be staying long this time, Buffy.”

“Oh, I figured,” Buffy said much more lightly than she felt. The water in the saucepan was bubbling, so she carefully poured it into the teapot. Trying to remember all the parts of the ritual, she popped on the lid and then finished with the little jacket, or whatever it was called: yellow, with small white daisies. “You’ll have all Watchery things to do now. Have you gotten yourself reinstated yet?”

Giles fiddled with his tie. “Well, no need to go into all of that in any detail now. Until the others arrive. But in point of fact, that’s in progress. The census of surviving watchers is nearly complete. Enough so for some pro tem appointments to be made. I’ve been offered the position of Chief of the Research Division, inasmuch as I’ve logged more field duty than anyone else in at least a century. My Slayer has survived.” He beamed, and Buffy resisted the impulse to say something aw-shucks-ish. It hadn’t been easy, and they both knew it. “Strictly on a temporary basis,” Giles went on, “until the new council can be elected. Then they will, of course, make their own appointments. But at that point, I may have some small say in the matter. With proper preparation.”

“Twisting a few arms, hinting at a few closeted skeletons,” Buffy elaborated, wagging a hand, eyes lifted to the ceiling.

“A bit of that, yes. Which has to be done on site and in person. So after matters here have been all sorted satisfactorily—”

“Hullo, Rupert,” Spike interjected, passing through from the back porch to the hallway. “Like the cozy? Tried to find one that said ‘Mum’ on it for you, but the place was all out of ‘em.”

“Yes, very nice…..” said Giles faintly to Spike’s departing back. Then he gazed at the teapot as though it’d startled him with an off-color remark. “Well, Spike seems…frighteningly normal, under the circumstances. For someone who by rights should have been burnt to a crisp. How have things been going?”

“How long does it have to sit in there?” Buffy poked the jacket-thing, the cozy.

“A bit longer. Don’t be so American.”

Buffy eloquently stuck out her tongue, then responded to Giles’ question, frowning slightly. “Holding pattern, mostly, I guess. Picking up pieces here and there. Going with the habit, habits are our friends. Spike’s bored silly, of course, and blew up at his pal Mike a couple days back, got drunk, killed a dragon—”

“A dragon?”

“Sh’narth Wyrm,” Buffy admitted, shrugging, “it said in the book, so that’s what I wrote in the patrol log. But where’s the drama in killing a worm? Now, if you say dragon, it’s like you said shark, you know?”
“Buffy, there have been no authenticated dragon sightings since the thirteenth century. Your records will be far less useful if you knowingly fabricate.”

“I said I wrote in the log what Spike said it was. And what was in the book,” Buffy added quickly.

“Ah. So Spike is consenting to contribute. Admit his experience extends beyond footie on the telly. Perhaps, with due persuasion, he’ll admit to his education, as well.”

“His…education?”

“Buffy, the man reads Attic Greek and is fluent in a number of demon languages we lack adequate dictionaries-- What?”

Buffy beamed. “You said man.”

“Well, I probably did, but vampire does not slide easily into a conversation. Keeping to the point.”

Buffy set her elbows on the island and set her chin on the lifted prop of her folded hands. “And just what is the point, Giles? Let me tell you: you’re gonna try to recruit Spike. As a Watcher.”

“Not exactly recruit, as such, no. But I haven’t forgotten your Boogey Man Credo. All the ridiculous, inaccurate, preposterous so-called information that’s accumulated concerning vampires. For centuries. There’s a rare opportunity, this once in many lifetimes, to go through that rubbish and fix it! And a certain William London--he’s never divulged his original surname, but he certainly has resided in London, and it will do--would be a splendid resource. As a consultant. Papers, a passport, could all be arranged.”

“You’re not gonna get him, Giles. Not if it means taking him away.”

“Most of it could be done remotely. By e-mail. Willow has already become involved in the archiving effort, to a degree. Some of the rarer volumes, however, haven’t yet been--what’s the word?--input? scanned? Processed, in any case. They’re too fragile to entrust to transport. There would occasionally be times--”

“Not gonna happen. Unless you get them teleported--”

“Unthinkable. Some of these volumes are magical in their own right, and subjecting them to--”

Passing through in the other direction, an unlit cigarette already in hand, Spike admonished, “Now, now, children, play nice,” and was gone again onto the porch.

Buffy and Giles blinked at each other for a moment. Then Buffy poked at the daisy-spotted cozy, asking, “D’you think it’s ready yet?”

“Oh, I suppose.” Removing the cozy, Giles poured out a cup and managed to erase his vexed frown. “Might there be sugar? Milk?”

Buffy provided the sugar bowl and yanked the milk jug out of the refrigerator, setting both within easy reach. Giles fussed with his tea.

Buffy said, “And that’s not gonna work unless you can talk him into glasses. Or contacts.” At Giles’
inquiring glance, Buffy explained, “Farsighted. According to Dawn. Lots of teeny print is apt to be a whole lot less than appealing. Maybe once he could have been all super student, for all I know. Now, he really likes to kill things. It’s gonna be a hard sell, Giles.”

“I am not deterred. Certain…inducements will be presented…. Is that Anya?”

“’Fraid so,” Buffy admitted, having identified the same rapid-fire, irritating voice from the front hallway that had caught Giles’ attention. “Be prepared for rough water: Xander has a new girlfriend.”

Giles sipped tea. “Oh really? Has Spike passed on her?”

“Not yet. And I don’t think Anya knows. So we’ll see if we can get through the meeting without dropping that bomb. I’m all in favor of mayhem, but keep it outdoors, that’s what I always say.”

As Giles picked up his teacup and saucer, and Buffy finished pouring milk into a small pitcher, Spike leaned in at the back door, asking, “That Anya? An’ she doesn’t know? That’ll be interesting, if any of us survive. And forget about it, Watcher: not gonna read your bleeding books for you. Got better things to do with my unlife. And no fucking glasses, neither.”

“We shall see,” Giles responded with ominous composure, carrying his balanced saucer, following Buffy into the hall.

Willow was setting up a tray-table for Giles to put his teacup on. When the legs were locked, Buffy set the sugar and small milk pitcher there. Spike deposited the teapot, cozy again in place.

He’d done that all by himself, without being told or asked. Just saw it needed doing and did it. No fuss, no bother: like putting away groceries. Buffy was really pleased with him.

She backed up against the door arch, and Spike joined her there, sliding his arm around behind her, hand on her hip. She threaded her fingers through his, to make a fist together. His hand didn’t open easily until he noticed what she was doing and let her: more wound up and intent than he looked.

Before she could say anything, he asked, “Nervous, pet?”

“Well, Xander. And Anya.”

“Yeah, could be bloody,” he responded appreciatively.

“It isn’t funny,” she scolded.

“As you say.”

Buffy whispered, “Spike, what’s Attic Greek?”

“Opposite of basement Greek, pet,” Spike responded absently. “Of no use or interest to anybody.” His head snapped around. “And on that cue of no interest, here’s Floppy Boy himself.”

Elbowing open the front door, clutching snacks, Xander waved fingers. “Hi, everybody.”

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It was plain to Spike: the Watcher had been gotten to. And Buffy not as offish about the initial hints
as Spike thought she should have been. Willow…he didn’t think so. She protected herself from
influences pretty well as a routine thing. Maybe she’d taken a clue and manufactured one of those
charms for herself when he’d come asking for one each for himself and Bit. Canny bird, Willow.

Anya…he’d have to watch and see. She’d dealt with the Powers enough to be highly uneasy at the
prospect of doing so ever again, he knew that. Vengeance demon, after all, even if not at the
moment. And past a thousand years old. Knew a lot, played the angles, always sharp-eyed after her
own interest. Was his friend, and all, but he didn’t know how she’d jump.

And Harris he considered a pure utter fool. Couldn’t imagine the Powers bothering about such a
brainless yob one way or the other.

Wouldn’t have imagined them taking any notice of a vamp, neither, except for Angel. Set himself up
for that, Angel had: put on the collar and leash as meek as you please, seemed like. Champion, and
all. Fucking spineless git.

And then there’d been the dreams. Clearer, more specific as they went on. Visions, almost. Mostly, it
seemed, Angel had somebody else for that. He just took care of the wetwork, like Michael would
have said. Strong-arm bashing about. Somebody else took care of the brain stuff. Not that Angel
wasn’t a planner. But a bit of casual asking around had gathered Spike the information that it
basically took a demon to stand up to the visions. Filthy incapacitating headaches, otherwise. Had
come close to killing that Cordelia, whom Spike vaguely remembered as a high-nosed bitch and a
Scooby, sort of, upon a time. With Angel now. Got herself made part demon, the tale went, to
endure the brain burn. Idly, Spike wondered what part.

Not going about it that way with him, it seemed. He’d lived years with the chip, knew all about
brain-blasting headaches that could put you down for days at a time. Guessed Lady Gates figured he
could manage it all right, all on his own, if the pressure was cast as dreams. Sort of a compliment, he
supposed, but one he’d sooner do without, thanks. Didn’t like waking up, all of a sudden, with a
compulsive image in his head, one sort or another. Couldn’t think straight until he’d puzzled it out,
made some kind of sense of it.

Like the amulet.

Like the Hellmouth.

All well and good—once. But that was done now. And it wasn’t something he figured to put up with
as a regular thing. Buffy, she could point him at something and he’d take it down. That was part of
their arrangement. Whatever he took out, she didn’t have to. Besides, he mostly liked doing it.

Buffy. Nobody or nothing else entitled to use him like a weapon to their hand.

Let Buffy be a Champion. Or maybe she already was. Slayer, and all. And it was more the
circumstances, these days, that presented as a Mission to her, rather than anything the fucking
Council of Watchers pointed her at. CoW didn’t count for much, before, with her and counted for
nothing now. It was hers to choose. She’d damn well earned that right, all she’d been through, died
twice even. And whatever she chose, Spike would second her. No matter what it was. Assuming she
had a use for him. Assuming she wouldn’t be talked or pressured into giving him away.

Wouldn’t put up with that. Not for a second.
Watcher had been nattering on about all the plans for putting the council back together, in which Spike had no least interest whatever. So when Rupert paused to pour himself some more tea, Spike figured it was a good time to put in, “So when are they gonna start paying the Slayer?”

Dead and utter silence, everybody staring at him, sitting off in the big corner chair that let him watch everybody at once.

“Well,” said Rupert uncomfortably, “right now, there’s considerable damage to be made good. Infrastructure to be--”

“Hell with your infrastructure, Rupert. Lady there is no child. Her mum is dead and her dad’s a rotter who’s seven years behind on the child support an’ didn’t even show up for Joyce’s funeral. Or Buffy’s, come to that. She works all day and then fixes dinner for her sis and after that goes on patrol, and then the next day the same. She needs dosh, money, to live. Have you never noticed? So when’s that gonna become somebody’s priority, besides all the neat new computer setups, the new council building with its same old rotten paneled walls all eaten up with woodworm?”

Rupert took off his glasses. “Spike, when were you ever in council headquarters?”

“Been to a lot of places you lot don’t know nothing about. I hear you blathering on about furniture, and I want to know when do you get to the real stuff? The things that keep a Slayer alive, give her choices, not just burdens and duties?”

“Spike--” Buffy said, lifting a hand, like she wanted him to shut up.

Too bad what she wanted. He was talking about what she needed.

Rupert put his glasses back on and met Spike’s eyes directly. “I first requested a stipend for Buffy on her eighteenth birthday. I have applied each year since, and sometimes more than once. Since Buffy rejected the council’s stipulations—their control, not to put too fine a point on it—the matter has become even more problematical and difficult. And since I was dismissed, I’ve had to rely on intermediaries. And I believe you know at least something of what this last year has been. The council, such as it is, has had to absorb the cost of a great…many funerals.” The Watcher stopped and took a breath. “I believe it’s the matter of precedent that’s the chief sticking point. Not the money itself. The council has traditionally viewed the Slayer as a volunteer with a holy--”

Spike shot back, “The council has viewed the Slayer as a child, and a tool, and their chattel. And if you’re gonna try to remake the council, that’s the first thing that has to change.”

“Well. I didn’t mean to bring this up until later, but the council has at least noticed you, Spike. At my urging, I may add. Beginning tomorrow, or the first day I can get the papers filed, Sunnydale has a new institution. A very modest one. It’s a two-room research facility at the corner of Wilkins and Main. Second floor. Webster Hematological Research, Inc. Its mandate is to investigate some aspects of the transmission of blood-borne pathogens. It has two employees: one Holden Webster, whose death has never been reported or recorded, and yourself. To this facility, each morning and evening, will be delivered by arrangement units of freshly-drawn whole human blood, unrefrigerated and without additives. These units will then be conveyed, by whoever is currently impersonating our Mr. Webster, to whatever place you designate. At council expense. A small stipend goes with it. Xander, I thought perhaps you might be Mr. Webster until more something more formal can be arranged.”

An even more rousing silence greeted that announcement. Hand at mouth, Xander just gaped.
Narrow-eyed and thoroughly surprised, Spike leaned back in the chair. “And in return for this, I do what?”

“Nothing, Spike. Nothing at all. You’ve already done it. You are a remarkable creature: the only vampire known in council records to have voluntarily acquired a soul. The only vampire known to have closed a Hellmouth—an undertaking almost certainly suicidal. And one which you nevertheless miraculously survived. You are owed a considerable debt, of which this is only the least token. To honorably free you from…the shackles of predation. A payment in kind, even: life for life. Blood for blood.”

Spike was up out of the chair and shouting. “Are you insane? Have you gone totally around the fucking bend? Pay me off for the soul? Not hardly! Didn’t do it for the fucking watchers! Pay me off for closing the Hellmouth? I opened the damn seal, that’s all. And so I saw it got shut. That was mine to see to, an’ I did it. And not for the Watchers! Not for anybody here save one. Two. My own fucking choice. Mine! And somebody—”

First carefully setting the table aside, Rupert rose too. “Spike, you are a bloody bastard first, last, and always. Now shut the hell up and say ‘Thank you,’ you incredible lout!”

“—figures if you do this, pay off a damn vampire in blood, your council has these few old books they can’t make out, this date they can’t confirm, this spell they want checked out against five accounts that all disagree with each other, no problem because you got this obliging tame vamp on retainer or some such, they can have trot off and fix it for them?”

“Well, it was expected that certain courtesies—”

“The hell with courtesies, Watcher. Scrap the fucking clinic, the meager stipend, the little delivery van or ambulance sneaking out of some hospital at dawn. Give her the dosh.” Spike’s arm stabbed out at Buffy. “Don’t want it, never asked for it, and won’t take it. You are out of your bleeding librarian Watcher skull even to imagine such a thing! Much less imagine I’d sign on for it, when you won’t pay your Slayer a single sodding quid. She’s died for you. Twice! Keep your goddam collar and leash because I won’t have ‘em! Never!”

Without noticing, Spike had gone to game face and advanced enough to make the Watcher retreat as far as he could without falling back onto the couch. Then Buffy was between, her hands on Spike’s shoulders, her frowning face an obstruction he leaned aside to see past, leveling a pointing finger at the Watcher, declaring, “And another thing: nobody but a fatuous git would believe the council to be benevolent toward yours truly, much less—”

“Shutting up, Watcher.” Anya put in, pert and brisk. “So far, it commits you to nothing and makes it much less likely Buffy will have to stake you. In the event you inadvertently kill your dinner.”

Swinging around, Spike snapped at her, “Oh, now you’re in it too, are you? What does he mean, Xander? He said ‘stepping out.’ Does that mean you’re getting orgasms from somebody else? The fact that we’re currently unengaged doesn’t mean—"
Buffy said, “Oh, boy. That’s done it. Thanks a lot, Spike.” She gave him a shove.

Pivoting, Spike saw not a single friendly or sympathetic face. Everybody was shouting at everybody else except Giles, who was protecting the teapot. Anya had used her leverage to drag Xander down crookedly, on one knee and leaning on her lap, an arm upraised to fend off her attempts to smack him about the head. Buffy was trying to drag them apart, ignoring Spike completely.

And Spike was still in a towering fury with no acceptable target anywhere within reach. “All right, then!” he declared to nobody in particular. “You lot sort it out amongst you, then, and let me know what keeper I’ve been assigned to.”

Barging into the hall, he snatched open the front door, intending to fling a final line over his shoulder, barely noticing the small redheaded man standing outside with a hand raised to knock.

“Hi,” said the man, carefully lowering the fist as Spike swung and glared at him. “If it’s a bad time--”

Spike slammed past, giving the guy a shoulder in the process. No satisfying impact: the guy had faded back and avoided most of it.

“--I could come back….”

From inside, Willow’s voice exclaimed, “Oz!”
Greeted enthusiastically by everyone, settled in the big chair Spike had left so emphatically vacant, and provided with cookies and hastily made coffee, Oz blinked at them all happily.

“OK,” Buffy decreed, “meeting is officially adjourned, to be reconvened at a later date. So, Oz: you know all the obvious questions--spill.”

Oz held up a finger, giving notice that he was still occupied with chewing.

He looked fine, Buffy thought. A little more obvious muscle on him, visible in his shoulders and arms. Face heavier, too: less pixie, more wolf. Jaw more pronounced, more projecting, russet eyebrows thicker. Same short rough-cut duck-fluff dark auburn hair that seemed to call out to be combed flat with fingers. (Buffy shot a glance at Willow, but after the initial hopping group hug, Willow had resettled herself in the wood occasional chair, all smiling, cool, and attentive in the presence of the boyfriend-left-behind.) It was easier than it used to be to see, not a small man, but a very large and substantial werewolf in its human aspect.

“Music is fine,” Oz reported finally. “Did some club gigs in Seattle, Tacoma but then the band split. Guys wanted to do a demo. I didn’t. Getting into mandolin now.” His fingers demonstrated quick banjo-like plucking. “Whole new set of calluses.” His spread hands lifted to display the thick, toughened pad on each of his fingers. “Been mostly doing RenFaires, folk art festivals, Miss Fall Fruit celebrations, Antique Extravaganzas. Open air, healthy. Less smoke.” He threw a flashing glance at the front door. “Spike seemed fairly hot there. Think he’ll be back soon?”

Buffy caught something non-casual in his tone. “Why?”

“Well, it’s actually him I came to see. Looked first at his crypt, but there was a whole crowd of vamps there. They seemed pretty occupied and not too sociable. Spike not in attendance. I came on to Scooby Central. But he was on his way out.”

*Till after we’ve talked with Giles.* Spike’s remark popped into Buffy’s head, and she was suddenly sure that in keeping with only the letter and not the spirit of their compromise, furious Spike was making a bee-line for Restfield Cemetery in search of some unrestrained mayhem. Alone, as he’d wanted. With a twenty minute lead.

Begging Oz’s pardon with a glance, Buffy leaned past to grab the handset of the standard phone on the weapons chest and punched in numbers. No joy: as usual, Spike either had his cell turned off or, more likely, hadn’t taken it with him.

She dumped the whole phone on the floor and grabbed the keys to the SUV to clear and lift the lid of the chest. She started to grab a stake out of the bag, then changed her mind and took the whole bag.

Everybody jumped as the lid crashed shut.

“I’m sorry,” Buffy said to Oz. “I gotta go. Everybody, take care of Oz and Giles, all right?”

She headed for the door.

Oz offered alertly, “Want company?” and Giles asked, “Buffy, what’s wrong?”
Buffy just shook her head and kept going. No time to sort things out, explain, or plan. Twenty minute lead: it could be over already.

At best, Buffy was an erratic driver but not normally a reckless one. Tonight, she ran yellow lights, red lights, and stop signs, and bullied the sparse traffic she met out of her way with the SUV’s careening bulk and blaring horn. She saw three pedestrians jogging across the street ahead of her. Three tall girls, arguing and gesturing. Buffy slammed on the brakes and looked down into the startled faces of Amanda, Rona, and Kennedy.

“Get in.”

They did, in haste. Finding the bag of stakes, Kennedy started distributing them as the SUV jerked back into motion and Amanda started explaining anxiously, “We didn’t want to bother you, I’m sure we’ll find her all right.”

With difficulty, Buffy changed mental gears. “Find who.”

“Kim,” said Kennedy.

“It’s all my fault,” wailed Rona, in back, and burst into sobs.


“‘Manda doesn’t know it all,” said Kennedy, leaning forward between the seats. “Spike came and told me that something I’d hoped for hadn’t worked out. I went and told Kim and Rona, and Rona took off in a flaming snit.”

“My fault!”

“Shut up, Rona,” Kennedy snapped. “When she wasn’t back by supper time, we got worried went looking for her. There was going to be a Scooby council meeting, so we didn’t want to bother Spike about it. Or you, of course. Then I got the bright idea to call ‘Manda, to cover more ground. I named the mark, and Kim went on ahead, to meet at the mark in ten minutes. Come to find out, Rona had just gotten there. To Amanda’s, I mean. She’d been hanging at the mall all day, and ‘Manda lives by there. I told them to stay put and went to the mark to tell Kim. She wasn’t there. I waited half an hour. Still no Kim. So I went back to the pay phone and called ‘Manda again, they came, and we’ve all been looking.”

“Where was the mark?” Buffy demanded.

“Corner of Mulberry and Lucas, at the bus stop.”

Buffy shut her eyes for a second, then opened them in time to swerve and miss a wandering Golden Retriever. Mulberry Avenue, that she was driving down, bounded the south side of Restfield Cemetery. And cruising vamps just loved to find people waiting at bus stops.

Usually Buffy would have used one of the many trees with overhanging branches to get over the cemetery wall. But Oz’s report of seeing a bunch of vamps in the vicinity of Spike’s old crypt made her reluctant to leave behind whatever advantage the SUV’s tank-like weight, power, and headlights might grant. Pulling up to the next gate, she broke the chain with a tire iron. Amanda pulled the gate open, then shut it when the SUV was through and climbed back in.
Buffy slowed the vehicle to a crawl, scanning the familiar cemetery-scape for motion. She didn’t know where the two new vamp nests were located, but the most likely places were to the north, where most of the big mausoleums were.

The road was forced into a curve by the girth of an enormous oak. As the headlights swung around, illuminating the various headstones, monuments, and stands of assorted bushes and widely spaced trees, the light stopped on a low grassy mound above which was visible a wall topped with a two-tiered molding: the back of Spike’s crypt, the rear of which was built into the earth.

Buffy stopped and set the hand brake, checking the area. She couldn’t lock the SUV without turning off the engine. Nothing moving. She turned the key but left the headlights on. They all slipped out, Buffy retaining the tire iron. She signaled the SUV to lock itself and made sure the keys were securely stowed, then led off. The three SITs moved into practiced formation to either side and behind her, and Buffy couldn’t help but contrast that experienced discipline with their haphazard attempt to locate Rona.

Why they’d picked the vicinity of a known dangerous graveyard to look for her was an obvious question. For later. Now they moved silently, circling the mound, spread at the right distance to notice any threat within striking distance but not far enough to be easily separated, cut off.

Still nothing. They’d come far enough that Buffy could see that the crypt had been broken into: the heavy oak door had been broken from its top hinge and hung crooked, its weight straining the lower hinge. The interior was pitch black. When she advanced to the first of the three downward steps, Buffy made out a slightly lighter spot: the back of Spike’s head. He was sitting on the floor at the foot of the sarcophagus.

“Spike?”

No reaction.

The last time Buffy had been here, there’d been a candle set on the sarcophagus. She went down the steps and moved her hand slowly over the flat, chest-high surface. Locating the candle, she grasped it before it fell over, then realized she had no matches or lighter. She was about to ask Spike for his when the smell, already subliminally noticed, hit her: blood. Fresh. Lots of it. She passed the candle blindly backward, hoping one of the SITs would have a way to light it, and dropped onto her knees behind Spike, grabbing him in a tight hug.

“Are you OK?”

No answer, and she started patting at his chest to find any wet patches. Then he said hoarsely, “Fine,” in about the least fine tone she could imagine.

A point of candle light bloomed and steadied from behind. Buffy found she was looking over Spike’s shoulder at Kim’s corpse. The girl’s throat had been torn out. There was blood all over her chest and shoulders. The crypt floor near her head was black with it.

Rona screeched and somebody, probably Amanda, scuffed outside and began to heave noisily.

“I’ll see to her,” Spike said in that same emotionless voice.

“We have to take her home,” Buffy said, starting to rise.
“No!” Spinning around, Spike knocked her off balance and backward. He was poised on fingertips, staring at her with fierce, deranged blue eyes. Guarding the corpse. “I’ll have to see to her.”

Buffy clapped a hand to her lips, realizing he thought Kim might have been turned.

“Can’t you tell?” she asked shakily.

His eyes finally drifted away, and he turned back and settled as he’d been before. “No.”

“How long?”

“A day. Two. Depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“On who turned her. She’s just dead now. Can’t tell nothing from that.”

Kim’s head was nearly severed from her body. Not much would be needed to finish it and end the possibility now. But as Buffy started to get up, Spike said, quietly this time, “No. Let the child be. I’ll stay with her. If she rises… I’ll stay with her. You get the children home. Or wherever they’re to go. You see to that, Buffy. I’ll see to this.”

If there was one thing Buffy was certain of, it was that she wasn’t going to leave him alone with a corpse stinking of blood in a wide-open crypt in a cemetery where at least a dozen vampires laired. Standing, Buffy got out the key bundle and exchanged it for the pillar candle Kennedy was holding. She told the girl, “Take Amanda home. Then you and Rona go back to Casa Summers. Tell them what’s happened. See that Rona gets to sleep. Willow can do that. Then tell Willow I need her here in the morning for a heavy-duty protection spell. Can you do that?”

Big-eyed and swallowing convulsively, Kennedy nodded and got sobbing Rona turned around and out the broken door.

Buffy paid no more attention but went immediately back to Spike, settling behind him, her back against the sarcophagus. She placed the candle arm’s reach away, on the floor. She tried out, in her mind, various things she might do or say and ended up discarding them all. She just waited. Until her back began to ache and her butt was numb from the cold stone. When Spike could break out of the rigidity of his grieving, he’d notice that she was there. Of course, he knew now on some level. But in his mind, he was alone with the dead SIT, and Buffy didn’t try to intrude on that. She’d ceded responsibility for the SITs to him. She understood that they were his still. All of them. In death as in life.

After several hours, he said abruptly, quietly, “If she’s turned, this is my fault.”

“Why, Spike?”

“She bore my mark. Any vamp might have come across her, eaten her, by chance. But she…. She was caught and brought here. Killed here. Turned, maybe. With my mark set on her, saying she was mine and under my protection.”

“Oh, God: the territorial claim,” Buffy realized.
“Yeah. Figure so. Poor little cow walked right into it. So they used her to play me. The insult direct. Answering move, opening gambit. Fool’s chess…. If she’s been turned, and because she was mine…. Have to do ‘em all, Buffy. Nothing else for it. Three of ‘em still here when I came. Thought— Thought I’d collect a weapon or two I still have put away here. An’ they were here, playing with her. She was already gone, though.”

No need to ask what’d happened to the three vamps. It was quite likely Buffy was sitting on their dust. And she’d arrived all ready to tear into Spike about the utter stupidity of taking on the Restfield vamps on his own. She probably would never do that now, even though he richly deserved it. This had intervened, rendering all lesser matters petty and irrelevant.

“Oh,” he said, in a tone of recollecting something. Fumbling in a pocket, he came up with the cellphone and punched in a number. After a moment, he said, “Spike. I default.” He listened, then said, “Can’t help that. Dock my odds. Take me off the fucking board, for all I care. Willy, I don’t give a damn.” He shut the phone and tried to put it away but instead dropped it. She could hear him pulling in deep breaths. She reached out then, stiffly uncurling, and pulled him unresisting back against her. Buffy held him tight against the shaking.

She thought about repeating to him Kennedy’s account of how Kim had come to be here: how it’d been Rona who’d bolted and Kim part of the small and badly organized search team. But there was still the question of why Rona had bolted in the first place and the fact that the other SITs hadn’t brought the matter to her or to Spike but instead tried to handle it themselves. Too much still undetermined. And even if it were to be all untangled and explained, detective style, it would still leave Spike where he was: confronting the death of a girl for which he felt responsible.

When the candle had burned nearly to its base, she told him quietly, “They’re all civilians now. Most have gone home. And they were alive to go home because you brought them through and didn’t lose a single one. Not one, Spike. Whatever started this, they got into it by themselves and handled it in the stupidest way possible. Kids like Kim die in Sunnydale every day. From being stupid. Or careless. Or just unlucky. You got them through to the jumping-off point. Not one was killed by Bringers or by Turok-han. They weren’t your responsibility anymore. If they’d had the sense to come to us, or to Willow, this could have been avoided. But they didn’t. They were dumb. We protected them the very best we could. You’re not responsible for this.”

She waited for his response. The shaking had passed, or he’d controlled it. After awhile he said, “That was that Oz: Willow’s mutt, from before. The werewolf. Got him placed now. What’d he want?”

“I don’t know. Whatever it is, they’ll take care of it until we can go back.” Through the open door, the sky was lightening. “Spike.” She nudged him, rocked him a little. “We’ll have to move. The sun’s coming.” When Spike didn’t respond, Buffy said, “The door’s broken. The sun will come in. We could take her down to your basement.”

“Bed’s gone.”

“At least it’s dark there. The two of us could take her down easy. We can’t stay here. C’mon, Spike. I’ll hand her down to you.”

He said, “There are no children like Kim.”

Only later, passing the stiffening body to his upraised arms and the crypt’s lower level, did Buffy realize his comment was in belated answer to her try at consolation. So she guessed it hadn’t worked.
She hadn’t really expected it to.

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It was very simple: if she rose tonight, it was Michael. If she didn’t, it was not. The second night, if she rose, any mature vamp might have turned her, and she might be able to say which. If she didn’t rise the third night--and it might take as long as that--she was merely dead, perhaps by intent, perhaps by mischance. The others could have her then, to do whatever they considered seemly.

Waiting occupied the whole of Spike’s attention except for what was focused rigidly on the blood.

It had dried. On her, and above. What little remained within her was as dead as she was, spoiled. No life left in it. If she’d been turned, whatever blood her sire had forced on her was working undetectably to transform the whole, open the way to the demon that would inhabit this flesh. Nothing left that even remotely could constitute food anymore.

But the smell of it was still present--to him, if not to the others who came and went. And it was their blood he was chiefly aware of. That lived and moved in them, on the level above. If he’d been attending to voices, he could have named them. Willow, he supposed, since Buffy had summoned her, and later reported that she’d put a protection on the crypt no vamp could pass until a certain word was said, He didn’t remember the word. There’d been one or two others up above, as well. Dawn, he thought. And something inhuman, whose blood he nevertheless could have fed on. That Oz, he supposed.

Buffy was kind and strict: she allowed nobody else to come down and went above when others were present. Was away, sometimes, because she had to be: to eat, rest, shower, do human things. Then came back, and down, and was with him again, mostly silent, patient with what must seem to her his inattention. He wasn’t sure whether her absence or her presence was worse. When she was away, he felt desperate, frantic, adrift, certain she’d made the choice and severed herself to some different life. And when she returned and was present, it was impossible he’d ever reveal to her how he perceived her then: what she meant, what he wanted from her.

It was almost three days since he’d fed from the drunk in the alley, and that hardly more than a snack. His demon was in deep need--restless and intent, demanding to hunt. He ignored it, controlled it. Blessedly she hadn’t realized, hadn’t offered. If he stayed very still and didn’t look at her, she wouldn’t notice. And he wouldn’t see a blur unfocused except for the shining heat of her exposed skin and the visible beat of her pulse.

He’d done without before. Even into the extreme of starvation, of which he was in no danger yet, merely by willing himself still. It would take at least a couple of weeks to reach the point where his control of his demon might slip and it might get past him and take whatever it found and could get at. This would be long settled then. He’d manage.

Unless Michael had taken her as defiance, if she rose, Kim was dead because Spike had set his mark on her. To feed from her. By her consent. After that, the SITs had spilled their blood into cups for him. It died a little, being away from the source, but still good and sweet and strong. Barely diminished. So the only one marked was Kim.

Not acceptable.

Fasting while he kept vigil seemed an appropriate penance. Not sufficient, but fitting. The soul approved. It would help him keep clear in his mind what he’d set himself to, and why.
After a time and because the crypt was now protected, Buffy went away: to rest, to be able to watch with him through the night. Although all his dread of her choosing otherwise and never returning flared up again, it was still easier when she was gone. Day was his time to sleep, and he let himself be overtaken by it, a dreamless blank. Nothing would happen before nightfall, and he doubted anything would happen then.

Buffy could be present on the first night. Nothing would happen and she therefore wouldn’t try to interfere.

Spike’s demon woke him quite sharply when Buffy dropped down from the upper level rather than bother with the broken-rung ladder. Spike remembered and kept it all contained and still.

Only the Old Blood would rise the first night. All the same, Spike moved to a new place with a wall at his back and took Kim’s body into his arms, across his lap. Rigor was passing off. Little pressure was needed to fold her close, in something like a human posture. Buffy brought him water in a dish, and a cloth, and he cleaned Kim’s face and the edges of the gaping, ragged wound. Buffy helped unbutton and cut away the child’s stained blouse that contained a woman’s contours: large, heavy breasts, a belly rounder than current fashions dictated. She’d have been a beauty much sought after, many places he’d known. But she’d never know that; and if she rose, the change would shed her of that padding soon enough. Spike had never seen a fat vampire although some, like Angel and like Mike, were surely big enough…. Not fat, though. Buffy helped him wipe and rinse all the crusted blood away. Then they dressed Kim’s corpse in a clean blouse Buffy had brought from Casa Spike: carefully buttoned and smoothed, without folds.

Coming back from disposing of the spoiled water, down the tunnel where Spike had tapped into the city system and put in two faucets, one high enough for showering, the ruddy shimmer of heat and life that was Buffy handed something toward him: a mug filled with water for him.

He considered a moment and decided that was allowed. When he handed the mug back empty, she returned it refilled, or maybe it was another one, and he drank that too but placed it on the floor to mean that was enough.

She set a hand on his shoulder. It felt hot enough to burn. He flinched enough that her hand lifted, and he was sorry to have shown such an obvious reaction. But she didn’t seem annoyed, asking him in a quiet, steady voice how he was holding up.

Starting to answer, he had to clear his throat because no voice was there. Then he remembered to breathe. “Well enough.” He shut his eyes, to not see her. Not the way he was seeing her.

“I didn’t know you were so attached to her,” Buffy’s voice commented carefully: a question.

“There were a lot of children. Kim, I knew. Too many hostages.”

“What?”

Spike only shook his head. He didn’t want to tell her about the Powers, lumber her with that. His to see to. As this was.

Dylan Thomas knew: After the first death, there is no other.

There was only the one death, the one victim. All others were merely repetition.
Patiently, Spike kept vigil for all his dead.

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The afternoon of the second day, when Buffy had gone away to sleep, Spike laid Kim’s body gently aside and checked the tunnel passage. As he’d thought, it was open to him: Willow had never been to the lower level of the crypt and hadn’t realized another entrance was there. It wasn’t blocked by her spell.

Probably, if he’d really tried, he could have called up the password he’d been told. But he didn’t need to.

He lifted Kim’s body, then hesitated, frowning. He should leave a note, so Buffy wouldn’t worry and imagine horrible things. But there was no way to do that. A pace toward the tunnel opening, and then he thought of the cellphone. But it wasn’t in his pocket. Must have forgotten it somewhere.

He stood swaying, undecided. Then he again put Kim down and climbed to the upper level. Bright sunlight was blazing in the broken doorway, splashed halfway across the crypt. But the head of the sarcophagus was still safe. Wiping the smooth stone clean with his arm, he allowed the demon to show forth to let fangs tear the side of a finger and drew uneven letters with the blood: DONT FRET.

That should do.

That was all right, then.

He took Kim away through the tunnels, a mile or more: westward, away from the houses, where he knew there was an alcove were tools were kept. The sewer line was an offshoot, led nowhere of interest, and was lit by grates during the day. Going as slowly as he was, the light was gone before he reached the final stretch. Noplace he judged they were likely to be disturbed. At least the best place he’d been able to think of.

He let Kim down, broke into the alcove with a couple of solid kicks, and took her inside. A quiet, private place and a hell of a lot better than clawing your way out of a coffin, however shallowly buried. He settled more or less as he had been, cradling Kim, and resumed his wait.

After an uncounted time, he was aware of a pair of eyes at the far side of the tunnel. Yellow. Because he hadn’t bothered to shift aspect, he could discern the outline. Tall, broad, unmoving. He shut his eyes and turned his head tiredly. Night one was past: not the Line of Aurelius. Not Michael.

“You stood me up,” Michael said in no particular tone of voice. “Defaulted.”

A distance of maybe twenty feet was no barrier to conversation between a pair of vampires.

“Sue me.”

“That means I win.”

“Congratulations. Fuck off.”

“Dawn said it was Kim.”
Bit talks too much, Spike thought, leaning his head back against the tiles. “Surprised you didn’t fetch her along.”

Silence. Apparently unworthy of comment. Then Mike said, “Spike, sometimes you’re a total asshole.”

“Only sometimes? Must be losing my touch. Go away, Michael. Tisn’t none of your concern, an’ talking to you isn’t worth breathing for.”

Mike ambled closer until he was standing just outside the alcove. Looking down. Studying Kim. Good they’d cleaned her up then. She would have been mortified to have Mike see her the way she’d been.

Mike asked abruptly, “You fed?”

“Hell with you, Michael.”

“You fed, you idiot?”

Spike clenched and almost moved. Then he remembered Kim and stilled. Mike didn’t speak or stir for long enough that Spike forgot about him, slowly stroking Kim’s hair.

“I’ll take her away,” Mike said. “Someplace. You’d never see her again. Stay a week or so, to get her settled. Maybe find somebody to look after her so she wouldn’t be all on her own, not knowing nothing nor how to do.”

It slowly sank in that Mike was talking about Kim, not Dawn. Spike thought of about twenty reasons, explanations, then simply said, “No.”

“It was the Restfield pack, wasn’t it. One of ‘em. So it was my fault, shooting off my mouth about you claiming that ground. Wasn’t sure if that was what you meant, just me banned or everybody. Took the worst interpretation. Because I was mad. Also stupid. Never knew Sunnydale when it had stable territories, under the Master that was. Didn’t know what kind of a flap a claim could stir up. Let me take her, Spike.”

“Go away, Michael. This is mine to see to.”

“You ain’t fed. Bet I could beat you for her.”

Spike slowly raised his head. “You piss off or I will tear your fucking throat out.”

Kim stirred. At once, Spike attended only to her, held her close and strong as the change came upon her, the ghastly neck wound filming over and then suddenly whole, healed without a mark. All the skin smoother, denser, so pale as to seem nearly luminescent. No sudden breath, no cry to this birth. Only the features of her round face shifting from within to the aspect she’d display perhaps forever.

The newly risen demon opened golden eyes.

“Kim, love. Don’t be afraid, I got you. How are you, treasure?”

“Spike. It was so strange…. I was looking for Rona. Is she all right? Is she…here?” Kim began
looking around her. In case Rona was nearby.

“She’s fine. I sent her home. Just us. How do you feel, pet?”

Kim stretched languorously. “I feel…fine! Strong!” She sounded surprised. “Why are you holding me? Was I hurt?”

“Some, but you’re better now. Have to make sure everything works right before you get up. Might be a bit dizzy. Just lie still now till I’m sure. A vamp got at you, took a bite out of you. Do you remember?”

“I want something,” announced Kim, frowning. Game face made that a savage expression. “What is it, that I want? Who’s that?” She twisted to see, faster than Spike could hold her still with one hand. “Mike. Hi!” She smiled—a mouthful of fangs. “You smell good. Much better than Spike. Why is that? Come closer. Let me smell.”

Mike raised his eyes to Spike’s and backed a step. He began rolling up a sleeve to bare his forearm.

Spike said, “It’s important, pet, to know which vamp…hurt you. If you can remember. You seen lots of vamps. All sorts. You’re not a girl to get all terrified in a fight and not notice the details for the log. What did the vamp look like?”

“Let me up,” Kim said, starting to struggle. “I’m hungry. I need…something. I want—”

Spike’s free hand brought the stake down. Kim looked briefly surprised before she collapsed into dust. Spike leaned slowly forward into the space her form had vacated. Folding his arms across his knees, he bent his forehead against them.

He didn’t know how much time had passed when Michael shook his shoulder roughly and roused him. When he lifted his head, drifty and disoriented, Michael had opened his own arm and presented it, bleeding, right in front of Spike’s nose. Spike’s demon had no scruples and no reservations. It wanted and took, in great gulps, worrying at the flesh to make the blood come faster, pulling hard. There was nothing else but the thirst and its slaking. Just as if he were only a fledgling, consumed by appetite.

It wasn’t until the worst of the bloodthirst was eased, and Spike pulled violently away, that he truly tasted the blended blood and caught the strong undertone of Summers. Without which Mike’s blood could not be food to him. Which, when he’d been thinking, he’d known would be there, and refused.

“It wasn’t for me anyway,” Mike said, licking up the last of the blood, closing the wound.

Spike just stared dazedly at a wall as Dawn’s second-hand blood worked through him, easing exhaustion, replenishing his strength, clearing his mind. Doing nothing whatever about the sorrow or the weight of the soul’s revulsion.

“You fit to get back on your own?” Mike asked, buttoning a cuff.

“In a while.”

“C’mon. Bike’s not far.” Mike hauled him out of the alcove, stood him up. The tunnel blurred and swooped before Spike’s eyes. The focus, the concentration he’d maintained for Kim’s sake seemed to have gone with her. He had no firm conviction of what he should do, and wandered along
because Mike kept pushing at him. Mike kept talking: “I’ll stand you to a rematch in a week. I’m on the board now, at Willy’s. At the bottom, at lousy odds, but I figure to better that. C’mon, move yourself. Not much farther, and I’ll let you drive. Should be steady enough to hold the handlebars.”

“Is Bit all right?”

“Was when I left her. Can’t answer for now. You’d best get home and ask her yourself.”

That seemed to make sense.
Delicate Negotiations and Tribute

Because Buffy had seen it before, she recognized it now. The moping (not brooding!), the withdrawal, the diminished energy and libido levels: how Spike handled grief. Or rather, didn’t handle it. Generally vampires weren’t vulnerable to loss or grief. Their self-sufficient natures protected them from any deep attachment taking hold. But in this, as in so much else, Spike was the exception. He didn’t come as a lone item: you had to get the set. From the first, it hadn’t been just Spike: it’d been Spike-and-Dru. Then Spike-and-Harmony. Then, with difficulty, Spike-and-Buffy. Plus Dawn. And after that, a whole liana-jungle of mostly unacknowledged connections had formed. Anya. Willow. Giles. The SITs--all twenty-eight of them. Michael.

No longer a tidy set: a collection.

Not particularly relationships he wanted: mostly they puzzled and annoyed him. They just happened to him. The soul had opened him up like the proverbial oyster and he couldn’t help but connect. He had no defenses against it. And he therefore had no defenses and no mechanism for dealing with pain when that was what rebounded through the open connection. The pain just happened too. So he shut down and hid.

Late Monday afternoon, finding Spike asleep, fully clothed and huddled up as tight as he could get (he normally was a starfish-style sprawler and slept naked) on what had been Kim’s bed at Casa Spike, Buffy got all melty and sad, looking at him. When she woke him, he never did come fully alert, not registering what she said, making disconnected replies when he said anything at all, and emphatically not wanting to be touched, flinching away or going still and rigid if she touched him anyway.

Buffy in turn had no mechanism for dealing with Spike when he’d gone unreachable in misery. Probably even worse at the touchy-feely aspects of things than he was. Since she didn’t know what to do, she made an uncomfortable smile and left him, and ended up consulting with Dawn on the front porch of Casa Summers.

“I’ve quit automatically categorizing vamps as animals,” Buffy explained, frowning, the two of them perched on the steps in the reddened light. “Some are, some aren’t. But when I was a kid, I saw this black-and-white mutt, mostly collie, lying at the side of the road. Hit by a car, I guess. It didn’t growl or snap or anything. Just looked at me, panting fast. I suppose it was in dreadful pain. But what struck me was that it didn’t understand. Didn’t know the why of the pain. Why it couldn’t do anything except lie there and pant. And….” She shrugged and spread her hands.


“Not coping at all, as far as I can tell. I thought, if anything, I’d have to be hauling out the manacles to keep him from exploding at those two vamp nests. And it’s like…he’s not interested, he doesn’t care. And I know that’s not so. But….” Another helpless, puzzled shrug.

Eyes downcast, Dawn picked at her skirt--still in her school blouse-and-plaid--and commented, “It’s probably all ick to talk about, but, well, he hasn’t been feeding right for a long while now. Even before the SITs left. Pretty much from the closing of the Hellmouth, I think. Goes short or without as long as he possibly can, then a little. Never enough. Just as little as he can take and keep going. Sort of like when you hold your breath, you know? I don’t know for sure: he’s gone all avoidy on me about it, tells me flat that it’s none of my business and he’s fine, yada yada. You know how he
“Not really. I’ve left that end of things to him, figured after a hundred and twenty-some years, he knew how to take care of himself.” And, Buffy added inwardly, she’d figured it was better not to know.

“Only about seven months with the soul,” Dawn pointed out. “And I think that’s what it is: soul’s giving him hell about it. I was always afraid something like that would happen when I heard he’d gone all ensouled and everything…. Again with the ick, sorry, but we both know he feeds from you sometimes. And we have the same blood, the famous Summers blood….” Dawn tossed her head and grinned wincingly. “He’s had some of mine, but never direct, only in mugs and like that, and never outright asked me. Just something I did, something I do, when I think there’s need. Well, I’ve offered, and each time, he’s shut me up. It was like I’d offered to sleep with him, ‘scuse me, but it was, not that I ever did or anything. And not that I want to, or he wants to, or—”

“I get the idea,” Buffy assured her wildly blushing sister. An embarrassed, thoughtful pause. Then Buffy said, “I didn’t know you did that.”

Dawn hitched a shoulder. “No big. Not to me, anyway. But since that one time he snapped at me, he’s backed way off, even more than before. Pretty much figures beforehand what I’m gonna say and shuts me down cold, so I can’t even bring it up, can’t even ask. He’s not listening, you know?”

“Yeah. I do know how that goes. All Mr. Impervious, when he wants to be. But why, Dawn, when there’s the pig’s blood he could—”

“He hates that. He won’t touch it anymore.”

“Enough to starve himself?”

“Apparently. Looks like that, doesn’t it? He said he wouldn’t touch it, and now I expect he’s got his pride all in gear to stick to it.”

“Oh, the dreaded Spike pride. Then we’re all doomed…. I’ll have to think about this, Dawn. It looks as if he’s backed himself into a corner here and I don’t know what he’ll let me do to pry him out of it. I don’t even know what to try. Any ideas?”

“Well, when you’re…together, whatever, maybe you could…. ” Dawn suggested delicately.

Buffy shook her head. “Doesn’t work that way. And when he’s like this, doesn’t work at all. I can barely get, or keep him, in snuggling distance, let alone…well, together. Avoidy. Like you said.”

“Buffy—” Dawn began, then stopped, mouth drawn tight, fingers clenching in her skirt.

“Present. What?”

“Kind of super ick for me, but I promised. Buffy, Mike tastes me. Drinks from me sometimes,” Dawn said, all in a burst. “I let him, and it’s soooo intense, and sometimes I don’t want him to stop but he always has, it’s not just a vamp thing—”

“It’s completely a vamp thing and you know it. And…yeah, intense. I guess. Why is the little talk about the birds and the bees never enough?” Buffy implored the skies. “Why does it always have to be high weirdness and talking to my sister about the sensation of vamp bites? Why couldn’t it just be
plain old ordinary sex?"

Dawn giggled. “We could, like, talk about sex if you really want to--”

“Stick to vamp bites. Something we have in common. OK, I’ve got as far as Mike bites you sometimes and you both get off on it, more or less. So what’s the problem, exactly? If there’s a legal age of consent for vamp bites, I’ve never heard about it. Unregulated territory here."

“Spike’s worried that sometime, Mike won’t stop. All ‘in the moment’ and all.” Dawn tossed her head and waggled her hands around randomly. “Not mean to, just get carried away. And then leave me to get carried away. Literally. Vamps aren’t exactly cut out for moderation. And not really big on the self-control. That’s what they’re made to do: bite; feed. All kind of hard-wired and primal and everything.”

“Yeah. A major biting thing. I’ve noticed.”

“Yeah. So anyway, Spike pretty much read me the riot act about it, and flashed out at Mike--”

Buffy’s eyes widened as illumination struck. “So that’s what that was about!”

“Pretty much, yeah. And he made me promise to tell you about it, thought you could take care of what little hide he hadn’t already ripped off me. So I have. And maybe one more thing I should tell you. There’s been times, a couple, when I had Mike feed from me on purpose. So he could turn around and have Spike feed from him. Spike has fewer scruples about vamps…and sometimes it’s been necessary and there was no other way. Like after Angel hurt him so bad…. That’s how come I got marked in the first place.” Dawn turned her left arm, displaying the white, defined semicircle of a deep vamp bite about midway on her forearm--like an upside down C with the punctuation of the longer incisors, fangs, at each end. “It wasn’t so plain, of course, to begin with,” Dawn added casually.

Buffy rubbed her eyes, feeling discouraged. Here her kid sis had been running around for several weeks with a vamp claiming mark, and the Chosen One, famous for being able to spot a vamp at fifty paces and stake it in under ten seconds, had never noticed. Maybe because it wasn’t in the expected place. Buffy rubbed her nose. “Confession of major Duh here. I’m sorry. I should have seen. It’s not as if I don’t know what one looks like.” As illustration, she rubbed the left side of her neck first, then slapped the right side: giving Spike’s mark precedence. “Bad Buffy.”

“No big. Really. Why I’m telling you…I did that, Mike and I did that, Sunday night. Last night. Then I sent him after Spike. Wherever he’d taken Kim. Yay, vamp long-distance smell-tracking capability. And of course Spike cussed him out, wouldn’t hear of it, yada yada. Except then he did. Was distracted enough, desperate enough, something, he just clamped down and fed to the point that Mike was lightheaded and shaky for awhile. Until the wonderful effects of Summers blood perked him up again, enough that he could get Spike home. So I figure Spike’s pretty far back into that corner, Buffy. To the point that he’s scared what could happen if he did come out, all vamped up and demon-driven.” Dawn tilted her head in a rather Spike-like manner, considering. “Nice phrase,” she decided. “Alliteration and everything.”

“Yeah. Like you said. Nice phrase, bad image.”

“Deduct two points for gross,” Dawn ruled. “The thing is, the famous little dab isn’t gonna do it here. We’re talking quarts, just to pull even. Make up the deficit.” She wrinkled her nose. “The famous little dab.’ Of what? Mom used to say that.”
“Obviously something olden-time: pre-us. I never knew either.”

“And how weird is it that the monks made me know something like that?”

“The current theory is that it was lawyers. Not monks.”

“Oh, sure, and that explains it all. You mean it: lawyers?” Dawn’s expression soured in distaste.

“Don’t blame me. I don’t make it, I just report it. So: what do you want me to do about Mike?”

Dawn considered. “Just know about it, I guess. Or you could try to go all Mom about it, threaten to ground me if he darkeneth ye door, yada yada.”

“And we both know how well that goes. Actually, though, Mom liked Spike. A lot better than Angel, anyway. Hello pot, greet kettle. Well, consider me put on alert and ready to interrupt the regularly scheduled programming for any necessary bulletins and news alerts. And if you decide you want him dusted, that’s a well-known service I can also provide.”

Dawn gazed at her soberly. “Not funny, Buffy. And sort of on the NOT side of helping.”

“I know. Scratch that. Doesn’t mean I won’t, but not a current desirable option. Believe me: I understand…. Do you love him, Dawn?”

“I knew you were gonna say that!”

“Sorry to be so predictable. But it matters. Matters quite a lot, actually.” Buffy clasped Dawn’s hands and held them on her own knees.

“Yeah. And the thing is, I don’t know. It’s too strange…and intense…and confusing. He likes to just stand and smell me: how weird is that? I don’t know if he even thinks I’m pretty. Just kind of a Dawn-shaped scratch n’ sniff. He’s thirty-three, and he’s six. Before he was turned, he was a merc: used to kill people for money. Now he kills them for appetizer, dinner, and dessert. Sometimes. All uber strange. Nobody’s brought up the ‘L’ word yet. Kind of playing it a day at a time.”

“Sounds like a plan. Provided you have your taser.”

Dawn pulled a hand away to pat her pocket. “On my person at all times. Never leave home without it.”

“Good. Satisfactory.” Buffy had no qualms about Dawn’s being able to use it. Buffy had reason to know that under pressure, Dawn could be nearly as split-second, cold-blooded ruthless as any vamp.

“And…Spike?” Dawn asked.

“Under heavy consideration here. High alert. He can be such an utter…chowderhead!”

“Yeah,” said Dawn, and sighed, smiling, because it was another of Joyce’s words.

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Dawn sat thinking awhile after Buffy went inside, then went hunting for Spike. She already knew he
was no place in Casa Summers: that was the first thing she’d checked out when she got home from school. Not in the first likely place, the finished yuppie basement of Casa Spike. Roving through the ground-floor rooms, she found him almost immediately. In the bed Kim and Amanda and at least one other SIT had shared when bed space was at a premium. Kim’s alone, since Amanda moved home and the rest left.

That accounted for Buffy’s woeful expression, then: he really did look pretty pitiful.

Must be Kim’s scent was still on the pillow, the way he was hanging onto it. Dawn wondered what Kim had looked like in game face. Probably like one of the Oriental battle helmets at Mom’s gallery: all round-faced and fierce. Designed to scare the shit out of the enemy. Kim would have liked that. She’d been a fine fighter: never backed off.

Dawn pulled up a chair, very extremely quietly, to the side of the bed, sat down, and waited until her presence drew Spike up from someplace apparently very deep, because it took nearly five minutes.

When his eyes blinked open, she said, “Hey.”

He was another couple of minutes collecting himself, checking that he was presentable to teenaged girls, and roughing up his face with his hands to wipe the sleep away. “You in your Scout Finch phase?” he asked eventually, which was a pretty good line to come up with, out of sleep like that and everything. Definitely deserved extra points for that.

“I just felt like saying ‘hey.’ Shouldn’t over-analyze things like that.”

“Yeah. All right. Did you actually want something, or are you just being a pest?”

“Being a pest. Does Kim’s bed smell nice?”

His face froze.

“OK, sorry,” Dawn said softly, looking at her swinging feet. “What I meant was, does it help?”

“Rather not talk about it, Bit. ‘S complicated. Hard to keep all of it in mind.”

“There was a time,” Dawn said wistfully, “when I thought I could ask you anything.”

“Yeah.”

That bait hadn’t worked either. Maybe she should change the subject. “Is the locket still working?”

“Oh. Yeah. Guess so. Far as I can tell. No more dreams, since. But…do you think it was Lady Gates? This now, with Kim?”

Dawn bit her lip. That possibility hadn’t occurred to her. She found it rather alarming. “Can’t rule it out. A lot of coincidences and remarkable stupidity had to come together to make that happen. Not that people aren’t quite capable of being remarkably stupid on their own.”

“Could you find out?” Spike asked, very soberly, and Dawn looked at him very soberly in return.

“Is it worth my maybe being unmade?”
“No. Forget it, then.”

“If it is, I’ll do it. I’ll try,” Dawn insisted.

“No, just quit about it. No. Don’t do nothing like that, not even if I say. I don’t know the risks. Can’t figure out…” Spike left that hanging, which maybe was the problem, Dawn thought. Or at least an expression of it.

“You defaulted on your fight with Mike,” she commented.

“How-- Oh. Michael told you. Well, yeah. Who the hell cares.”

“You still mad at Mike? The last time that you almost killed him, when you made him submit, neither of you was mad. Vamp weirdness. I hate to think what might happen if you actually were mad when you were fighting.”

“Well. Only got to put him down, not dust him. Lad needs reminding, as long as he’s around you, he has to take me into account. I’ll hammer him to make sure he don’t forget. He’s gonna set it up again.” Spike didn’t appear to be looking forward to the prospect. Not scared. Just horribly tired.

“Why is it,” Dawn asked deliberately, “that you get to take me into account, and I’m not allowed to take you into account? Why can you worry about me, but if I worry about you, you go all freeze-face and dismissive?”

Spike looked more tired still. “Not up to you being provoking, Bit. You’re way too clever for me. Just a vamp here, not your debating club. You score yourself all the points you want.” He pushed off the bed and headed down the hall to the basement door.

Dawn didn’t recall his ever actually walking out on her before.

She wondered if she’d have to go to the extreme of hurting herself to make him attend. That had been her final resort when he’d had a wicked awful nightmare or just gone Looney Tunes in any of a variety of ways, that dreadful summer after Buffy’s second death with no hope or expectation then of any resurrection. She’d employed it whenever he was captured by the notion of greeting the morning, strolling out into the sun and then gone.

It wasn’t that bad yet, she judged, and the sun was down now. Night was normally a good time for him. Fewest restraints and restrictions. Her best strategy was to keep self-damage in reserve and stay with the provoking awhile longer.

She trailed along to the basement stairs and ventured down three steps.

His voice came from below, from the bed end: “Bit, you keep this up, gonna be hard to stay friends.”

“I’ll survive,” Dawn replied coolly, and sat on the step, chin resting in palm. “The problem, it seems to me, is the soul. Any way to get rid of it?”

Pulling on a fresh T-shirt, Spike came slowly to the foot of the stairs and stared up at her. “Goddam, Bit. You take the bleeding cake.”

“Thanks. But seriously. Is there? You were fine, before.”
“I wasn’t. I--” He started wandering away.

“Don’t forget, I was there.”

His voice came back, “Not for all of it, you weren’t. Not…. Bloody hell, Bit, can’t you just let me be?”

“Nope. That’s not in the contract. And here you thought it’d take sixty years for us to get sick of each other.” Dawn had a sudden thought. “If you don’t agree to come back to Casa Summers now and play nice, I’m taking off the locket. Count of ten. One. Two. Three.”

He came back into view, and he had his locket out, hand clasped around the chain. He said, “Four,” looking straight at her.

“She’ll probably fry me, cutting her off like that. Five.”

“Really? Six.”

“No, haven’t a clue. Seven.”

“Back off, Bit. I mean it. Eight.”

“Nine. I don’t back off.”

He let his hand drop. “All right. You win.” Then he leveled a finger at her. “If I do someone a mischief, it’s on your head.”

“I’ve had worse on my head. Come on.”

Slowly climbing the stairs, he grabbed her hand, pulled her up, and pushed her before him with a hand on the small of her back. “Anybody ever tell you you’re a wretched bully?”

“Often,” responded Dawn serenely, and squeezed his hand. She awarded herself high marks.

**********

Slowly meandering across the two back yards, Spike thought that it was like being stoned or mildly concussed. He was there, right enough, but everything else had only two distances--much too close and confusingly distant. They alternated those positions about every minute and a half. Except Bit, steadily alongside. Annoying as hell but absolutely there and wouldn’t let you forget it for a minute.

Maybe what he needed was a drink. That could serve as a reason why everything was off. Make sense then.

Wheeling about, he turned back to Casa Spike, expecting every second that Bit was gonna blow up at him, but she just kept watching him and following along. Never could predict the child or much figure what went on in her head.

In the kitchen he pulled the bottle of fairly good bourbon off the top shelf of a cabinet. Only half left. Well, it’d do. Uncapping it, he put some down, then leaned against the humming refrigerator with his eyes shut, waiting for the liquor to settle and grant at least an illusion of warmth. Generally he didn’t much notice temperature, and Dawn had no sweater or anything, so it was probably a normal night.
But he felt cold. Deep at the core.

Kim, she’d been so cold, holding her for so long. But not really, that was foolishness. No colder than he was, than the crypt was or that sodding ugly little alcove….

He’d hoped, when she rose, there would be something capable of being talked to. Something still in her that could listen and connect. For a second or two, at the first, he thought he’d touched it. But no: just another ravenous fledge. He’d been disappointed like that before….

Not working. He applied more alcohol.

He asked, “How’s Rona?”

“Staying over with ‘Manda for a few days,” Dawn responded. “Trying to get it all sorted.”

“That Kennedy?”

“You should watch that, Spike. Anybody you don’t like, they get to be a ‘that.’ It’s a dead giveaway.”

“I lose obviousness points. What’s she doing?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see her all weekend. Maybe she’s gone.”

“Maybe…. And Buffy. Has she decided?”

“Decided what?”

“How she’s gonna live, gonna be now.”

“Is she planning something different?” Dawn sounded surprised and slightly alarmed.

“Might. She could now. Just wondered, is all.”

“You have the count,” Dawn said.

“Count.”

“The ten. If we’re not gonna have locket showdown, I think you’d better move.”

“Oh. Yeah. All right.” He rubbed at his eyes and blinked until they focused better, then pushed away from the refrigerator.

Some better, he decided, crossing the lawn again. The lunge-retreat of everything seemed to have eased into a vague middle distance. He didn’t have to notice. But he could. That big beat-up Dodge van, bad shade of maroon, that would be that Oz. Wolfboy. And another strange car at the curb, beige characterless Euro-heap, maybe a Volvo, that would be the Watcher. Rental place must have been all out of crappy red Mustangs. No sign of Harris’ truck, though. That was a mercy.

Near the sidewalk, reaching the brighter patch the street light cast, he looked back and was seeing a score or so of girls, all the young faces nervous and hopeful, and he heard his own voice saying, *You’re mine. I’ll keep you from death.* Just as if he could do what he promised them. *Kim, run to me,*
The next thing he knew he was laying on his side in the grass pulled up all tight and breathing in
great gulps as if he needed it and none of it made sense. Dawn was practically kneeling on top of
him, hands patting and grabbing at him, saying words he couldn’t make out, only her shrill voice. He
reached and checked that the locket was still there and it was, so all right, this was just him some
way.

As he sat up, Bit curled around until her weight was across his legs and her arms around him at the
shoulders, head tucked hard against his chest. The smell of spilled liquor told him he’d dropped the
bottle. Damn. Getting control of the breathing, quieting it down, he patted vaguely at Bit’s back. “’M
fine. Just came over strange there a second. Don’t you be scared. ‘M fine.”

As he worked getting to his feet there was an awkwardness, a dullness in the right side of his back
that puzzled him. And also, under the spilled bourbon smell, a sharp edge of bloodsmell, not
Dawn’s.

She was tugging at him, impatient, so he came along even though he wanted to look back again to
see if the phantom children were still there. Didn’t want to leave them if they were. He’d promised.
But Bit insisted, so he wandered up the walk and then up the stairs, leaning on the left-hand pillar
and that was strange, he surely hadn’t downed enough to be so fumble-footed.

Inside the door Dawn finally released him to lean against the wall, coming over a bit strange again,
and Bit yelling, “Buffy! Spike’s been shot!”

**********

They’d been in the middle of dinner when Dawn’s screech brought Buffy dashing into the hall to
find Dawn hopping in anxiety and Spike starting to spill bonelessly down the wall, leaving a blood-
smear behind on the wallpaper. Wounds of all sorts, Buffy knew how to handle. She grabbed Spike
and eased him down, then grabbed some towels out of the closet under the stairs, laid them out, and
shifted him onto them.

The small entry wound on his back was plain: a patch of blood about the size of her hand just south
of his right shoulderblade. No exit wound. So the bullet was still inside. Yanking up the shirt
confirmed what she’d thought: the wound was already smooth, healed.

“Will, can you get it out?”

“Think so. Yes.” When Buffy looked around, Willow was staring into the air with unfocused eyes.
“Gonna hurt, though.”

Spike was already trying to get up, protesting at such a fuss being made over nothing. Buffy firmly
pushed him down again.

“This rug doesn’t need any more blood on it. Stay put at least until Willow can—”

“Ow!”

The slug pushed back through the entry point and hung in the air: a little warped splash of metal.
Willow bent and scooped it up.

“Not magicked that I can tell,” Willow reported, handing the bullet off to Oz. She knelt down next to Spike: sitting up steadily enough while Buffy wiped off the blood with a wet dishtowel Dawn had brought. Willow said to him, “You know what I told you about your aura? How it’d gone all wide and strange, bright?”

“Bleeding hell,” Spike was grumbling, his back twitching under Buffy’s hands. The reopened wound had stopped bleeding and was already closing. Barely the diameter of a pencil. No need for even a Band-Aid. “That’s nothing respectable. Like somebody was to come after me with a fucking push-pin.”

“Spike. Your aura.”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“It’s not, anymore. I can barely see it at all, and what I can make out is black.”

“So I’m dead, am I? Well, no news there.”

“I think it means you’re running on fumes,” Willow said firmly. “Normally a little pinprick like this, you’d barely notice. But you have no reserves. Healing takes extra, and extra is what you don’t have. You drop below minimum, the engine won’t turn over. Or something.”

Spike didn’t seem interested, trying to pull the T-shirt off over his head and swearing when the obvious stiffness of his right arm and side impeded that. Buffy helped ease it off and took it before he could drop it on the rug. She deposited it on the towel, then took the fresh one Dawn had collected from upstairs, from his colorful collection of black, black, and black. Buffy didn’t like Willow’s report about his aura, mainly because it sounded ominous and was waaay out of her field of expertise.

She was just helping him get the fresh shirt on when he quit swearing, went still, and keeled over—very much like an engine stalling.

“Ran out of adrenaline,” Willow guessed. “Or it could be shock. Vampires can get shock, right?”

Giles came in then, and Xander behind him, carrying a large styrofoam chest. Hallelujah, Buffy thought. Xander asked, “Buff, where do you want this?” as Giles demanded, “What on earth has been happening?”

“Front room,” said Buffy, pointing, “and sniper, apparently.”

“Good lord.”

“Not much firepower,” Oz commented, displaying the deformed bullet. “Twenty-two.”

“But why?” Giles asked.

Bent to deposit the cooler on the front room floor, Xander called, “Hey, do you think it’s possible he might have pissed somebody off?”

Spike had come to again, this time as lethargic and vague as Buffy had found him earlier. Oz went
and shut the door: a belated prudence. Buffy hadn’t done it because she was used to thinking of Casa Summers as thoroughly protected. Yeah: against Bringers, uninvited vamps and other wildlife, a wide range of spells, and door-to-door salesmen. Not snipers with low-powered rifles.

Buffy directed, “Everybody, finish your supper before it gets cold. Colder. Dawn?”

“But I haven’t even started mine,” Dawn whined, but came and helped lift and steer Spike into the front room and install him in the big corner chair.

Once he was down, he seemed to steady. As Dawn scampered off to rescue her supper before everything was gone, Buffy knelt down by his knees and said lightly, “Hey.”

“Now you’re doin’ it!” Spike accused.

“I wasn’t aware that ‘hey’ was actionable.”

“You’re both daft. The pair of you.” Spike looked at her: frowning; concerned. “Bugger did more damage, scaring Bit and interrupting your meal, than he did to me. Fucking twenty-two. ‘M just… not all caught up to myself, is all. Nothing to fret yourself about.” Wincing slightly, he leaned forward to stroke her cheek.

DONT FRET, Buffy thought, remembering the capital letters drawn in blood on the dusty sarcophagus lid. You had to watch him every minute or he’d be off doing something insanely dangerous. Or insanely kind: like exempting everybody but himself from having to witness the ghastly spectacle of Kim rising…and then his mercifully staking her.

Buffy hadn’t asked. She didn’t need to. Some things, she just knew.

“Today, I realized something. And I think it’s something you should be told. That first night, Friday, at your crypt. All the time we were there, trying to figure out what had happened. Here I find you with a body, young girl, throat torn out. Obvious vamp kill. And it never once entered my mind that it might be you. Not for a second. That’s the first thing. The second thing is, you never for a second thought I might. And taking our history into account, I think that’s really something.” She gazed at him, loving him very much. Like an ache in her middle.

He turned his eyes away, likely thinking of a dozen dismissive or derisive things to say. Not saying any of them. Meeting her eyes again, he responded simply, “Yeah. Guess it is.”

She got up, hands braced on the chair arms, and leaned into him. They had a long, satisfactory kiss. He even tangled fingers into her hair and held her there. Not so much moping now. Whatever its intent, the sniper incident seemed to have cracked the shell of his mourning.

Straightening finally, Buffy said, “Gonna collect the troops now, reconvene here for coffee in a few minutes. You want some?”

“Ta, pet.” As she was leaving, he said, “Never mind me. I’ll just sit here in the dark.”

She slapped the wall light switch in passing. Definitely recovering.

*******

When the Scoobies started wandering in, some with plates of supper they were still finishing, Spike
knew something was up by the way they either looked at him too hard or avoided looking at him at all. Either way, something was up.

After folding tables were broken out and Buffy deposited a mug of black coffee on the weapons chest and took a seat there herself, Giles stood up with hands in his pockets, confronting Spike’s suspicious gaze with a mild but resolute expression. “Spike, to give this the short shrift it deserves, you’ve been overruled. Regardless of your whims and your stubbornness.”

The Watcher picked off the top of the styrofoam chest. It was stacked nearly full of bagged blood.

Now everybody was looking at him. Expectantly. Some hopefully. Some bracing for explosion. And he couldn’t dredge up the energy for indignation. He just wanted to be someplace else. So he pushed out of the chair and walked out. Got himself down to the basement, back to the washtubs. He turned on the cold water and ducked his head under. A little stiff, bending, but that was fading. Nothing wrong with him a little rest wouldn’t fix. Fucking twenty-two. Pea-shooter.

He opened the dryer in the middle part of the room, knowing he’d always find a towel or two there: left behind for an extra cycle, when everything else was dry, and then forgotten. Toweling his face and then his hair, he leaned on the dryer, waiting, wondering who the delegate would be.

Feet on the stairs: three steps, then settling there.

“Bit, just go on.”

“Spike, we’ve done this. It’s old.”

“They may not see, but you should. It’s not a thing I can do. It’s a collar.”

“Maybe not.” She came the rest of the way down, all long legs and grace, and stood by him, facing him soberly, a sweet, pensive expression on her face. Tall enough now to look at him pretty much level, eye to eye.

“Listen,” she said. “Don’t think of it as a bribe or a collar. They can’t make it be that, even if they wanted to. Because you can walk away anytime. They’re committed; you’re not. You haven’t promised anything. And they’re not asking you to. You’re just being super-suspicious, super-stubborn, because you need it so bad. And so you figure there must be something wrong with it and you shouldn’t let yourself have it. Do you know what benenoia is?” When Spike only waited, she explained, “It’s the uncomfortable suspicion that people are banding together to do you good. Seldom fatal.” She made a quirky little smile. “You’re allowed good things sometimes. Really! Don’t think of it as a bribe, Spike: think of it as tribute.”

He barked a syllable of a laugh. Then the idea caught his attention and he had to consider it. Master vamps accepted tribute. It was their due. Expected. Even required. Very often in the form of blood: on the hoof, not in bags, but the container didn’t signify.

He’d accepted the SITs bargain because it was fair. Marked or not, they’d been under his protection and willing to provide him with blood in return. All fair, nothing to object to there.

And the Scoobies. Well, he protected them too. Had for a long time--years--without so much as a single thank-you nor bare recognition of his help. Of course, for years before that, he’d tried his best to kill and demoralize them, but that was before and didn’t count. They’d tried nearly as hard to off him, so that all should balance out. They were an extension of Buffy--her friends. Family, as good
as. Not his, by any chalk, but surely hers. And for her sake, he protected them.

He could get his mind around that: tribute was fitting. Nothing shameful in it at all.

Watching him think it out, Bit was grinning and trying not to. She knew.

“Bit, you tell them what you said. Tribute is acceptable. But if Harris or anybody has some smart-mouth thing to say about it, I don’t want to hear because things might get unpleasant. Then fetch the box down here. Damned if I’m gonna have them all watching me. None of their damn business what I take or don’t.”

“Got it,” said Dawn briskly, and raced off up the stairs.

It was Buffy who brought the styrofoam chest, tucked under one arm. In her other hand she carried a full pitcher whose rich scent made his eyes heat and change, and a mug dangling by its handle from her little finger.

Placing pitcher and mug on top of the dryer, then setting the chest down, Buffy remarked, “I didn’t think you’d mind me. But if you want…?”

Spike paid no attention. Ignored the mug, too. Seized and lifted the pitcher, gone to full game face because his demon had barged through and wanted it so bad. Not warm, but not halfway to killed by the microwave, either: Buffy’d had the sense to leave it as it was. Strong. Rich. Fragrant. Only a small step from the source. None of the pleasures of the kill, of feeding at another’s expense, raw direct exchange of life for death; but he didn’t need that and the soul would have rebelled and ruined it all anyway.

This was fine. And good. And not nearly enough.

He finished the pitcher and Buffy helped refill it.

Finally, after two more pitchers, it was enough. He gazed regretfully at the bagged units left in the chest.

“There’ll be more in the morning,” Buffy said. “This was kind of the emergency expedited version. Giles filed the papers this morning. Later, there will be invoices. Accounting. The usual mess of bureaucratic paperwork, all in perfect order, none of which you’ll have to touch. That was the third thing I did, after I got home: called Xander to ferry Giles around in minimum time. Giles showed his authorization, scribbled up a purchase order, and basically wiped out a blood bank. Tribute is taken care of. Just one less thing to worry about.”

She leaned toward him. He immediately turned away and went to the concrete tub to wash his mouth with tapwater. However good blood tasted to him, it’d been made abundantly clear to him it was pretty nauseating to humans. Their loss. But he’d never present himself to Buffy tasting like something repulsive.

She’d followed him and was combing fingers through his drying hair, probably making it all stand up and look stupid. Felt really fine, though. He kept still and let her.

“I like it better not all flat and stiff and gelled up,” she remarked absently.

“Yeah: like it looking like a bleeding poodle.”
“I guess…. So, you gonna be all right with this?”

“Poodle hair?”

She smacked his head. Always with the hands, his girl. Wonderful, warm little hands….

Against her mouth, he said, “Come back to my place. Nobody to hear. Much better bed.”

“But Oz,” she replied indistinctly. “He’s been waiting to-- Mmmm. But we were gonna discuss--”

He grabbed her wrist and began towing her. Not at all in the mood for discussion.

At the head of the stairs, where an instant’s uncertainty about who should go first turned them against and into one another for more heated groping, Buffy protested, “But…they’re all there. They’ll all see!”

Breaking from her, Spike resourcefully hauled her to the kitchen door and out. There was another protracted question of precedence at the gap in the hedge, but no more protests.

**********

“So,” Spike said, the following morning, “what d’you want with me, then?”

The shaded side porch of Casa Spike was Spike’s usual morning place. Spike was semi-perched on the wooden porch rail, and Oz, rumpled and friendly, occupied a folding chair borrowed, months back, from Casa Summers.

“Need a vampire for a job,” said Oz, as Spike lit a fresh cigarette from the coal of the old one. “I was told you’d help.”

“Who exactly told you that?” Spike responded, all amiable. He suspected if he felt any better, he’d catch fire, because all that energy had to go somewhere. He turned, enjoying the play of sunlight on the grass, the hedges, and the trees, projecting the shadow of the neighboring house’s utterly useless California chimney as though it were the gnomon of a sun dial. He knew, pretty much to the minute, how long this porch would be safe.

“Well, you know,” said Oz uncomfortably.

“No, I don’t know.” (Spike employed full elocution and politely swallowed dogboy) “so why don’t you spit it out and tell me?”

“They don’t like being talked about. You know, right?” Oz persisted, puzzled but still hopeful there would be a meeting of minds or secret handshakes or something in the near future.

“Oh, you mean the moderately famous Powers That Be,” Spike said, as if he’d just caught on, enjoying Oz’s plain discomfort.

“You’ve had dealings. You should know better.”

“Right,” Spike responded in the flattest, least-impressed tone he could manage. “So this Power, or these Powers, that you get all itchy-looking when I mention, conveyed to you.” (point with cigarette)
“that I was available for assignment.”

“Something like that.” Boy was all shut up now: wary, displeasured. Spike had hurt his furry feelings. Pity.

“And you come when they whistle, do you?” Spike decided to try genial. Gave Dogboy the pleasant smirk of the thoroughly shagged-out and self-satisfied alpha male.

Oz shot him a look. Definitely getting hostile here. Oz stood, all five-feet-maybe-six of him, went down the stairs, and tramped off without another word.

Studying the cigarette-end, Spike wondered who the delegate would be this time.

He’d decided he liked tribute. Very much.

He didn’t have to wait very long, about half an hour, before the delegate arrived: Willow. Spike made a disgusted face because he owed Willow a few and if he was extremely rude to her, she quite likely could make him regret it.

“Now, that’s not fair,” he complained as Willow took the chair where Oz had been. “Dogboy’s brought in the big guns.”

Willow gave him a bit of a wry grin. She pretty much knew his number: knew he stole cookies at every opportunity. Couldn’t put much past her. “It seems Oz was given the false impression that you were no longer a thorough bastard. I’ve put him straight about that. Sure, you can refuse. But don’t refuse just to prove you can. That’s petty.”

“I can do petty. Doesn’t bother me at all.”

“Did you even give him a chance to explain what it is?”

“Don’t care what it is. Not my concern.”

“Feed you and you get ugly, don’t you.”

“All a matter of perspective, pet. Some people think I look quite nice. All poodled up, an’ all.” He pushed a hand through his hair, that he figured was still all curly, going every which way and probably looking ridiculous. Today, he didn’t care. Today was for impenetrable smug. He didn’t get days like this very often. He intended to enjoy this one for everything it was worth.

Willow thumped hands on her trousered knees. “All right, let’s ditch the attitude and just talk straight: one killer to another.”

That made him pay attention. “Got you on numbers, Red.”

“Got you on style. You want to turn this into a pissing contest, I can piss you right out in the cheery sunlight.”

“And live with it afterwards?”

“Well, no: you got me there. And let’s not mention the fight to the death, afterward, with Buffy. Take that as a given.”
Spike opened another chair and sat down facing her. “You get round one on points. No contest. But I think you know something of the issue here. No collar. No leash. Not gonna do that.”

“Agreed. You may be battling the biggest windmill ever seen, but you’re entitled. I grant you that. I’ll even help you. But you used to make this big deal of what you were for: getting between whoever and death. What are you for now, Spike?”

Spike looked at her for what seemed to him quite a long while. “Non serviam,” he said finally.

“Got that. Really. And yet, your Hellish Majesty, it doesn’t seem to bother you a whit to second Buffy.”

“True.” Spike took his time lighting a fresh cigarette. “I trust Buffy. No, that’s not entirely right either. She can do with me whatever she likes. Even throw me away. No complaint here. Not because I trust her, although I mostly do. Because she’s the Slayer. An’ the best fighter I’ve ever seen or expect to see. And, well.”

“And you love her so much you get a little crazy with it sometimes. I know about that,” said Willow, a little wistfully.

“I know you do. Not to interrupt, but what’s happened with our Kennedy?”

“Subtle segue there, Spike. You’re not nearly the air-head that you look.” Willow’s quick-humored face turned somber. “She’s gonna try to wait me out. Taking a place of her own, here in town. Gonna sign up for classes. Likely some I’m in. Camp on my doorstep and make an embarrassing spectacle of us both. Kid doesn’t know how to let go gracefully. Now she’s hissing and spitting at Oz, and poor guy, he doesn’t know what to make of it. I’ve known worse break-ups,” said Willow distantly, “but this one will do. Very non-fun. She may actually succeed in chasing me out of Sunnydale. Even the First couldn’t do that….”

“Not evil. Only young.”

“I worry: more and more, things Principal Snyder said are making sense to me…. Back to topic here. What do you figure to do with the rest of your unlife, or at least the chunk immediately ahead?”

“Dunno. Been waiting for the Slayer to call the mark, and then I could figure. But she’s not done that yet.”

“A-huh. OK. I can see that. First shoe hasn’t dropped.” She bent her head and raised her eyes, as though looking at him hard over imaginary glasses. “She being secretive, or you being shy?” She added a patently fake cough before the word “shy,” as punctuation.

“Not shy. Just don’t want to joggle her elbow. Haven’t been many times she’s been free to choose. Don’t want to spoil that for her.”

“And the Powers. You setting up against them, or what?”

“Non serviam. I’m not their servant. Slayer’s one thing, but I’m not putting up with this ‘champion’ crap for a second. It’s no honor to be used. The pay’s real bad and the reward uncertain, to say the least. The reward is you live through the one thing so they get to use you again. Got nothing in particular against the Powers. As pointless as hating Zeus or Hera, which they much resemble.
Nothing special about the Powers, except that they got it: power. That doesn’t make me inclined to trust ‘em and certainly doesn’t incline me to want to go blind wherever they point me. Whether… whether Buffy came or not.”

“Kinda thought that might be one of the sticking points. Yeah. You’re getting pushed toward an independent destiny and you’re digging in your heels as hard as you can. I can see that,” Willow allowed. “Buffy know about this?” Another sharp over-the-no-glasses glance.

“Dunno. We’ve not talked of it. An’ you keep shut too, Red. This is her choice. When I know it, I’ll make mine. And nobody else gonna do it for me. Not the Powers. Not Oz. And not you.”

“Fair enough. I respect that. Leave it at this, then. You owe me a few favors, right?”

“That I do.”

“Then hear Oz out. Find out what this business of his is about, and no, I haven’t asked him. I just know Oz. It means going someplace--that much, I’ve gathered. He didn’t realize you and Buffy were joined at the hip. Till now, anyway….” Willow made a reflective and rather pointed smile. It faded and she gazed at him soberly again. “But have you thought Buffy might do better, making her choice, without you moping around the place, right in her face, all the time? Maybe you’d both be better for a break. But whether or not, consider whatever Oz says on its merits. The Powers steered him your way for help. That doesn’t mean the thing’s not worth doing. You listen and then you make the call. If you do that, we’re square.”

“You are definitely not square, Red. Not in any way, shape…or form.”

“I go for the quiet ones, Spike. You’re not my type at all. Significant absence of meek.”

“Well, happens I’m pretty taken, so it’s probably just as well. Tell Oz, real nice, to come back.” Spike glanced at the sky, the tighter angle of sun. “Have to adjourn to the conversation pit. Downstairs. But tell him I’ve had my fun for the day. I’ll behave.”

“Spike, everyone behaves: the question is well or badly.”

Spike made a grand gesture. “Always let the lady have the last word.”
Distances

At first, Spike found lazing in the sun with the whole back seat and rear of the van to himself intensely enjoyable. It was bright; it was warm; it was forbidden, dangerous, and exciting.

He knocked knuckles against the nearest window. “What’d you say this was called again?” he asked Oz, who was driving at a poky, prudent rate: setting out about noon, it’d taken Oz nearly an hour to pass the You Are Now Leaving Beautiful Sunnydale sign that Spike could blow past, on a bike and strongly motivated, in ten minutes. And the pace hadn’t picked up appreciably since.

“How do you know what this is?” Oz asked.

“Necro-tempered glass.”

“Right,” Spike said, as if memorizing the name might make him more certain that it worked. He looked around at the slightly tinted windows warily.

Because nice as it was, direct sunlight triggered century-strong survival reflexes. He’d settle down, all comfy and so remarkably warm, and start to doze, watching smeared, slanted vistas of pine trees passing, and as soon as his conscious mind slipped out of gear, instinct kicked in like a boot to the balls. He’d come stark awake convinced he had to get under cover now or he was toast. Once, he actually got a rear door partly open before sanity and Oz’s shout pulled him up short of the very immolation he was trying to escape.

The sunshine was a pleasure whose price was almost higher than he could afford.

And Oz’s unbending preference for nasal, twangy, whining country-western music was about to drive him totally mental.

“How far is it now?”

“Ten miles closer than the last time you asked.”

“Thanks ever so,” Spike responded sourly.

This trip was a terrible idea and Spike became convinced he’d been an utter prat to agree to it.

Some unknown beastie or other munching Oregon tourists. A few days away and back. Bugger. After all, who’d be such a moron as to choose Oregon to go touristing in? Maybe they deserved to be eaten. Maybe they were the sole sustenance of some endangered demon species. Some kinds of demon had gone extinct: stood to reason others were threatened but was there any legislation protecting them? Anybody protesting the slaughter of the last Zantiphthe? Demons had a right to survive too, didn’t they? Everything judged by the standards of good-for-humans, bad-for-humans instead of healthy restrained warfare, predation and defense, cull out the morons and weaklings--
both sides. Not enough of that for Spike’s tastes. Against the natural balance of things. Insufficient biodiversity. That was what’d done for the fucking buffalo. Correction: bison. And that in turn put paid to the wolves and most of the cougars, foxes. Prairie dog population explosions. Dust bowl fiascos. Things out of control, out of balance, with music by that repetitive ponce Philip Glass. Humans just didn’t fucking belong at the top of the food chain!

He sat as far from the alluring sunlight as he could get, glowering, arms wrapped around himself protectively, trying to think of some way to keep himself awake.

At the sound of the lighter opening and then striking, Oz announced for maybe the twentieth time, “No smoking in the van.”

Spike bent his head to the flame. “Open your fucking window.”

“Then actual sunlight would come in,” Oz pointed out patiently.

“Oh. Right.” Spike shut the lighter and took a long drag on his cigarette. After all, what was Dogboy gonna do: leap over the front seat, leaving the van driverless, and take the fag away from him?

“Spike, my van, my rules. Put the cigarette out.”

“Look, chum--all I want is five minutes of peace inhaling smoke that’s not from the skin of yours truly. My being here is your idea, not mine. Least you can do--”

“Put. It. Out.”

“Fuck yourself.”

Dogboy was scowling in the rearview mirror. Of course he could see nothing but the empty seat. Not knowing what was going on behind him seemed to bother the boy. No use in looking, but the habit was apparently too strong.

Pursuing his perceived advantage, Spike said, “And if there’s nothing can get through these hills but that awful self-pitying tripe, stick in a tape, something. Or turn the bloody radio off. Sending me frantic, wanting to strangle the whining idiot. No wonder she left him.”

“Mountains,” Oz insisted, making no move to touch the radio.

“I’ll give you bloody mountains: the Himalayas. Mountains of the Moon. That’s mountains. These are hills.”

“Himalayas are mountains,” Oz conceded. “Ever been there?”

“Yeah. Couple of times.”

“Peaceful.”

“ Fucking frigid. And empty. Could go a hundred miles vertical, up and down, and not find anybody to eat. Like here,” Spike reflected, looking out the side window again.

The van was momentarily traveling in shadow, in the small, hacked cleft between palisades of enormous evergreens so high that, even twisting his neck, cheek against the glass, he couldn’t see the
tops. He could barely even see where their branches started. Just trunks: a ranked army of telephone poles. Nothing familiar, nothing man-made except the road itself. All that inimical wood waiting and wanting to skewer him. He shuddered, recollecting how much he hated untidy, untamed Nature. Gladly trade it all for a nice filthy slum, teeming with life nobody would miss.

The forest’s inhospitable sterility, from a vampire’s perspective, made Spike think about feeding. He wasn’t really hungry, but even with refrigeration, the bagged blood wouldn’t stay good long, lacking the usual chemical soup of preservatives and anti-coagulants. Best to use up as much as he could before it spoiled.

Dropping the last of the cigarette into an empty soda can, he flipped himself over the seat and started pawing through the confusion of boxes and gear in the back.

“What are you doing back there?” Oz demanded sharply.

Spike felt his eyes heat and change. “Looking for the cooler.”

“Don’t touch the instrument case. In fact, don’t touch anything. You are not gonna spill blood in the van. It would stink for months. Get out of the back, into the seat, fasten the seat belt like I told you twenty times already, and shut up!”

Spike popped him in the head with a single-serving can of chicken-with-stars soup. Several other little cans rolled out of the cardboard box, all handy to be pitched toward the front of the van in an indifferently inaccurate fusillade.

“OK,” said Oz, “that’s it.”

The van cut hard right, everything (including Spike) spilling helplessly in one direction, then the other, bounced around a bit, then tumbled forward as the van jerked to a halt.

Bruised and battered, Spike started pushing gear off him, working free of the pile. The right-hand rear door slid back. Hands gripped his ankle and yanked. He was pulled free and flung away, sliding on his shoulder and side on a thick, prickly mat of brown, dead pine needles with intense brightness all around and the smell of pine so strong, it was like being assaulted by a hundred million car deodorants. For a second he instinctively pulled in on himself in anticipation of the first agony of burning…that didn’t come. The trees were so high, thick, and dense that there was no direct sunshine at all. Cautiously, he uncurled, still unburning, and got to his feet.

The van was halted on a rutted dirt track partly obscured by drifts of pine needles and hidden by alignments of the wide-spaced pillars of pine boles a few dozen yards before and behind. Oz was kneeling in the back, pushing things around, plainly checking that whatever he was particularly choice of--probably the case that held his guitar and what-not--hadn’t been damaged by all the bouncing around. Spike had the momentary thought of pitching him out, then driving away, but that was no good: Oz had the keys, and it would take more time to hotwire the van than Oz would give him unless he completely immobilized the little pissant. Which Oz would resist vigorously, and that wasn’t to be lightly discounted. Anybody who could pitch him twenty feet had to be taken seriously.

With nothing better to do, then, Spike leaned against the nearest trunk and lit a cigarette.

Emerging from the van, Oz stabbed out a finger. “You don’t do that!”

“Not in your rotten van anymore, am I?”
“That doesn’t matter.” Oz swept a furious hand around in an all-encompassing gesture. “Fire hazard. That should mean something even to you!”

“Oh, so sorry. Don’t care. I’ve managed to avoid turnin’ myself to ash for a few years now sans assistance from any Smoky Bear Junior. Go fuck yourself, Fido.”

Oz began methodically cracking his knuckles, muttering, “Willow said you could control yourself. Said you’d behave.”

“Am behaving. Still alive, aren’t you--Twerp? Despite almost constant provocation, I might add.”

“OK,” Oz told himself, “meditation not the answer here. Not gonna solve anything.” He looked up, and there was something different, something strange, in his eyes. They’d gone yellow, Spike realized. Not like a vamp’s eyes. And they took up more of his face. “You been asking for it. Now you’re gonna get it. Best of three falls. Winner pisses on the loser.”

Oh, please: interspecies dominance games. Spike rolled his head back against the trunk. Then, on second thought, he proceeded to extinguish the coal of the cigarette with extreme care, making sure no sparks fell, and closed the remainder in his palm to make certain it was dead and cold. Just because the boy was an idiot didn’t mean he was wrong.

Dogboy had disappeared back into the rear of the van, wrestling around in there. What leaped out was covered in brick-colored fur and stood, on all fours, about hip high. Rather conspicuously male. Well, couldn’t keep the pants on, could he? Must be a major inconvenience, having to drop trou to change or get all tangled up. Meanwhile, with a gargling snarl, the werewolf had taken one long bound and launched itself straight at his face. Spike lifted both arms and closed his hands around the bole of the tree. With a bounce and a pull, he flipped, locked his ankles, and was securely head-down, like a squirrel, in time to watch Oz collide, jaws gaping, with the tree and bounce off to stand wide-legged, ruff bristled, glaring and snarling up at him.

Hands were, well, handy. Spike inchwormed half a body-length further up the trunk. Blood rushing to his head not a particular problem.

“Might want to rethink that strategy, Rex.”

Spike had never had much contact with shapechangers. So interpreting their smells wasn’t in his lexicon. He assumed the modulation in the overall canid odor would translate as highly pissed-off werewolf. Oz had stopped making noises and was now regarding him steadily. Then Oz looked off toward the van, and back.

Not going anywhere, that look said, until this is settled.

The clothes were in the van. The ignition key was pretty certainly in the clothes. But Oz wasn’t gonna let him get at it without some kind of tussle. And only Oz knew where they’d been going. Even if Spike got the van shut, locked, and started, he’d have no option but to back along this track until he hit the highway, turn south, and so home to beautiful sniper-inhabited Sunnydale: among the reasons Buffy had cited for finding Oz’s request a good pretext for Spike’s getting out of Dodge for a few days while she investigated who’d decided to take pot-shots at him with an itty bitty rifle.

He imagined punching the cellphone’s buttons (the cellphone stuck with his minimal gear, still in the van) and explaining to her, “Well, pet, I’ve been treed upside-down in a fucking forest by this scruffy
red werewolf you wanted me to make nice with, old chum and all, Original Scooby, that’s prepared
to sit there until bloody doomsday waiting for me to come down and fight him to establish who’s
alpha male here. You and Willow will be brassed off if I kill him. So what exactly would you
suggest I do in this situation?”

Imagining her silence and suddenly missing her acutely, Spike shut the imaginary connection. And
naturally now, with the blood in the fucking van, he was hungry. He knew Oz’s blood was
marginally edible: just the sort of thing you knew. He wondered what it would taste like. About on a
par with rat, probably.

No point, he decided, putting this off.

Without bothering to change aspect, he kicked away from the tree and dove. The werewolf rose to
meet him.

Not much of a contest. Although their weight was about equal, Spike had knees, elbows, feet, and
fists to strike with. All Oz had was ferocity and jaws that seemed the size of a Buick, snapping a
scant inch from your nose, and gleaming white fangs at least the equal of Spike’s own. Claws were
blunt, not up to much of anything except maybe eviscerating you if you were stupid enough to let
him get a high hold and then kick. Spike wasn’t that stupid, although he couldn’t prevent Oz
inflicting a slash or two. Then Oz changed tactics: instead of leaping high, trying to bowl Spike over
or get at his face or throat, seize onto an arm to gain leverage to pull him down, Oz came at him
straight ahead and crotch high. Stepping quickly aside, Spike seized him by the scruff and tail-root
and held him suspended at arm’s length. Oz fought and bucked and snapped but couldn’t twist head
and neck around far enough to find anything to bite. Spike held him like that until he subsided to
frustrated growling.

“Now look,” Spike said. “I’m something like a man. And you’re something like an animal. How the
hell did you expect this to play out, you moron? Now give over.”

Suddenly he wasn’t grasping fur but a smooth neck and there was no tail. Dropping naked, Oz
twisted and ran far enough to catch up a substantial storm-downed branch and brandish it. Wood:
oooh--dangerous. Spike backed off and looked around until he found a branch of his own. He
strolled back, breaking off side twigs until he had something a nice length and fairly evenly balanced.
He twirled it, walking it between successive pairs of fingers, then flipped it to his right hand and did
the same. Scowling stubbornly, Oz changed grip, holding his crooked stick quarterstaff-style. They
engaged, sticks spinning, striking, rebounding. But a couple of years of RenFaire play couldn’t begin
to contest effectively with over a century of swordsmanship and kendo combat. Not to mention
impeccable pool and billiards sharkings. Spike thumped the boy a couple of times on each knee,
enough to start him moving stiff and lame, then saw a good contact coming and brought the thick
end of his stick down full-strength against Oz’s branch at a crooked place, where it would be weak.
Oz’s branch shattered. He was left holding a stub.

Spike brought his staff up and around, quick, making Oz back and lean, then repeated from the
opposite side until he’d backed Oz up against the bole of a tree thicker around than Oz was. Spike
set the point of the stick against Oz’s breastbone with just enough pressure to keep him there.

“Now, you wouldn’t dust all pretty, but I could bust you up--”

Oz shifted again, just a second’s shimmer and changed, and the wolf lunged at him under the reach
of the extended stick. Losing patience, Spike let him come and thumped him hard on the head with
the butt end as they made contact. Having closed jaws around Spike’s leg, Oz hung on, even after
Spike thumped him again. Persistent, stubborn little bugger. Not particularly wanting to stave his skull in--he would have heard from Willow, at considerable length, about that--Spike dropped the stick and closed fingers around the wolf’s windpipe in a strangling grip. He held on until the wolf, and then the man, and then the wolf again ran out of air and sagged, unconscious. Still biting down as hard as he could, though the bite radius of course changed. So two bites for the price of one. Wonderful. Retrieving the stick, Spike levered the jaw open, then limped back to the van and went through the tumbled junk until he located a first-aid kit. Checking on Oz--manform again but not moving--Spike stripped off the ruined jeans and applied gauze pads and then an anchoring wrap of gauze to the wound in his upper left thigh. He’d actually lost meat, dammit. Finding his carryall, he put on his single change of jeans, downed three bags of blood that hadn’t quite gone off, then had bourbon for a chaser while attending to the surface gashes on both arms.

Oz was stirring. Reaching long, Spike grabbed Oz’s discarded pants, extracted the ignition key, wadded them up and pitched them in Oz’s general direction. He considered having another drink but capped the bottle: not bright if he was gonna be driving through unfamiliar territory, considering the sun was nearly gone. He stuck the bottle back in his carryall. Sitting on the edge of the seat, legs dangling outside, he pulled his boots back on and lit a cigarette.

Oz had moved a little--flopped over on his back, belly exposed--but hadn’t collected his pants.

“I figure that makes three,” Spike remarked. “So if you’re through with this foolishness, get dressed and we’ll get going.”

“It’s not through. You have to finish it.”

Spike thought, alarmed, for a second before remembering the forfeit Oz had named. Winner pissing on the loser. “Oh, please: that’s prehistoric.”

“Not finished till you do.”

“Then it won’t be fucking finished, all right? There’s things I like doing dog-style but that’s not one of ‘em. Put on your fucking trousers, Fido, and get in the van. Passenger side.”

At least he hadn’t been bitten on his accelerator leg. And this time, he’d find something decent on the radio.

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A couple of rings. Then: “Hello?” Dawn’s voice. Must have put in the wrong number, the one to the fixed phone. Spike lifted a hand and rubbed his forehead absently.

“Madam, could I interest you in a set of encyclopedias, barely used--”

“Spike!”

“--because the previous owner was an ignorant, illiterate git?”

“Spike, where are you?”

As if he could show her, Spike went to the small platform’s nearest railing and leaned against it, shifting weight from his left leg, aching from the long climb. He looked out and down in the bright silver moonlight to the green-black rosettes that were the crowns of hundred-foot pines. “Top of the
world, Bit. Fire spotting station. Can see everything. ‘F you were to go into the front yard, bet I could see you.”

Dawn giggled. “How are you getting along with Oz?” she asked knowingly.

“Oh, much better. Much better after I took over the driving and we started going past ten miles an hour.”

“Then how’s Oz: in much pain?”

“He’ll survive. You keeping your promise? Keeping clear of Michael till I get back to make sure neither of you gets careless?”

“Yes,” Dawn complained, her voice sour and annoyed.

“You put out with me?” From such a distance, with only her voice to go by, it was hard to know or take the good things for granted.

“No. Or only sometimes. No, we’re good, Spike. Normal, anyway.”

“That’s fine, then. Bit, hate to say it, but I didn’t climb all the way up here to make certain you’re extant. Hunt Buffy up for me, there’s a pet.”

Sounds of bounding retreat and then, distantly, Dawn’s voice hollering Buffy’s name. Then Dawn came thumping back, fumbling, breathing into the phone. “She says she’ll call you back on her cell. But Spike? Are you eating all right? Oz starting to look like breakfast?”

“’M fine, Bit. Finished off what I brought, so I’m good for some days now. You can tell Willow Oz is safe as houses. Not in the least appealing. Going now.”

“Yeah, bye. Miss you!” A screech right in his ear: “All right, all right, I’m hanging up now!”

Closing the connection, Spike held the little cellphone at arm’s length, wincing at the assault on his hearing. In under a minute, it beeped. Spike returned it to his ear.

“Hullo, love.”

Buffy’s voice: “Not so sure this was a great idea. Lonesome here.”

Spike sighed. Everything else had gone away. “Yeah. Here too.”

“Was the special glass fun?”

“For a while. Novelty. Warm. Then it got to be a bit of a bore. Not used to sleeping in the sunshine.”

“Spooked?”

“Yeah, some.”

“You get any rest at all?”

“Not to speak of. After this, maybe. No signal, down below. Had to get high to catch the right
breeze, get a call through.”

“Miss you more in the night time. Nobody’s frigid feet…. Where are you, then? Up a tree?”

“Was, earlier. Getting things sorted with Dogboy. No permanent damage, all fine now. Not a chatty chap, is he?”

“Ah, the famous Oz significant silences, interrupted now and then by a single word. Where are you? Make me see.”

“Steel tripod, sort of, with rungs along one strut and then across struts at the narrow part, toward the top. Long climb. Hate to do it every day, like Oz says the regular fire spotters do…. Nobody here now, though: cutbacks, not a priority area, something like that. Anyway. Pine platform built around the top, raw wood, some warped and weathered. Railing around the outside. Stink of pine something fierce, like sticking your head over a bucket of cleaner. Can see for miles and miles around, seems like to the end of forever…. Moonlight, coming stronger. All alive, everywhere. Air sharpish— you’d be cold, I expect, if you were here…. What are you gonna do, love? After this?’

He hadn’t intended to say that. He breathed anxiously, waiting for her response.

“You’re breathing. I can hear you.”

“I suppose. Never mind, didn’t mean to bring that up. Just got past me, came out. Don’t you take any notice. When you got it settled in your mind, you’ll--”

“You’re scared,” she realized. “What are you scared of, Spike?”

Because of the distance, the cold clean air, he couldn’t keep his silence that had become automatic in her presence. “That you’ll have no need of me anymore. Not say so, just start pulling away, ducking away because that’s how you do. All the words still there but nothing behind them anymore. All closed off. Can’t reach you, touch you anymore. You go away, inside. When--”

He finally clamped down on the babble. The chill air stung his eyes. He couldn’t bear the silence.

She said, “I am so horribly, wretchedly bad at this. Dammit. Can’t see you. Can’t know what you’re thinking when I can’t see your eyes, when you’re not here. Why couldn’t you bring this up the thousand times you could have, when you were here? Why does it have to be now?”

“Dunno, love. Just is. Didn’t mean to. Tried this once not to be dumb, not keep nagging at you like I do. Know you hate that. Pull back and go all closed anytime I keep pushing at you. Trying to do better, let you be. Messed that up too now. Not doing it right, seems like I can never do it right, be what I should, be any different than I am. Which is not enough. Not right for you. No matter, let it be. Sorry if I upset you. Never meant. You take care now.”

Spike turned off the phone. After a long while, he opened his hand and let it fall.

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As the sky was just beginning to lighten, Oz stepped down from the van, pushing hands through his wildly upstanding hair and yawning, then sniffing at the smells coming off the small and extravagantly safe campfire Spike had made at the eastmost margin of the clearing, where there’d be long shadows well into the morning. Ground scraped clean down to the dirt with the sharp edge of a
rock for six feet around, fire contained within a circle of stacked stones (none of the kind that would fracture or burst from the heat), two narrow plates of sandstone across the top to serve as the cooking surface for the bacon with the coffeepot back to one side, just staying warm. Spike was on about his eighth cup of coffee, but he’d made fresh and there was plenty left.

“Didn’t know this came with the service,” Oz remarked appreciatively.

Spike nodded, setting the frying pan across the sandstone plates to heat. He wouldn’t pour the slurried-up eggs into it until Oz was ready. Otherwise, they’d be cold.

While Oz disappeared around the van, presumably to take a piss, Spike turned the bacon strips with whittled chopsticks and removed to the side the ones he judged done. Then he poured coffee into the waiting mug.

No great achievement: except for the campfire, everything needed had been in either the small refrigerator that ran off the van’s extra battery or one of the boxes beside it. That Spike viewed camping out as strictly a desperation measure didn’t mean he didn’t know how. There’d been quite a lot of desperation in a century and a quarter, every now and again. He knew how to take care of himself. And he’d always been partial to human food.

As Oz approached and bent to pick up the mug, Spike judged him still a bit stiff about the knees. He’d heard werewolves were nearly as indestructible as vamps, with the usual few exceptions, and had pretty much the same accelerated healing. But he had no idea of how quick that was in practice. He was still keeping the bite wrapped, but mostly to protect the healing patch from chafing. It took longer when actual meat was missing.

Inquiring with a look and a tilt of his head if Oz was ready for anything beyond coffee, Spike added some bacon drippings and then poured the eggs into the pan. After about a minute he whisked them up with the flattened ends of the chopsticks. Better if you mixed in a little milk first, but all he’d found was cans of evap and that would have turned the eggs as heavy as lead so he’d made do with water. The tumbled eggs came off the pan nicely with barely any sticking: that was the bacon grease. He reversed the chopsticks to pick up the bacon strips, neat and deft, three at a time, arranging them to the side of the plate, then set it on the cleared ground where Oz could reach it.

“Aren’t you gonna have any?”

Spike pushed the chopsticks into the gap. What with the bacon grease, they flamed up immediately. He absently licked his fingers clean, then added coffee to his half empty mug and drank some. “Smell, flavor is all I need. Or can use. Got that.”

When Spike slid his cigarette pack out of his shirt pocket and lit up, Oz made no comment whatsoever. The meticulously cleared ring around the campfire had made its point. As Spike had meant it to.

Finishing the last of the eggs, Oz commented, “You know your way around a set of chopsticks. Tibet?”

“China. Handy all-purpose tool, once you get the trick of it. Good weapon, at need, too. Through the ear, or the eye. Or with vamps, just under the third rib....” Spike shook his head, saying, “Never mind. Push the button, that’s the speech that comes out. Like a bloody museum exhibit. I forget I’m not talking to the children anymore.”
“Children?”

Spike shrugged. “Potential Slayers. They were with us for awhile. All gone home now, or mostly….” Glancing at the brightening sky, Spike went on, “Thought if we made an early start, we could take a look at that last site and be back before noon. Expect I’ll have to go to ground then awhile, with the sun directly overhead.”

“Your turn in the van, if you want.”

“Sooner someplace dark. Fine thing, those windows, but I don’t want to get used to it. Forget, maybe, what I can’t afford to forget.”

“Yeah. All right…. I’m told there’s a cabin goes with the fire station. Likely a trail between there and the tower. I’ll hunt it out.”

“That would be good. You set?”

Rising, Oz eyed the campfire dubiously until Spike doused it thoroughly with a gallon jug of water. When not even steam remained, Spike gave Oz an inquiring, eyebrow-lifted glance asking if all was in good order and up to standard. Oz smiled and turned away, carrying the pan, plate, and utensils back to the van so as not to attract inquisitive wildlife. Spike followed along with the coffee pot, still nearly full. No use wasting it, and it didn’t yet meet the standing-spoon test for too strong.

Over his shoulder, Oz asked, “Any problem if I go shifted?”

Spike shook his head. Didn’t matter to him, and he could understand Oz choosing the other aspect for the keener senses. Probably would cut way down on the conversation, too, which at the moment Spike found preferable, although he’d made a mental note to quiz Oz about working for the Powers, in as much detail as Oz was willing to give. Later, then.

The red wolf jumped down from the van carrying a medium drawstring bag in his jaws. When Spike held out a hand, Oz cocked his head, clearly not having expected the offer. “No trouble,” Spike said. “Must be a nuisance, having to drag clothes around. As the one with the hands at the moment, easier if I see to it.”

The wolf deposited the bag at Spike’s feet, and Spike hitched the drawstring cord to one of his belt loops. Then they set out, the wolf at a steady lope. No remaining sign of lameness. Maybe only the human aspect had to suffer that. Spike matched the pace easily, keeping a bit of his attention on the sun’s progress and noting every clearing where the sun might break through behind him before he reached the other side.

He thought his sun tolerance was greater than it had been: he’d frequently risked short dashes without even a blanket for cover and suffered no worse than surface burns. Maybe that was one of the tolerances vamps could develop over time. He didn’t know any vamps older than himself, that he might ask. Except Dru, a total nutter; and except Angel. There’d be ice skating in hell before Spike went to that source to enlighten his ignorance….

That made him think about Michael, so impatient to understand the powers and limits of his current estate. Basically a good lad. For a vamp. Probably hadn’t killed much above five hundred people, to keep himself fed, these past six years since he’d been turned. Only about ten busses’ worth. As compared to Spike, whose cumulative toll would have been hard-pressed to fit into your basic sports arena…. 
Damn soul starting in on him already. Like a downhill slope, canting his thoughts in certain
directions, making it a labor to keep going straight across, resist the drift. Now if he just could get
Red to contrive an amulet against that, matters on the inside of his head would be much improved.
Not a whole lot of use keeping intrusion out when he had this huge intrusion already firmly
entrenched within.

He’d been moving pretty much on automatic, keeping pace with the wolf, following along. Oz
tugging lightly at the bag made Spike realize that they’d stopped. No place in particular, that he could
tell. Trees all looked the same. Same overwhelming smell of pine. He untied the cord, and Oz trotted
off with the bag to change, with what Spike considered absurd modesty, given that they’d been stick
fighting, and Oz naked, the afternoon before. Well, Oz wasn’t a vamp, wasn’t a demon in a dead
body. That tended to distance you somewhat. In a secure, established lair, vamps didn’t bother much
about clothes the one way or the other. Didn’t need ‘em for warmth. Just habit. And the convenience
of pockets. And that was basically it. Apparently, twentysomething werewolves were shyer than
that. Probably wouldn’t fuck anything that moved, with or without a pulse, either. Different fettle of
kish altogether. One of Red’s phrases, that’d stuck with him….

Tucking in his shirt, Oz reappeared from among the trees, scuffling through the drifts of pine debris.
He laid the empty bag on the ground, then pointed off to the left. “Cabin’s there. Show you that
first.”

Following, Spike found a clearing he checked thoroughly before entering, the frame for a fake Swiss
chalet with one side of its roof caved in. As he went nearer, he saw a dirt track dead-ending in a twee
rusticated carport with carved gingerbread along the edges. Foul object. Private road, then.
Somebody’s forest weekend hideaway. Secretary shagging and that sort of thing, most likely.
Checking quickly again for sun high enough to slant its rays down into this open space, he changed
aspect. With a run, a leap, a bounce, a grab, and a swing, he was up on the sound part of the roof,
inspecting the damage.

Not blown outward. Nor cleanly broken, as it would have been by an artillery shell or the like. (Brief
image of Buffy with the rocket-launcher on her shoulder, almost instantly shut away. Wasn’t
thinking about that today. Staying straight on and away from the bottom of the hill.) Beams cracked,
some dangling. A pile of roofing, twee pine slab shakes (not very authentic) down below. Dropping
down, Spike could smell the death. Not raw and recent, but there. A very thorough death: he could
separate some components that told him people had been pulled rather thoroughly and messily apart.
He prowled through the rooms, finding them decorated in early affluence, until he thought he had the
shape of it pretty well. Four people dead by his count, though all tidied up now. Nary a chalked
outline--not even a yellow tape remaining to ward sightseers away from an ongoing investigation, if
there’d been one--if whatever passed for local authority hadn’t fallen victim to the Sunnydale
Syndrome and put the damage down to a wayward meteor or rampaging white supremacy militias
and their squads of rabid albino weasels, instead of whatever large thing had crashed through the
roof, basically opened it up like a cracker box and then eaten the contents.

He went back outside through the front door, leaving it shut but indifferently unlocked, and rejoined
Oz, standing by the carport.

“Another one here,” Oz said, pointing.

Spike studied the ground, and took in a long breath and held it. Then he shook his head. “Too
weathered. Take your word for it, though. That makes five.”
“Yeah. Family. Mom, pop, two kids and the friend of one of the kids. That’s the right tally, according to the obits.”

“How long ago?”

Oz tipped his head back, calculating. “Eleven days. Counting today. This is the freshest one. There are two more, radius of about twenty miles. And a couple of backpackers missing. Might be related or not.”

“Time since the first one was noticed?”

“A month. About. I got word two weeks ago.” Oz sounded faintly defensive, as though he thought, or thought Spike might think, he should have been able to prevent this.

“Yeah. All right. What’s the bag for, at the moment?”

“Start of the trackline I found.”

Spike was just as glad to get back under the cover of the trees. When Oz lifted the bag, Spike could make out the track, just barely: the resilient pine needles didn’t hold a mark well. But this was at the edge of a drift, and weight had pressed the litter into the ground. He judged the track as about eighteen inches across for the pad and then clawmarks beyond: two or three in advance of it and another one or two behind. Headed away from the chalet.

“Next one.”

Oz trotted maybe ten feet. Print was deflected to the left and blurred: except for Oz pointing it out, Spike wouldn’t have recognized it. “Next one.”

The next print was deflected to the right. So that was the stride measurement. Hip height would be something in excess of seven feet, and a stride length of about twenty.

“Show me the track.”

Oz ranged ahead, pointing out the tracks as he went. Spike noted, at a place where the track turned aside and went around, the approximate distance between the tree trunks that had been enough to deflect it. He adjusted the height and width estimates accordingly. Not a lumbering Triceratops sort of beastie. Trim little three ton package, short stubby legs, and a lot more slim body than the stride length would otherwise suggest. Likely a tail in there someplace: long and whippy. And therefore a neck to match.

“And then,” Oz remarked, “it just stops,” doing so himself, lifting both hands in a gesture of frustrated mystification. “Can’t tell anymore but the scent went dead here, too. Like it just up and vanished. I thought teleportation, but then why walk all that way first? Why break the roof if it could teep itself inside? Didn’t add up no matter which way I stacked it.”

Spike sat on his heels by the last track, idly poking at the matted pine needles. “So tell me: why’d you want a vamp to come look at this? You seen more of it than I could make out, on my own.”

Oz was shaking his head. “Didn’t ask for a vamp. Asked my contact for an expert on unusual wildlife. And she came up with you.”
“That a fact,” Spike remarked in a flattened voice. “This contact: she a Watcher?”

“Nope. A pretty good clairvoyant. Not an all-around witch like Will. Might have some Watcher contacts, for all I know. Never asked. She points me, I go.”

“That how it works…. How do the Powers come into it, then?”

“Why?” Oz was frowning, but not seriously yet.

“Curious, is all.” Spike didn’t say any more, just waited, looking steadily up at the boy.

Oz started to hunker down too. Both knees popped and he changed his mind, grimacing. “Couple years back, the group had a gig at a jam festival near Anaheim. Really: jam. Knott’s Berry Farm? Tourist attraction near Disneyland. Put on shows, had events. Not too bad. Not too many juicers, and too square to attract the pothead, hashish, and curious pills crowd. Some people actually listening to the music. Anyway, a lady came up to me after the first set. She knew things. Lots of things. Freaked me out, pretty much, actually. Handed me something. Said if I wanted to help people, I’d keep it. And said she’d be in touch. That night I had a semi-weird dream in which she explained about the Powers and said they’d told her I was a likely prospect, stuff like that.” Oz laughed uneasily, kicking at the pine straw. “A few weeks after that, she sent me on my first assignment. Fake haunting, that one was. Somebody trying to force tenants to vacate a building. Bit the ghost in the ass, kind of made a developer look really stupid. Kind of fun, and I was between gigs anyway. Not really demanding. Not even one a month, just what she thinks I can help with. I figure she has others, for other kinds of problems. No conflict so far with any gig I’ve signed on for, and I like helping.” Oz shrugged. “I get expenses and a little extra. Special stuff when that’s needed. Like the glass. Appointment was all made and everything, four hours later the job was done and I could turn around and head for Sunnydale.”

Spike didn’t particularly like knowing the glass had been installed specifically on his account. He’d just figured it had some advantage to Oz, or to other vamps he’d worked with before. “This lady. Your contact. She got a name?”

Oz considered him a long minute, deciding. “Marjorie. Wexler. Uses the professional name ‘Sunshine Mystical Services.’”

That forced a laugh from Spike, and after a second Oz laughed too, realizing the name wasn’t all that great an omen to a vamp.

“Obliged to you. Now come on, and I’ll show you something.” Spike led on the way the tracks were headed. He didn’t have to go far. Maybe a dozen feet or so before the trees ended in a clear-cut patch completely open to the sky and shimmering with sunlight and clouds of insects. Oz looked at the clearing, then around at Spike again.

It was bright enough to make Spike’s demon very uneasy. Letting game face go dimmed things down a little, gave him some distance. He explained, “Your beastie trudged cheerfully along because it was full of the residents of Ugly Swiss Fantasy #27 and because open space there was a little too tight. Came along here,” (Spike pointed along the line of the track, far to near, with a finger, then lifted his hand and soared it upward.) “--and opened its wings and flew away.”

Oz frowned dubiously, then tried to smooth his face out to neutral. “No confirmed dragon sightings since the thirteenth century.”
“Tisn’t a dragon. Nor even a Sh’narth Wyrm. But it’s here because the Sh’narth are. Tagging along for the honeymoon, so to speak. Sort of a Sh’narth cousin: a Taskin. Adolescent. Grown, they’re too big to fly and not interested anyway. Here’s how it goes. Junior Taskin catches the scent of a courting pair of Sh’narth. Real attracted. If he hurries, and he can hurry pretty brisk compared to a Sh’narth, he’ll catch ‘em before they sniff out a dimensional rift and go sit on it until it buckles. Hitchhikes along with them, more or less, and wherever they end up, he ends up. Then he practically stands on his lumpy head, aerial displays, the whole works, trying to get a female Sh’narth to dump her current date and mate with him. Tisn’t likely, but it’s been known to happen. Every now and again, you’ll run into a Sh’narth with vestigial wings. So some of the boys get lucky, it would seem. This one’s all disappointed. Lost his mission in life. So he’s living off the land, what he finds good to eat. Maybe hoping in his dim little brain another Sh’narth pair will come through and make life interesting again. How far to the coast, from here?”

“Fifteen, twenty miles.”

“About a day’s march, for a Sh’narth. Must be a rift in this general area. Our boy’s still hopeful, hanging about the area he knows best. Where he came through. Area that’s got Sh’narth sign. Find Sh’narth sign and backtrack, you have the rift. Taskin will be laired up as near to it as he can find a good place.”

“What kind of places do Taskin like?”

“Caves. They like caves. Especially caves with water nearby.”

Oz showed a slow, big grin. He had the same sort of mouth as Willow, Spike noticed: Willow could do a big grin like that, though it’d been some while since Spike had seen her produce one. Nodding, Oz said, “That’s good. That’s really good.”

“Don’t figure you tagged your Taskin just because you know what name to hang on it.” Spike straightened, inspecting the sky. “Maybe you could show me where that fire-spotter’s cabin is.”

“Sure thing. Aim for the watch tower, then backtrack from there. Sure to be a trail.”

Apparently Oz didn’t feel it necessary to shift for the return trip. Meant more talking, probably. Shouldn’t complain: he’d provided good and useful information on his contact and how he perceived his relationship with the Powers. Good thing to know, that. A beginning anyway. And Spike figured by the time this cabin was located, he might finally be tired enough, wound down enough, to sleep.

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Spike woke, roused and gripped by one of those Get out of here: now! impulses you didn’t question. He rolled off the pile of blankets and was out the door all in one motion, with no idea what had alarmed him or even where he was or why, trying to scan everything around him with sleep-dazed eyes that didn’t want to take anything in and a mind that refused to process it. Coffee, he thought. I need coffee.

Despite not knowing where he was, some internal steerage was working because he set out through the trees directly for where the van was parked. Except it wasn’t: the clearing was empty. The treetops still blazed in sun but everything below was twilight against deeper dark past the first arc of sentinel trunks opposite. Unknown birds he couldn’t see were singing soft, tentative evening songs in counterpoint with crickets. Doing a steady, stupefied blink, Spike wandered into the open, and the van was still gone, and although the obvious conclusion would have been that Oz had dumped and
deserted him, that didn’t even occur to him. Couldn’t get past the emptiness, the absence of the van: raw uninterpreted sense data.

He shut his eyes, waiting to catch up with himself, and even drowsed so, standing, until alerted by far-off engine noise. He didn’t yet know the characteristics of the van engine well enough to identify it positively. The sound seemed to have too much range and confusing harmonics—as though a Porsche were racing in one of the lower gears with a garbage truck. Before he’d made any sense of that, the cause lurched into view, picking a path through the obstacle course of trunks, bouncing crookedly over projecting roots and rocks. The van. And the second and larger vehicle behind it was Buffy’s SUV.

What seemed like the next moment, the two vehicles had come into the clearing and halted alongside one another. The engines cut off. Buffy, Oz, and a taller, slender girl—Dawn, of course: what was Dawn doing here?—convened in front, and Oz pointed in Spike’s direction. Buffy wheeled and started coming at a fast march, arms swinging, head bent: she was mad.

*I’m for it now,* Spike realized hazily, not at all alarmed, because Buffy had found him, was coming for him. The sense of rescue was overwhelming.

From her first stride, Buffy had her mouth going: “Now you shut up, you don’t say anything because I’ve been rehearsing this nearly seven hours on the road and I hate driving, I really hate driving, and it’s all your fault Dawn missed school, and I’m missing a parent-teacher conference, all because you’re an idiot.” Arriving before him, without hesitation she belted him in the left temple and knocked him down. Spike didn’t get the whole sequence, just the start and then the end, where he was flat on his back and looking up at her, standing there with fists planted on her hips, all wonderful and fierce and pissed-off, ranting on, “Can’t I leave you alone one single hour without your convincing yourself of something utterly crazy and going off like a rocket? Straight into the dirt? Up the whole freaking night, Spike, first trying to call you and then call the number Oz left, waking up some total freaking stranger and trying to explain how I have to locate my insane idiot vampire boyfriend who’s freaking out in some forest in goddam Oregon, for God’s sake, and do you have the least idea how that made me feel, Spike? And then she couldn’t get through either, well she could and left voicemail, she said, but still nothing, hours and hours of nothing, and the sun was out, and, and another thing: How is it you could last through six weeks of torture and never once, you said, in the least doubt I’d come for you, but you can’t get through one single freaking day away from home and not believe I’m gonna dump you, leave you? How could you do that to me, Spike?”

She stood there, all clenched up in rage and hurt, face twisted up and breathing hard, tears pouring down her cheeks, so beautiful there were no words for it. Though it probably wasn’t the best idea, Spike got up and held her almost hard enough to break bones because he couldn’t not. It wasn’t an answer, nothing solved or changed, but that didn’t matter because she was here and had come for him. Yet again. And there were no words for that either: so large and shining that he couldn’t begin to encompass it. His sense of rescue was no different and no less. It held him mute and shaking and hanging onto her very hard because he couldn’t think past this, the immediacy of her. Not in her presence. All of his senses locked in absolutely.

And when she pushed a hand free to move fabric aside, to bare the mark, there was no choice, no hesitation, any more than when she’d hit him. All part of the one thing, the continuum of what they were to one another. Changing aspect, he sank into her and was of her with no separation and no more thought.

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Sitting by the fire with Spike leaning on an elbow possessively across her lap, Buffy was still theoretically mad as hell at him. In more practical terms, picking at gooey toasted cheese and bits of semi-burned chicken—part of the tapestry Oz had assembled to be supper for three (picking up food being one of the undoubtedly countless things she’d forgotten in her snatch-the-keys-and-go frenzy)—Buffy felt she had a lot in common with the toasted cheese if it’d been shagged into the forest floor repeatedly. All crazy haste and carelessness in that too. Although the mark tingled with energy, her mouth, ribs, and regions south were sore, and Spike had bruises blooming too, some of them visible. Not even counting the bandage he’d had wound around the top of his leg. He’d lost that, someplace along the line. His T-shirt was also on backwards and inside-out, not that anybody cared.

Feeling Dawn’s fingers on her back, Buffy said sharply, “What?”

“You have pine needles all stuck in your sweater.” All priss-faced and solemn, Dawn displayed those she’d plucked. When Buffy said nothing, Dawn took it as permission to continue the removal of incriminating evidence. Of course she’d made a total nuisance of herself, insisting on coming along, but since arriving she’d muted way down, not saying much of anything. Buffy wondered vaguely if Dawn might be coming down with something.

Everybody was quiet. Oz attended to the fire and the cooking, lifting a shrewd glance at one or another of them from time to time, his usual taciturnity comfortably in place, and that was just Oz, after all. Spike, inertly relaxed, seemed nearly asleep. He hadn’t reached for a cigarette since she’d arrived. And Dawn lavished, unneeded and unwanted, on Buffy the care Spike didn’t need and wouldn’t accept: filling and passing her plate, opening the pop-top of a fresh soda for her, fussing around the periphery.

If Dawn could be trusted as a barometer, all was still very not well in Spike-land. Not that Buffy had really believed any different. Tonight, or two days hence, depending on how you chose to figure, Kim would be dead a week. Four days since he’d been shot. Buffy hadn’t asked him what had become of his cellphone. Really upset, he tended to throw things. From a hundred plus feet up, she figured she had to consider the cell a write-off.

She still loved the back of his neck: slender and vulnerable-looking, just below where the hair ended. Mindful of audience, she contented herself with petting him there, fingertips and knuckles alternately. In response he bent his head further, giving her better access.

He grumbled to Oz, “Thought no signal could get through here.”

“True.”

“Then how did they get ahold of you, figure how to find us?” The motion of Spike’s head, back and then to the side, indicated Buffy and Dawn.

“Mar-- My contact can stick some extra mojo on. She always gets through.”

“You objecting to the company, Spike?” Dawn inquired, just short of teasing, delicately nibbling at the end of a hot dog.

“You been watching Tom Jones, Bit?”

“The singer?”

“The movie.”
Coloring, Dawn hastily set the hot dog on her paper plate and began carving it into scrupulously even segments with plastic utensils.

Buffy didn’t know the reference but caught the implication. She gave him sharp knuckles in the top vertebrae. “Don’t be mean. You owe her an apology too.” Of a slightly different sort, perhaps, but Buffy meant it all the same.

“Sorry, Bit,” said Spike obediently. “Didn’t mean to worry you. Or anybody.”

“Well, you did,” Buffy snipped, and then realized how much she sounded to herself like Anya. That had to go. “Oz, why don’t you tell Dawn about this dragon, or whatever we have on our hands here. Spike, move: I want you to show me the watch tower.”

Spike slumped theatrically. “No tree you’d like to look at, instead?”

“Move.” She gave his back a shove.

“I’d like to hear about the dragon,” Dawn pimped on cue, contriving to look fascinated.

Oz showed a small private smile that said nobody was kidding anybody here but he didn’t mind, and started talking. He could, when he wanted to. And especially when it was just family.

Spike hauled to his feet and they wandered off. Back among the trees, he went to game face, maybe because he was tired and maybe to see better. He didn’t seem sure of the way, slowing and looking around from time to time.

“I’ve been thinking,” Buffy began.

“Never a good sign.”

“Shut up. I was thinking about what you asked, about what’s next, and Dawn and I talked it over too, on the way up. Not that there was a lot to do, and only this really awful music on the radio--What?”


“I admit it: I’ve been putting it off. Put off thinking about it. Deciding. Kind of confronting the Great Unknown here, all right? And you are too. I understand that. Understand you tried your best to keep out of it, not try to influence me or force things. And I think I know, now, how hard that was for you. And why it came out how it did, when we were apart. Because we were apart. It was still dumb and thoughtless, and I still owe you a few more lumps for that, but I understand, all the same.”

Very deliberately, Spike released her hand and sat down on the ground.

“What now?” Buffy demanded.

“Not stirring a step till you dump all the understanding preliminary crap and just spit it out, love. Killing me here.” He lit a cigarette. The flame reflected in the gold of his eyes and then was gone.

“All right. Sorry. I have trouble that way. You know.” Buffy sat down next to him and took a deep
breath. “Item one: I don’t want college. One of us who knows Basement Greek is enough.”

“Oh, you caught me on that one, did you?” Earnestly, almost anxiously, he went on, “You could, though. Some way, we’d come up with the dosh. You’re a bright little thing, for all you mangle the language.”

“But it’s not my best thing, or what I want. Stick with the agenda. No college.”

“Right: no college. Got it. Next item.”

“I don’t want to move. There’s a chance now. Everything unstable, upset, nobody in charge.”

“Power vacuum. Yeah.”

“OK, power vacuum. There’s a chance to win, not just each battle, but the war. Without the Hellmouth powering things, there’s a chance to settle, stabilize, the situation in Sunnydale once and for all. So wherever the next Big Bad pops up, it won’t be there because it would find nothing to work with. Fix things so the number that actually graduate from good ol’ Sunnydale High compares favorably to the mortality rate. Make things be normal. And get to dictate what normal is. Make it happen. There’s a chance now.”

“You sure about that, pet? ‘Cause that would be hard and nasty. And neither one of us has ever been much of a planner.”

Buffy shook her head emphatically. “Doesn’t matter. I know from no more dead kids. Don’t have to be a master strategist to know what’s unacceptable. And I want it. I want it bad. You used to complain to the SITs that we were always two steps slow and two dollars short. Always fighting reactively. Trying to put out one fire while two more were being set. It’s true. But it doesn’t have to be true. We could sell fire extinguishers. Don’t let ’em get started in the first place. Take away the fuel. Insert here the metaphor of your choice. We could do it, Spike. And I don’t think anybody else could. Only us.”

That us was what he’d been waiting for. What he’d needed. And what she’d therefore concocted for him since that dreadful phone call. His relief was immediate and unmistakable: a huge sigh and no more conscientious protests. He leaned his forehead against hers, his dread of being outgrown, unneeded, finally reassured.

Buffy had considered returning to college. Even vaguely assumed it. She’d gone a couple of semesters—the era of Riley Finn and the Initiative that had changed her life and Spike’s so drastically and set them on their present course, though neither could have suspected it at the time. It had been a hopeful beginning, and she’d resented it when her mom’s death and Slayer concerns had forced her to drop out. But so much was different now; and that would have been a different life—one that relegated Spike to the periphery. He was the Slayer’s consort, not Buffy’s; and he knew it. To try to resume the unremarkable life of Buffy Summers would inevitably mean losing Spike. And he’d known that too and feared it, rightly and profoundly. Amazing that he’d forced himself to keep silence as long as he had.

His blurted question had made Buffy finally know and face and make the choice whose implications she’d been ducking. Made her affirm her vocation as Slayer more decisively and clearly than ever before. She knew she’d never look back.

To lighten things and make the moment pass, she remarked, “You have Dawn pretty well trained,
you know. Whatever bandwagon has us on it, she’s ready to jump onto, regardless.”

“Be lost without Bit. She knows that…. Sorry if I forced things.”

“You lie through your pointy teeth, barbarian. And I don’t think you forced things so much as things forced you. I’ve heard the silence, felt you pulling back behind it. Just didn’t know that was why. Because you know what? What you said about me, how I pull back and go all closed off, make the right noises and don’t admit to what I’m feeling? That’s true. I do. But you know what else? You do it, too. Maybe it’s catching or something. And I don’t know how to break through it. Any better than you do, I guess. Just pull back and worry and feel hurt. Like you write a note in blood, Don’t Fret, and think that’s gonna reassure me. Insane vampire person!”

“I expect. Don’t know how to do. Guess, and guess wrong. Dunno how to do better.”

Buffy sighed. “I know. Me neither. But so long as we’re still in there pitching, so long as being apart is utterly unacceptable, I have to believe we can learn. Bloody and messy and stupid sometimes, but we’ll learn.”

“Dunno if I can. Hammered on the left and then hammered on the right, to the point that everything I do seems wrong. Sure, I’m an arrogant git. But…just so fucking tired of being wrong.”

“Next item, and be prepared to howl bloody murder. Because I know you’re not gonna like it.”

“Dead of the suspense already. Spit it out, for pity’s sake.”

“I want you certified, accredited, and paid as my Watcher. That’s what we are. That’s what we do. I want it formally acknowledged. You’re a rare commodity with the Council at the moment: they’re courting you, which is more than they ever did for me. Slayers are cheap, we both know that. A vampire Watcher would be unique. A historic first. They’re paying you goddam tribute, even if they don’t know yet to call it that. We have to use whatever torque that gives us, and bluff the rest. Before they revert to the ‘evil soulless thing’ party line again, which we both know they will eventually. Giles won’t be here much longer and a Slayer needs backup. Somebody to train with, call her on it when she gets lazy or careless or overconfident. Somebody who can tell me how to kill the demon of the week, that I never saw before. Somebody with a vested interest in me staying alive. That's you. You bend a little their way--read their rotten books--and Giles thinks he could make them bend a little toward us. I woke him up, too, in the middle of the night. Maybe he wasn’t even wearing his glasses, which would be a first. Then when they revert, you’ll be all tweed and seniority, with a goddam track record; and the wrath will fall elsewhere.” Buffy waited. “What’s the matter? I haven’t heard a howl yet.”

Spike picked up pinches of pine needles and pitched them fretfully away. “Dunno if I can. Tweed collar and all. And been a whole lot of years since even Basement Greek. Dunno if I could even do what they want, what they expect.”

“Giles thinks you can.”

“Giles doesn’t know what the sodding hell--!” Spike stubbed out the coal of the cigarette. That took some time. And instead of pitching the butt, he inserted it back in the pack. “If that’s what you want, I’ll try.”

“Good. That’s settled.”
They both burst out laughing at what a gigantic, hopeful lie that was.

Buffy leaned and kissed his cheek glancingly. Then he turned and made a much more serious business of it. Coming up for air, Buffy looked him straight in his yellow eyes. “But I’ll tell you one thing. Once is fine. Even twice is fine. But if you ever pull a stunt like this again, I’ll figure you’re yelling ‘frog’ to see how high I’ll hop. Don’t ever play around with the emergency codes just to see if they work. I won’t be played, Spike.”

His nose and mouth nuzzled in behind her ear, above the mark. Tongue tasting there. “Wasn’t playing. Only scared.”

“Young you got to get yourself un-scared, all on your own. Because I can’t make you believe, or trust me, or trust yourself. That has to be you.”

A silence and stillness. Then: “All right. That’s fair. But you don’t know how it is. Tried to tell Michael once. It’s how vamps are: immediate. Everything close is real intense. But we pay for that. We lose the distance. Can’t see it. Can’t feel it. Don’t know it. Past a certain distance, ‘snot real. Away from you, I have to imagine. And it’s not the same. And not enough. Have to feel you there, all the time, every minute, to believe. To know. No good at distances at all, and that’s not gonna change. Can’t change. How I am because of what I am. No changing that.”

“All right. I’ll try to remember and allow for that. Spike is hot for ‘clingy.’ Any more little nuggets like that?”

“Not at the moment. Bulletins when they occur.”

“Then let’s do that tower.”

“Fuck. No option?”

“No. When we get to the top, I’ll tell you why.”

“Goddam bloody hell. On your feet, then, and don’t whine and decide halfway up that you want to be carried, like the goddam Statue of Liberty tour.”

Buffy thought he’d just crossed a circuit with a Dru-memory, but declined to say so. They both had to be tactful about exes.

He hadn’t been exaggerating: it was a long climb and got colder the higher they got. Unexpectedly Buffy found herself assailed by memories of Glory’s tower and forced them away as best she could, head stubbornly bent and trying to attend only to the chore at hand—the next rung, the next handhold. Keep it all intense and close, the way a vamp would, and shrug off whatever other garbage tried to distract her. Be “in the moment.”

The moment eventually brought her to a solid roof over her head. Climbing below her, Spike directed her in finding the bolt that held the trapdoor in place, and they climbed onto the platform. Her calves ached. It was going to be a wretched business getting down, and maybe worse for Spike, with that nearly-healed bite mark he didn’t intend to discuss. But it was worth it, she insisted to herself, looking away and far off over the rail.

It was a dizzying height. The moon, just past the full, had already begun its decline. A clear white light illuminated threads and eddies of clouds moving in far below. Some trees, they concealed.
Others poked their heads through in fringed, feathery rosettes. Buffy reached in a pocket and brought out a zip-close bag she pressed into Spike’s hand. As he looked at it and then at her, she was almost distracted by what the light did to the planes of his face, his shoulders, his strong arms.

She explained softly, “It’s Kim. Mike showed me where. Maybe I brushed up a lot of other stuff too, but that’s everything. Everything there was. When you told me last night what it looked like, where you were, I thought…”

“Yeah. Well.” He frowned at the little packet of dust. Presently he said, “Don’t believe vamps know anything after we go. Don’t believe they get the chance to sit on the little clouds and watch. But what was gone from Kim, maybe it’s someplace. And I’d like to think I’d done right by her. And…and might be, this would have pleased her. Better than what was, anyway. Good of you to have thought of this, love. For a vamp.”

“Don’t fret,” said Buffy. “Let her go.”

So he did.
Peeking out the SUV’s door, Buffy found the air chill and the campsite thickly embedded in fog. The only light was the flames of Spike’s breakfast campfire flicking up like the hands of bright prisoners reaching through a grate. Huddled in a blanket, she shuffled to a log dragged handy to the fire and sat, leaning toward the warmth. His back turned, Spike was doing breakfast preparations next to the van, humming and banging things around. Dawn climbed down past him, also clutching a blanket, and joined Buffy on the log. Blinking into her paper cup of juice, Dawn inquired sourly, “Who wound him up?”

Buffy only smiled. She’d wakened from a pleasant dream to a still more pleasant reality: Spike “starting without her,” as he put it, and happily experimenting to find out which attentions would prompt her to wake and join in. “Nothing like it to work out the kinks,” he’d claimed blithely afterward, and smacked her rear, and bounced out to start breakfast.

Buffy knew better: he still had plenty of kinks left.

She bent her head over a very large yawn she couldn’t cover without losing hold of the blanket. When her jaw unlocked, she asked Dawn, “Where’s Oz?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. He snores.”

Hearing Spike moving behind her, Buffy entreated plaintively, “Coffee?”

“Right with you, love. Here you go.” Coming and bending, Spike offered a steaming mug until Buffy could figure out the logistics of grasping it without blanket-loss, then was gone again, frighteningly brisk. One of his manic phases. That was OK, Buffy decided. She’d seen all the restrained, solemn depresso-Spike she cared to for awhile.

Venturing to change the mug from hand-warmer to container of heated beverage, Buffy sipped, then reared her head back, demanding, “What’s in this?”

“Little pick-me-up. Medicinal purposes only,” came Spike’s reply.

Buffy chanced another sip of bourbon-flavored café a la Spike, making ook-face. But it was wonderfully hot and it did leave a really pleasant core of warmth in her middle once it was down. She found she could dispense with the blanket after all.

Spike called, “Dogboy’s got oatmeal. If there are any takers, I’ll attempt it.”

“The real kind,” Dawn inquired, “with lumps? Or the add-boiling-water kind with fake fruit?”

“Believe it’s the fake fruit kind. What with the envelope an’ all.”

“Pass,” said Dawn.

“Then pancakes are the thing. An’ I know you like them.”

“You gonna do the death-defying flip thing? ‘Cause if they end up with needles and dirt in ‘em, I’m passing on that, too.”
“Oh, no: I put the needles and dirt in first. Saves time. ‘Tisn’t an automat here, Bit. Finite choices. Eat or starve.” A fresh idea occurred to him: “There’s considerable spoiled blood left, if you’d care to have a go at that.”

“Oh, ick, Spike!” Dawn blurted. “Why’d you have to make me imagine that?”

“Just trying to be obliging here. Uninvited guests have to make do with what they find.”

Buffy held up a tremulous hand. “Eggs?”

“Eggs it is, though that’ll be the last of ‘em. Best wrap this all up today ‘cause tomorrow the larder will be extremely bare.”

“I’m all stiff,” Dawn complained, straightening and then slumping again. “My back hurts. And if you start making time-of-the-month jokes, Spike, you can say goodbye to your dusty remains.”

Looking around, Buffy found Spike momentarily still, looking toward her. They met each other’s eyes for a moment, probably thinking the same thing: the tower; Kim. Then Buffy attended to her coffee-with and Spike went back to cracking a succession of eggs into a saucepan in lieu of a bowl.

“I mean, it’s like trying to sleep on the floor,” Dawn went on, oblivious. “What am I saying: it is trying to sleep on the floor! Aren’t you all lame too?” she asked Buffy.

“No, I think I have all my kinks worked out just fine,” Buffy replied, prompting a loud but indeterminate noise from Spike.

Dawn lifted her chin haughtily. “I really truly don’t want to know.”

Coming to the fire and placing pans and containers in handy positions, Spike sat on his heels, riposting, “Might want to save that for somebody who actually cares.”


“What you need, Bit, is a nice brisk walk. Ten miles or so. Loosen you right up.”

“Fine. I come to console a miserable vamp and I get the scoutmaster from hell.”

“If this whinging is your notion of consolation, I’d hate to find out what actual help would be like.”

“It’s like not playing, Spike: you couldn’t afford it.”

“Yeah, and what’s the going rate on swordfish?”

Their quick-fire, mostly nonsensical bickering was better than anything Buffy had been able to find on the radio, the whole trip. And it didn’t require anything from her at all. They had it down to an art. Like tennis–you didn’t have to understand the insane scoring to watch. Buffy felt amazingly kinkless and content.

About the time Dawn had consumed the first round of pancakes and the single frying pan was being repurposed for scrambled eggs, Oz appeared out of the fog and immediately collected coffee for himself.
“We set?” Spike asked him and Oz nodded, winning by two fewer words.

Pouring frothy eggs into the frying pan, Spike commented, “Then everybody eat up and take care of all necessaries so we can get this show on the road.”

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Oz and Spike were someplace up ahead, casting separately across the rocky hillside to locate the Sh’narth trail they’d been backtracking. Buffy was next, frequently visible looking back to check that Dawn, laboring along last, hadn’t vanished completely. Although the fog had gone golden with the sunrise, it was still dense and deceiving. Visibility about, like, a foot and a half. Dawn was unhappily aware that she was slowing everybody down.

Her legs hurt. Her back hurt. And hard as she tried to push herself, she couldn’t keep up. Then she walked off the edge of a ravine.

“Everybody else has supers--super speed, super endurance, super-not-tripping-and-skinning-your-knee-and-bleeding-ness--except me. It isn’t fair,” she complained to Spike, crouched before her, starting to wrap a long strip from what had been his T-shirt around the cut.

“Certainly seems like a waste,” he responded. She figured he meant the blood.

“You can taste it if you want,” Dawn offered dispiritedly. “Seal it with spit. Uber-gross, but I don’t care.”

She had blood all down her shin, on her sock, and into her sneaker. She’d never get it out. The sneakers were ruined forever. When Spike didn’t reply, she poked his bare shoulder. “Aren’t you tempted even a little?”

“Oh, something terrible,” he assured her blandly, attending only to the lay of the wrap: smoothing each turn, all of it deft and competent. “Haunt me for years, this will. Feel too tight anyplace? Too tight and it’ll cut off your circulation. Gangrene, amputation, wicked systemic blood poisoning. Render you uneatable for life, that would, and what a terrible disappointment to Michael, poor lad.”

He showed her a smirk that combined sardonic, knowing, heartlessly cheerful, and sympathetic all layered together. But although blue, his eyes remained vampire eyes: regarding her as though for this moment, nothing else existed.

Buffy materialized out of the fog on the other edge of the ravine. “Spike?”

“Yes, love.”

“We’re above the tree line, and this fog is gonna burn off.”

“Yeah.”

“There’s no shade. No cover. And we’ve come quite a way from the trees. You have to…. How about if you take Dawn back to camp? Now she’ll never be able to keep up.”

Buffy trying to be tactful: not a pretty picture. She’d managed to annoy them both. Spike bowed his head, tying the last knot, and patted Dawn’s knee gently--at the side, where it wouldn’t hurt. Dawn felt a guilty relief at the prospect of being left behind; Spike was long resigned to the limits, even
though he didn’t like them.

Holding out her hand, Dawn murmured, “Spike, meet pretext. Hi! I’m pretext!”

“So you are, pet. And very good at it, too,” Spike murmured back, then stood and turned. “You’re right, Slayer. Just see if you can locate it, then. Don’t you and Oz try to take it on alone. We’ll come back after dark and see to it, once we know where it’s laired.”

Tilting her head, Buffy smiled at him. “Oh, we’ll leave some of the fun for you, never fear.”

Collecting the medium axe--about three feet long, with a double-headed, nearly circular blade--he’d laid aside to take care of Dawn’s knee, Spike flipped to the lip of the ravine. “Hands up, pet,” he directed, and lifted Dawn up beside him. He continued to hold her arm. “Try and see if that knee’s gonna do all right.”

Dawn took an experimental step. “Only a little sore. And klutzy. Maybe that’s my super power: I’m Superklutz! I’ll be fine. Semi-fine, anyway.”

Starting downhill was a little hard: she had to lock the knee at every step. But she tried her best to move normally, to not overstress the other knee and have it lame and hurting too. Spike kept fingers on her elbow, just enough so he could grab if he needed to.

When she was sure she was going to be able to manage, she noticed she could see the ranked trunks of the first trees at the base of the slope, though anything higher was still completely obscured. The fog was lifting. Looking around at Spike, she said, “The fog’s going. I don’t trust it. You go on ahead, and I’ll meet you at the edge of the trees. Really. No need to hobble along with the dorky invalid. If you go all flambé, Buffy’s gonna murder the both of us.”

“Not too far now, Bit.”

“Yeah, too far, if the sun comes out. You wouldn’t make it. Don’t be dumb, get going.” She gave him a shove.

Dawn was surprised when, instead, she found herself lifted off her feet and held in the cradle of his arms. Taking a first long jarring downhill stride, Spike said, “Compromise. See if you can mind the axe.”

Dawn was busy working the haft out from under his arm. So neither of them saw what swooped soundlessly out of the roof of fog and the next instant collided with Spike’s back with the impact of an eighteen-wheeler.

That they were knocked tumbling on a downhill slope was probably the only reason Dawn survived the initial contact. Even still rolling and sliding, she was aware of something big coming down at her like the bucket of a crane and braced both skidding elbows to give her some leverage, some control. Realigning to face the thing, she poked desperately in her overall pocket. Clutching the familiar contour of her taser, she thumbed the safety, jabbed, and fired, holding contact as long as she could, firing button still depressed. BIG breath blowing right in her face, enough to sweep her hair back, and then a recoil: the Taskin’s sportscar-sized head receding to the point Dawn could actually see it whole.

It was beautiful. The head wasn’t reptilian but long and foxlike, with a golden sheen in the early light. Great drooping whiskers or tendrils, saffron shading to vermilion, on either side of the snout,
whipped as the Taskin shook its head in reaction to the unpleasant sensation of being tasered. Not hurt at all: only startled and annoyed. Shoving up onto her knees, simultaneously numb and stinging, Dawn knew several things, all together: a taser absolutely wasn’t gonna be enough to drive the Taskin off, much less disable it; the Taskin had been drawn by the scent of her freaking blood—again! again!—and had locked onto her as prey; ergo, she wasn’t gonna be able to handle this on her own. She was toast. And where was Spike?

Looking wildly uphill, past the barrel chest and strongly muscled forelimbs that were all she could see of the Taskin’s body, she located Spike: the Taskin was standing on his back, huge talons gripping and releasing reflexively. What interest did a Taskin have in a cool, nearly scentless vampire when a tasty-looking/smelling human was leaking blood from a dozen cuts and scrapes?

Because Spike didn’t move, Dawn knew he couldn’t. So Dawn’s first priority had to be getting the Taskin off him. As the Taskin’s head dipped, jaws agape, Dawn tasered it in the chin the instant it was in reach. As the Taskin again recoiled, Dawn clambered to her feet and started running along the slant of the hill rather than down it. Certain that any second that long neck would stretch out and the jaws chomp down on her like a Popsicle, she concentrated completely on the obstructions, her balance, and making her running, jumping feet go where they had to be and pushing off again the second they hit.

The Taskin made a noise like Errrrrrrrghhh! almost in Dawn’s ear, scaring her half to death. Then she caught the crunch of its huge feet shifting on the loose gravel. It had moved, and not to come after her: it didn’t need to. After the next arms-lifted bound, Dawn landed solidly and dared to stop, turn, and look.

Spike was up on his knees. He’d recovered the axe and was whacking away at the Taskin’s nearest leg: so close that he’d had to choke way up on the axe haft and lean back to cut at it at all. So he wasn’t doing much damage, although the gashes were running with a milky-white fluid. The Taskin’s head was twisting around on the long sinuous neck topped with streamers and banners of umber-gold and cinnamon. Surprisingly agile for such a large creature, it danced its rear quarters away on the pivot of its forelegs, two sets of rigid wings the size of city blocks, tip to tip, working in a butterfly-like flap to assist the hop-and-turn. Dawn ducked fast as the tail whipped right over her. Then she dove onto the tail about halfway down, hung on with legs and arms, and tasered it with a continuous charge, cheek pressed tight against the warm, dusty-feeling hide. The tail twitched, trying to shake her loose, but she hung on fiercely and wasn’t dislodged.

It seemed forever before the tail stilled and the huge body heeled over. Dawn’s mouth was full of blood: she’d bitten her tongue. Really disgusting no matter what vamps said.

Spike, she thought then, and moved away from the tail, back uphill, scuttling like a beetle.

He was sprawled partly in and partly out of a shallow runoff gully that maybe had protected him from some of the weight. But it hadn’t protected him from the talons. Two deep gouges the diameter of baseball bats were punched in high on his back, welling blood in the slow, grudging way that vamps bled. Something wrong with the angle at which his torso met his hips. Almost certainly internal injuries she couldn’t even guess at. But he hadn’t dusted. Hadn’t dusted. Hadn’t dusted. Dawn muttered that like a mantra, patting hesitantly at his face, willing his eyes to focus on her: acknowledge and reassure her. They were half-open, dull, unmoving. But he hadn’t dusted, so it would be all right, had to be.

Then the sun came out.
Naturally it was Oz who located the lair. Buffy was good in a fight but had never claimed to be any kind of scout. Given that it would be more than an hour’s walk back to camp, Buffy decided to stick around and see if the Taskin came back rather than walk the whole distance between this cave and camp four times in a day. But by 10:00 there’d been no sign of it, and with all the fog burned off, their chances of surprising it at close range were pretty much shot. So Buffy slung the broadsword, in its sheath, over her shoulder and began the long downhill trudge.

She was trying to talk Oz into staying in Sunnydale another couple of weeks. She thought it would cheer Willow up considerably and maybe provide a buffer in the Kennedy situation. And as for rekindling romance…well, one never knew, did one? But of course she couldn’t say any of this to Oz, so her persuasions, logic, and reasons became increasingly fanciful, ornate, and preposterous. She even found herself arguing that it would be such a help to Spike to have a guy around he could really rely on. She imagined Spike snickering at the idea but nevertheless plowed on gamely.

By that point Oz was looking at her as though he suspected her of having some contagious insanity and the intention of biting him. Being Oz, though, he didn’t actually express his alarmed skepticism in actual words.

In the middle of Buffy’s rambling reminiscence of happy High School events the six (counting Cordelia) of them had shared, like the eruption of Hellhounds at the prom, Oz went into intent hunting mode as suddenly as though a switch had been flipped. He changed course and lengthened stride, leaving Buffy with her mouth open, surprised and belatedly charging after him.

The dragon, the Taskin, was dead. Its ungainly sprawled carcass took up a good third of a long scree-covered slope—as though a holiday parade balloon had broken loose and drifted to this landing place, partially deflated, dwarfing everything around it like a new feature of the landscape. Buffy could see it was like a Sh’narth and yet not—as colorful but more sleek and slender, more like a quick, jewel-bright lizard than a rampant crocodile, not that it was in the least reptilian. It was hard to come up with apt comparisons for something that weighed as much as a whole herd of cattle and yet conveyed an impression of delicacy and quickness. Even if it hadn’t, improbably, been equipped with two banks of wings like those of an enormous dragonfly.

Buffy approached the head cautiously. Its jaw had been hacked at, as had its neck. But the throat wound was probably what had killed it. In the beast’s death throes, the head had been thrown back into an S-curve against the spine; Buffy’s whole body would have fit into the exposed gash.

Walking further around the downhill side, Buffy noticed that one of the wings had been chopped off and had been propped diagonally between the ground and a portion of the tail, forming a kind of awning. Then she saw that it was Spike’s axe embedded in the wing stump and immediately began struggling uphill toward the awning where Oz was already crouched. She assumed it was Dawn hurt, and her first sight of her sister did nothing to change that assumption: both Dawn’s arms were scraped and gashed, her overalls were torn out at both knees, and she was sitting forlornly on the ground.

“Dawnie! How bad are you hurt?” Buffy demanded, hands hovering to grab but not yet sure what would be a safe, uninjured place.

Instead of answering, Dawn twisted and pointed a shaking hand at the improvised awning. “It was all I could think to do. But it took too long. I tried, but the bone just wouldn’t come loose. But it’ll be OK, he hasn’t dusted so it’ll be OK…”
Buffy thumped down on her knees as the actual situation penetrated. “Oz. Go bring the SUV as close as you can, as fast as you can. It’s got four-wheel drive. Wait! Here’s the keys.” As Oz took off, Buffy inched closer to the shade cast by the propped wing.

Dawn was saying, “I couldn’t leave because I had to move the wing. Keep the sun off.”

“You did fine, Dawn. I wouldn’t have thought the two of you could take a thing like this down.”

“It came up from behind, from the fog. Spike was already hurt before it stepped on him. I tried to draw it away, to let him up--”

“You did fine. I’m very proud of you.” Unbuttoning her blouse, Buffy was calm--even happy. She knew exactly what was to be done, and that it would be enough. Not having a knife handy, she scratched hard at the mark until it bled. “Now, this is important, Dawn: if I pass out, you have to make him stop. Any way you have to.”

“Yeah. I understand. I thought, but he wouldn’t, he wasn’t--”

Buffy had stopped listening. The space of shade under the wing didn’t have room for two, so she hiked herself up until at least her head and shoulders were in the dark. Her sun-dazzled eyes couldn’t make out much detail. But there was a strong smell of burning. Didn’t matter: no matter how bad he was, she’d seen worse. And for any vampire, healing was in the blood; and her blood best of all.

Because Spike hadn’t yet moved or reacted, she rubbed fingers against the bleeding mark and touched the wet to his lips. No reaction, so again. A seismic twitch through the whole of his body. Buffy bent to him, over him, comfortably and calmly, and felt the familiar tingle-and-draw when his mouth latched on and he began to feed. Nothing so bad that her blood couldn’t heal it. And no least discomfort anymore at offering. This was what they were and what they did. Sufficient to one another.

So Dawn could monitor, Buffy hummed a tune, a lullaby.

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It was like the mother and father of all hangovers plus the aftereffects of a bar fight in which he’d taken on all comers. But dark, quiet, all around: he was someplace safe. No need to move, which was lucky--he didn’t much feel like moving.

Buffy’s voice said, “Willow’s bringing more blood. The tribute blood. Oz has gone to meet her halfway. In the meantime, there’s this.”

The curved rim of a cup was held against his mouth and an arm started to lift him. He lost the moment in a flare of pain.

The next time he became aware, there was a strong, good taste in his mouth. Yet need, hunger, was a quivering ache all through him. His head turned toward the nearest source of warmth.

The warmth was Buffy: he could smell and feel her close. Her voice said, “Good. Time for round seven. Here it comes.”

His mouth was full of blood. Lukewarm, not hot from the source. He swallowed convulsively. More
was supplied until he was sated. Whatever he’d gotten himself into, he’d taken serious damage. He lay thinking, feeling the blood working in him like the throbbing of an engine. A sense memory popped up: the scent of marigolds. He remembered the Taskin.

“Bit--!”

“Fine,” Buffy’s voice reassured. “Scraped up, but fine.”

He couldn’t move, wasn’t quick enough, was gonna lose her--

It seemed to him he was talking to Buffy about the soul. Complaining of it: how it ruined feeding, fighting. No joy in them anymore. The things that were rightfully his. Buffy was responding that since he’d paid for it and that store had a no returns policy, he was stuck with it. When he started to argue, Buffy turned into Dawn, sitting high above him on top of a pillar, all dressed in white.

Dawn said, “You have your wings back. But it’s only temporary.” She began to bleed. Streaks of bright crimson down the chalk white pillar. She added, “Nothing to do with us at all.”

His shoulders ached. Missing the weight of his wings, where they’d been torn off. He couldn’t lift and reach her, where she was. Couldn’t stop her being hurt. Couldn’t move--

“It’s me,” said Dawn’s voice, confusingly right beside him, all warm and smelling like herself so he couldn’t doubt it. “The walking Band-Aid. It’s OK. You don’t have to worry. We killed it.” (Remembered smell of marigold: the Taskin’s creamy blood, heavy and sticky.) “Now, don’t be all tiresome about this, all right?”

He was presented with a mark that wasn’t his own. Flesh that smelled nearly the same but not. Didn’t mistake one for the other--too confusing. His demon didn’t care, wanted her anyway, but he didn’t allow that. He made the demon subside, retreat.

“Buffy,” Dawn’s voice complained, “I told you: he just won’t.”

“No problemo. I’m all set for another go. You be minder, OK?”

Then she came to him, his love, all warm with his mark upon her--healed but fresh-bitten, so that he hesitated. Perhaps it was that other that she wanted. But he was empty, and hurt. Another way, then.

She breathed a giggle in his ear, then whispered, “Mustn’t scandalize the children. C’mon: bite the nice lady. Burns are almost all gone. This is for the deep stuff. Spike?”


“Demon is right,” she said. “You need this. It’s OK. You’ll know when to stop.”

While he puzzled over Buffy and the demon agreeing about anything, she laced her fingers through his, laid her cheek against his. Where she touched, no pain was. She began humming, and it seemed to him he remembered that, and feeding, all serene. The good heat in his mouth, moving to his core. Since that seemed to be what she wanted, and the demon wanted too, he released himself to it, and all the while she hummed, all good and peaceful.

It seemed Dawn was seated on a tall pillar, looking very stern and put out. Her hair was a bronze helmet--plain, with a nosepiece that reached the chin. The fingers of her right hand were curved
around a well made, long-bladed spear upright beside her; on her left shoulder an owl perched. She
demanded, “Why are you being so stubborn?”

For a moment it was as though the conversation were a scene in a play and he’d forgotten what his
response should be. Then he remembered: Non serviam: I will not serve.

She said, “All creatures serve us, willing or unwilling. Willing is merely more efficient. Why do you
persist in resisting?”

“Because I can. Your purposes are not mine. You have no authority I recognize. I’m not your
property. I don’t consent.”

The pillar was descending. When the top stood level, he saw that her eyes were blank and white as
marble. “You believe yourself a citadel in a high place, with strong towers. You believe you can
defy us with impunity. What if we take the towers, one by one, and hold as hostage all within? What
if we visit suffering upon all you hold in allegiance, on that account alone? Will you not take pity on
them and be weakened thereby? We will not be defied, creature. If you will not serve our purposes
willingly, we will break you to them, to your loss and ours, for you will then be a poor tool, marred
and of little use. Quickly discarded.”

“Fuck yourselves,” Spike responded flatly, and woke into the scent of pine with a map in his mind.
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On Monday, when Willow had only early classes, she came both in her capacity as healer and to get
away from Kennedy, though she of course didn’t admit to the latter purpose. Dawn figured
everybody knew anyway.

She pronounced on Dawn to the tune of abrasions and contusions and a sprained wrist, which she
insisted on wrapping, although most of the swelling was already gone. Dawn made a fuss because
she felt it was expected of her; and so the proprieties were observed. As far as Spike went, there
wasn’t much that could be done--vamps healed in their own way, at their own pace--but Willow
prescribed an herbal tea that Spike spat out after the first taste, and instructed Buffy in deep muscle
massage, which he seemed prepared to resign himself to, which Dawn interpreted as his liking it very
much.

The burned skin had all sloughed by yesterday evening and he was often awake now. And often his
eyes turned to her, or he called her from wherever she was in the new campsite among the trees
where sun came only at noon and not much then. And he wanted to see how the scabs were, on her
knees and elbows, and wanted her to rub lotion into them while he watched, so he could be sure she
was doing it. Anxious about her, that her healing went so slowly: nearly three whole days, after all.
He didn’t seem able to keep straight that she wasn’t super anything, just herself, no matter how often
she reminded him with increasing vexation.

His being such a fussbudget over a few ridiculous scrapes, when he’d broken nearly every major
bone in his body, struck Dawn as embarrassing and disproportionate. When Oz presented her with a
trophy necklace--one of the Taskin’s medium fangs (the big ones were banana-sized) bored through
the top and hung on a cord--she had a screaming fit about it, first at Oz and then at Spike, when she
found out he’d asked Oz to make it. Then she flung off among the trees, sat on a stump, and cried
herself dry for about the twentieth time because Spike certainly should know, even if the others
didn’t: it was all her fault.
Buffy, who generally could be stopped dead by a sufficient tantrum, came to check on her and didn’t leave when yelled at. Likely Spike would yell at her if she returned to the SUV without an adequate report. Being Buffy right now probably sucked: stuck between an ill-tempered invalid vampire and her insane-o sister. She looked quite pale and tired, Dawn noted guiltily.

Dawn burst out, “Go have a nap. Take a walk. Something. It’s my snit, and I’d rather have it in peace.”

“Just explain what you’re snitting about. Because your bedside manner leaves something to be desired. Spike tried to come after you and that was not a really great idea.”

“I never asked him to!”

“Didn’t say you did. But if you were aiming for post trauma reaction hysterics, it’s a little late. You should have tried that on yesterday. It would have been more convincing then.”

“It’s all my fault,” Dawn confessed, throwing her arms in the air. She could feel her whole face twisting up again, dumb and ugly. “If I hadn’t tripped like a dork and then trotted around bleeding, practically begging to be bait, the Taskin wouldn’t have surprised us and Spike wouldn’t have been hurt. And then I couldn’t cut the wing fast enough. Can’t do anything right!”

It was perfectly wretched of Buffy to tap her cheek and look amused. “Now, where have I heard that before?” she asked herself. “Let’s run down the checklist here so I can get this straight. On a very steep slope, full of unstable footing, you tripped and fell into a ditch on purpose as an excuse to get out of the hunt. Right?”

“Of course not!”

“Thus providing me with an excellent excuse to send Spike back with you, when he had no business coming in the first place, but he wouldn’t listen, he hardly ever does. So when the beastie stowed on you out of nowhere, pretty much immobilizing Spike, you panicked and ran. Right?”

“Well, no. I tried the taser. But that was no good--only made it mad. So I made it as mad as I could. So it would get off Spike.”

“Which it did. And Spike, who doesn’t care about you the least little bit, was so disgusted with your uselessness, he let the Taskin eat you and end of story. Right?”

Dawn hung her head. “No,” she admitted softly, caught between wretchedness and awe at what she’d been too busy to see or take in at the time and only understood later: in the awful time of hurting, waiting, and fighting the sun. “He made it come back at him. So he could reach it. I was so scared. He cut it everywhere he could. And when it tried to bite him, it was in reach, and he cut its fucking head off!”

“Sounds like pretty good tag-team fighting to me. But then again, what would I know about that?”

“But…I didn’t think of the wing fast enough. And then I took forever to climb up and cut it loose, and the axe was all heavy and slippery, and he actually caught fire--!”

Dawn was furious at herself that her breath was hitching again, stupid and weepy. Buffy wrapped arms around her from behind, her chin on Dawn’s shoulder. “I think I’ll grant you an extension on the reaction hysterics. Provided you wear the tooth.” Buffy dangled it in front of Dawn’s face.
“Because Spike’s all proud of how brave you were and he’s not bright enough to realize it’s all a mistake. So let’s not confuse him. Dawn Dragonkiller.”

“That’s really dumb.” Dawn dragged the wrist wrap under her nose. At least it was good for something.

“Let’s not tell him that either. Wait till he’s on his feet. Then you can snark at each other as much as you please over who’s more to blame for this terrible fiasco, that accomplished exactly what we set out to do with none dead, two hurt, and none who won’t recover.”

Lest Buffy think she’d given in, Dawn warned, “If I miss school tomorrow too, you have to write me a note!”

“I’m thinking Wednesday. So one big note, covering all current sins of omission. Wish granted.” Buffy again danced the tooth on its cord.

Dawn snatched it ungraciously and looped the cord over her head. The way Spike was weighing her down with junk was getting ridiculous. First the locket and now this. She dashed back toward the SUV to find a mirror to see how it looked. Certainly nobody else at school had a tooth like this, and double-certain not from a beautiful deadly creature they’d helped kill.

She had to admit, Dawn Dragonkiller was kind of cool, actually.

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Spike thought he’d made good progress, considering. When Oz wasn’t around, he’d got from Buffy the scrap she’d written the phone number of Dogboy’s contact on. Tucked it safe in the only pocket he had, that of the one red button-up shirt he’d brought, but it should be good enough there. And in odd moments he tried to memorize it, which wasn’t going so well, but numbers had never been his best thing anyway and there were distractions. Like Buffy hanging about so near, every moment he was awake, which was naturally all he knew about. Wasn’t the best circumstances overall since most of him wasn’t working anything like right yet, but still. She was close, wasn’t leaving or likely to, so that was all right. Fine, even.

He knew he’d had quite a lot of her blood, over however many days it was since Dawn had been so marvelously brave, helping take that beastie down. Should cut way back on that, he knew. But it just wasn’t in him to refuse when she laid down with him and offered. Pestered, even, the way she did. So instead of the months it’d taken for his back to heal that other time, when she’d dropped a pipe-organ on him, he thought a week or so should do. What with the tribute blood, that Red had brought twice now if his count was right, and the little Buffy allowed Dawn to contribute when it was brought to him in a mug, which was only right since Bit lacked the Slayer healing to make up the deficit within hours, he couldn’t remember a time when he’d ever been fed up so fine. Pity they hadn’t been friends that other time, he and Buffy. Bit of Slayer blood, once or twice a day, would have done excellently and no need of the fucking damn wheelchair. Always foolish to wish the past different, but there you were.

And he’d picked up on her cue, about keeping Dogboy around, and dropped some little hint himself every chance he got. Nothing obvious. Thing to do was help Oz talk himself into it, which Spike didn’t figure should be all that difficult, considering the inducements. To look at them, you’d hardly think Red and Dogboy were acquainted, much less had any inclination toward one another. All sad-faced (in Willow’s case) or poker-faced (that was Oz), mostly not exchanging a direct word or a straight look, glum and avoiding anything resembling contact. But though more spacious than the
van, the SUV wasn’t exactly Madison Square Garden. Both of them there sometimes, helping out with things, they’d bump or brush by one another and then act as though they’d been scuffing rugs and sparked each other: heart rates would fly into the stratosphere, breath changing, scent changing, near panic reaction. And definitely not revulsion, on Red’s side.

And Spike knew perfectly well that if he knew it, Oz knew it. Nose that could track Sh’narth across bare rock couldn’t miss such a thing. Not doing much of anything about it yet, too petrified and discouraged for that. But had to know it, all the same. So it shouldn’t be all that hard to make him hang about somewhat longer than he’d planned.

Spike didn’t trouble himself conjecturing what the witch noticed or knew. Likely a lot. But she was as apt as anybody to be monumentally stupid, skittish, and wrong-headed about anything that touched her deeply. Take the Slayer, for instance. Take himself, even.

So Spike and Buffy agreed that whatever Spike needed done, by way of getting things or moving around much, they’d have Oz do. Could have managed without, certainly. But it suited them both to have Dogboy doing it instead. For a tether. Nothing said about it, of course: no need. As in most things, Spike caught her lead and followed it. It might be handy to have Oz about for awhile, Spike thought. And not only for Red. He didn’t think that Harris would be much use, and there’d have to be somebody to look after Dawn. And Red, of course. If he was to be a Watcher, with all that entailed, at least for a while--until he could get the rest set up.

To pass the time, they were playing draw poker, deuces wild, with pebbles as stakes. Four-handed, since Buffy had gone to have a quiet lie-down someplace. Dawn had taken three. Requesting two, Spike frowned and held his cards a little farther off than he would in a real game. A bit hard to tell a six from an eight. It wasn’t a proper Bicycle deck but an off-brand Red had picked up at a convenience store along the way, stopping for gas and emergency groceries at twice the price.

Oz stood pat, which meant he’d probably fold next time around. He seemed to do that. Lack of confidence, maybe.

“Dealer takes three.” Setting down her discard and then arranging her hand, Willow lifted a flick of a glance and said to Spike, “Remind me to show you something when we get back.”

“What?”

She shook her head. “Easier to show you. Just remind me.”

The bet was to Dawn, She bet two and put in the pebbles. Returning, her fingers went back to the Taskin tooth: touching it. Adjusting it. So she’d reconciled herself to it, whatever had been upsetting her so, Spike thought.

Dawn inquired solicitously, “You want to sleep some more?”

“Oh. Call. Good thing we’re not playing for real. Not paying proper attention here.”

Oz laid his hand neatly face-down on the tray table, folding.

Willow raised two, Dawn called her, and Spike dropped out on a feeble pair of sixes. Willow took the pot with two pair, sevens and fives. She took the next hand, too, bluffing out Dawn with a bid of ten, which was pretty foolish considering they were playing for dirt.
The deal came to Spike, and his hands worked well enough to shuffle and then pitch the cards in good order, and palm an ace in setting the deck down.

“Oh, by the way, Spike,” said Willow, “thought you’d like to know: you’ve got your wings back.”

Spike stilled and looked at her, deeply startled.

Willow continued obliviously, “Pretty much at full stretch again, ‘cause it goes right through the roof.” Then she glanced up and started a bit in turn. Then her whole face warmed, and she grinned. “Your aura, you idiot. It’s back to normal. New normal, anyway. For you.” Her grin broadened and she even twinkled a little.

“Oh, I’m all relieved to hear it. Worried me quite a bit, that did.” The palmed ace gave him a pair, which was promising. “Oz, you still with us?”

“Yeah.” Oz considered his hand very carefully. Then folded.

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The sun was gone. With the rear seat pushed all the way back to make space, Buffy found sitting on the floor in the open doorway of the SUV, feet on the ground, was almost like sitting on the porch at Casa Summers. Except much more pine smell.

Leaning on a backrest of blankets and assorted gear, Spike lit his second cigarette and breathed smoke. “Could flat one of the tires. That would hold him up awhile.”

“Still doesn’t get Willow in, though.”

“Send her off on some errand,” he suggested. “Then take off. Make some excuse.”

Buffy shook her head. “She’d never buy that.”

“Don’t have to sell it, pet--only do it. What’s her alternative here: walk?”

That Willow’s rental car, parked way back by the highway, had to be disabled first was a given.

Buffy frowned, considering. “She could teleport. Well, she did it once.”

“Didn’t know that. Thought that was just Anya’s bag of tricks…. She enough of a fool to pass up the chance?”

“If she was mad enough, being played like that. Maybe.”

“Nobody likes being played,” Spike admitted. He shrugged and then went very still, plainly wishing he hadn’t. After a minute or two, he relaxed, resting more of his weight against her. “Come right out and tell her, then.”

“Are you crazy?”

“You don’t think?”

“Never. She’d have to admit to it. To herself. And she’d probably feel honor bound to tell Oz. Then
he’d go all strange too. Big mess. She won’t make the choice. So we have to make it for her.” Buffy was silent awhile, thinking. “Put that way, it sounds terrible, doesn’t it.”

“No problem with it here, love. Turn about’s fair play. She owes you a few of those. Doesn’t begin to compare to hauling you out of heaven, stealing your memory, or half the other trash she’s pulled, all in your very best interests, of course.”

“Still…. Are you sure Oz has a spare?”

“Think Oz has a spare everything. Got that van tricked out so it’s ready for fire, flood, or apocalypse. Regular boy scout.”

Buffy said, “No: I knew Kirk, and he’s no James Tiberius Kirk.”

“Having a geek moment?” Willow asked brightly, coming around the front of the SUV.

Buffy jerked, but Spike, the more experienced conspirator, didn’t even twitch, drawling calmly, “Something like. Red, meant to ask you: could you check that my locket’s in working order? Expect it took a bit of a beating.”

Buffy asked, “Locket?”

“Just a trinket Red ran up for me.”

Stooping, Willow muttered, “’Scuse me getting personal here. Seems intact, except…except the whole back’s gone. So everything inside’s gone, too.” She straightened and stood away, wrinkle-brow concerned. Then she reached to her own neck, saying, “I can lend you mine--”

“No. When we get back is soon enough. You keep yours. Any damage there was to do, have to figure it’s been done. No, you keep it, Red.”

Buffy persisted, “What’s the deal with the locket?”

Willow said, “I’m sorry-- I never even thought. No, wait, wait: I know!” Frowning, Willow shut her eyes a moment in obvious concentration, and then cautiously inserted a hand in a pocket and produced a small clay wafer. “Ta Da!” she exclaimed, grinning proudly, and handed it to Spike.

“Love, I believe there’s some tape in the First Aid box. Maybe a knife, or scissors. Get ‘em for me, would you?” As Buffy slid down in order to step up, Spike asked Willow, “What was the trick of that, then?”

“Just a little playing with probabilities. I might have stuck one in my pocket, just on the off chance. And it might not have broken. So I just made might into is. Don’t run the risk of paradox that way. Oh, here, I’ll do it, let me.”

Confronted with Willow’s reaching hands, Buffy surrendered the tape and scissors and watched dubiously as Spike extended his left arm, his better one, and Willow gently but firmly brushed it away to undo two more buttons of his shirt, push it aside, and tape the wafer high on his chest, just below the shoulder, explaining, “Not much motion there. Should be good enough.” Setting aside tape and scissors, Willow re-did the buttons, then patted the shirt flat. “There. All set.”

Buffy remarked, “Didn’t know you two were on shirt-patting terms.”
“We get on,” commented Spike comfortably. “Most times.”

And Willow said, “I already told him: he’s not my type.”

Then they both looked at her like two amiable tigers, to see if she was gonna try to make a thing about it. Dawn interrupted, running up to report Oz said supper was ready.

Stepping down, Buffy asked Spike, “Some blood?” Realizing her hand had gone automatically to the mark, rubbing the itchy, tingling sensation set off by even the thought of contact, she hastily snatched it down. Deduct points for unsubtle.

Spike looked up from lighting a fresh cigarette, smiling, mostly with his eyes: he knew. “Later. The bagged, that Red brought, it’s still good. That will do.”

“OK,” Buffy responded, disappointed and relieved, all at once. She wasn’t exactly shy about feeding him, but prudence required a minder, and it was uncomfortable to have something so personal watched, even by her sister.

She’d thought, now that he was aware and alert, to do without the minder. But he’d said no, on the grounds that it wasn’t just a nip and a taste but a full feeding and he wouldn’t trust her, or himself, to know the difference between enough and too much, and Buffy knew better than to argue with him about a thing like that.

She, Dawn, and Willow started toward the campfire. They’d gone only a few yards when Spike called her name in an odd, flat voice.

She wheeled. “What?”

He said, “Might want to collect it, then come inside to eat. Might want to leave tonight instead of tomorrow.” He still had that odd note in his voice.

“Why?”

“Joker with the pop-gun is back.”

It took Buffy a few seconds longer than Willow, whirling to glare at the dark forest, to take his meaning: he’d been shot again.
Spike looked balefully at the new cellphone Buffy set before him on the kitchen island. Willow, mashing cereal into milk, grinned knowingly. Turning from stuffing PopTarts into the toaster, Dawn looked on.

“Don’t lose this one,” Buffy told him firmly. “We’re talking major bucks here.”

“Yeah.” Spike gave the cellphone a dismissive, experimental tap with a forefinger. He hadn’t lost the last one: he’d merely released it to gravity. But it was on Buffy’s dime, so he wasn’t about to argue.

Dawn piped up, “I’ll enter the speed dials for you, if you want.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Bit. That would be good.” Spike nudged the cell in her direction.

Buffy looked skyward when the first number he specified was Willy’s. Didn’t know what her problem was: it was a number he used a lot and one that was on his mind now. The number of her cell was next, so he didn’t know what she was being so lofty about. Well, yes he did: severe shagging withdrawal. Didn’t do much for his disposition, either. Back just wasn’t up to acrobatics, gymnastics just yet, and it wasn’t much fun having to be so careful all the time. Really spoiled the mood. Since sitting and standing were about all that was currently on the menu, there was less aggro in doing without. Shouldn’t be too much longer until he was fit. Another couple days, maybe: by week’s end.

The caravan of SUV, van, and car had gotten in about two in the morning. Spike had slept through the entire return trip, except for the part where he had to cross the yard and climb the back stairs. The rest of the night, he’d spent on the front room couch rather than attempt the stairs to the upper story. There’d been no need for Willow to magic out the insultingly small bullet: it had gone cleanly through the upper part of his right arm, and the wound had sealed and healed within minutes. Just a brief annoyance: more the fact of it than any damage. Well rested and well fed, Spike thought Bit and the two women looked decidedly un-chirpy.

Finishing a politely covered yawn, Willow remarked, “You’re not a technological Neanderthal like Giles. I didn’t have to do the whole ‘this is a keyboard, and this is a mouse, and this is the monitor’ drill with you. So what do you have against cellphones?”

Spike thought about it a minute. “Too distant. Don’t much like talking to people I can’t see.”

“Right with you there,” Buffy put in fervently, pouring coffee.

Spike went on, “Admit it’s better than not being able to talk to them at all. Sometimes it’s convenient. Sometimes, it’s the only way. But it feels strange. Not real.” His thought took another turn. “Red, you said to remind you.”

For a second, she looked puzzled. Then she brightened and rose, collecting her bowl. “Give me a few. Then come on to the den.”

As Willow trotted out, Spike looked around. “Den?”

Still fiddling with the phone, Dawn informed him, “What used to be the dining room, opposite the
living room that’s now the front room.”

“Oh.” He’d always thought of that room as the parlor, except houses didn’t have parlors anymore, and who the hell cared anyway.

As Buffy set a cup of coffee down in front of him and started to say something, there was a knock at the back door. When Buffy opened the door, it was Rona, with the morning delivery of bagged blood. Finding Spike sitting at the island, Rona checked and gave him a look--likely because it was the first time they’d seen each other since well before Kim’s death. Spike just picked up his cup without letting on he’d noticed.

“Hi, Spike. Where do you want this?” Rona held up the hospital transport cool box.

Spike tapped the top of the island. “This what you’re doing now?”

Unloading the cool box, Rona said, “Sort of. Got first shift at the DoubleMeat, too. Between that and being this fictitious Holden Webster creep, it should do for now.”

“You’re staying, then.”

Rona didn’t look up. “Yeah. I could patrol, when you’re ready. If you want.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Spike, are you mad at me? On account of Kim?”

Drinking coffee, Spike consulted the soul, which proceeded to tell him what he ought to be feeling and how he ought to behave toward this hesitant and conscience-stricken teen-aged girl child. He told it to shut up. “Somewhat. Weren’t none of you thinking, that night. But you could have done worse. Didn’t actually go and try to get yourself turned, like they thought you might.”

“That was a dumb idea,” Rona admitted. “Extreme and dumb. I just wanted…. But what’s wrong with wanting to be a vamp anyway, Spike?”

“There’s a reason why it’s not generally something people volunteer for. But you should ask the expert.” He nodded in Buffy’s direction.

Buffy raised both hands. “So not gonna get into that! Got to get going or I’ll be late. You too, Dawnster.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Hey, Spike, here’s your cell. And this is a list of the speed dial numbers I put in. If you want any more, tell me: there’s still two slots left. OK?”

Spike took the phone and glanced at the list she’d written on a paper napkin. “Yeah, all right. Thanks, Bit.”

Rona waited until Buffy and Dawn were gone, then faced Spike again. “You gonna let me patrol?”

“Patrol, that’s up to the Slayer.”

Rona dismissed that comment with a grimace and a wave. “She’s gonna say yes, we both know that. What I’m asking is will you let me? ‘Cause I know if you don’t, it ain’t gonna happen, no matter
what Buffy says. Don’t you dodge me, Spike. Let’s have the truth here between us.”

Spike considered her for a long minute. “Then, yeah: I’ll let you. Might be I’ll have other things of my own along the way. Think you might be up for that?”

“Depends on what kind of things, don’t it?” Rona retorted, hands on hips.

“Expect it would. Got a shooter out there someplace. Low caliber. Hasn’t targeted anybody I know of but me. Might be I’d like to set some watchers in place, see if I can make his acquaintance.”

“Yeah, Dawn told me about that…. Sure, I’d be good for that.” Rona pulled the napkin to her and wrote on it, then pushed it back. “That there, it’s the number where we’re staying. Bunking in with Kennedy just now, for the time. But I pay my own share, ain’t freeloadin’ off nobody here. And Ken: she invited too?”

“She can come ask. Maybe. Depends on what she’d expect from it. And ‘Manda.”

“Don’t know about ‘Manda. I stayed with her a few days. Seemed like she’d dodge or change the subject when anything like patrolling came up. Seemed like she wants things to just be like when she didn’t know nothing about vamps or Slayers or what stance to use with an underhanded cut. But we’re still good, me and ‘Manda. I could feel her out. In a manner of speaking.”

Spike checked, and found Amanda’s number among those Dawn had listed. “No need. Ask her myself, whether she wants to remember or forget. Figure on weapons drill, Saturday at first light. Casa Spike. See who’s in then.”

“That’ll do.” Rona took a step toward the door, then turned back. “Meant to say, lucky it wasn’t worse, with that Tarkin beastie. Seen Sh’narth now: never want to see one of those. They sound real mean to go up against.”

Spike understood that Rona was expressing concern about his injuries in a roundabout way, which he supposed was nice of her. For himself, he wasn’t real interested in them, just wanted them to heal and quit annoying and limiting him. He said only, “Taskin, it’s just trying to get by, like everything and everybody. Just passing through. They leave us alone, we leave them alone.” He reached for the top blood bag. “Appreciate this. Since it’s you taken this on, I know it will be done proper.”

Rona gave him a big pleased grin, then turned on her heel and left, jauntily swinging the cool box and even remembering to shut the door tight behind her.

Before opening the bag, Spike remembered Willow had something to show him in the den, and carefully slid off the chair and ambled down the hall.

Empty cereal bowl set aside, Willow was working intently on a computer Spike had never seen before. Looking up, she immediately rose, explaining, “Giles got a req OK’d for this on the grounds that before you can translate, you gotta be able to read. Nice monitor, hey?”

She patted the screen: about the size of a Life magazine, open upright, and nearly as flat. Though Spike hadn’t had much contact with computers, he certainly could see that the screen was many times the size of the one on Willow’s laptop. He leaned over the keyboard with arms braced on the table, ignoring the chair for the moment. Didn’t want to be sitting that low, just yet. He tapped the screen, then drew his hand quickly back, checking Willow’s face to see if touching was allowed. Likely not.
Willow said, “I got a list from Giles of about ten manuscripts, scrolls, or whatever, that they want help with, and downloaded them. Now you said you’d do it, they’ll hurry up and start scanning in the ones that can’t travel. Anyway, this is what I wanted to show you. Take a good look.”

Frowning unconsciously, Spike studied the manuscript page on the screen. “Transcribed Hu-tesh. Demon language, mostly using Arabic alphabet, but the vocabulary is closer to Jinn. Going on about…” He followed a few lines with his finger, carefully not touching. “…a Black Mage named Ashteroth’s Servant, roughly, which would put it no later than 4th century B.C.E. Burned up, I think, and took most of a town with him. He--”

“OK, now look,” Willow said, reaching past him, and struck two keys together. The manuscript jumped. Three lines completely filled the screen. All the characters were clear and sharp and about ten times the size they’d been before. Willow beamed, proud of her trick. “You can blow it up or take it down as much as you please. I’ve built some nested macros for you for different resolutions. Don’t worry about the geek-speak, I’ll print off instructions for what keys to hit for each one.”

She hit another key and the manuscript page vanished. A quick sweep and click of the mouse and an empty white screen appeared. “Best thing for you is to play around a little with the word processor, get used to the keyboard and saving your stuff, that sort of thing. I’ve built you a directory where all your stuff will save to, that’s the default, until you need more directories to keep track of things. Major hand-holding here, for which I expect to be duly paid, thank you. Oh: not by you! I’ll submit invoices. I’m your technical support. Sort of like a combination mechanic and engineer. You name the problems, I’ll find a way to fix ‘em. For instance, you’re gonna need an embedded program to reproduce the character sets of some of those non-human languages. Don’t have to worry about a printer, but a lot of that’s not gonna display wizziwig without….” She saw his face and stopped, smiling sympathetically. “Don’t worry about it. You don’t have to understand what I say--just the manuscripts. I’ll show you how to annotate. Not a problem, really. I’ve been playing around with their database and their dedicated software for almost a year now, and I’ll do the navigating until you’re up to speed.”

Spike straightened up with care. “Could I just read it off, have somebody else take it down?”

Willow was shaking her head. “If it was straight English, sure. But who’s gonna be able to transcribe those demon languages by ear? Think of it this way: if it was easy, Spike, they wouldn’t need you. Sorry, but that’s a non-starter. Sure, there’s a learning curve, and just at the first it can seem pretty overwhelming. But--”

Willow stopped abruptly. Bending her head, she fitted two fingers on either side of her nose where glasses would have rested. Spike found the change in her manner--from effervescent confidence to apparent pain--striking and troubling. After a long minute and without changing her fingers’ position, Willow laughed nervously. “Guess I’ve been logging too much screen time, playing with those macros. Or maybe it was the drive. I haven’t driven that kind of distance for…well, I don’t remember. So a long time.”

“Maybe…you should get somebody to look at that. Doctor, maybe,” suggested Spike. He kept to himself the conviction that one of his fragile human “towers” was under serious attack--something he’d been expecting.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Eyestrain. Nerd occupational hazard. It’ll be fine. Really!”

But Willow’s forehead was still creased and pained while she vigorously waved off his concern.
Spike noticed that she’d also gone several shades paler.

“How long is it, that your eyes have been bothering you?”

“About a week. Something like that. I don’t remember noticing it before that drive north. To bring the blood and everything. I think I’ll just lie down for awhile. I should remember to take breaks, I should…” Willow’s voice trailed away as she ascended the stairs.

Spike gave the computer screen--monitor--a hard look, then went back to the kitchen and finished the blood quickly because the sun had started to shine in. It was still much too early to have any chance of reaching Willy, but he might as well follow up on the next item on his private agenda. He took the cellphone to the front room and relocated one of the wooden straight-backed chairs against the far wall and settled there. Consulting the folded paper from his pocket, he dialed the number. After two rings, a woman’s pleasant voice responded, “Sunshine Mystical Services, how can we help you?”

Spike had thought it all out, what to say. Holding the phone tight to his ear, he said, “Got this number from Oz.”

“Yes?”

“Figure maybe you can tell me how you can help. If you can’t, I need to look elsewhere.”

“Ah. That will be a moment. Phone consultations are particularly difficult, I’m sure you don’t realize…. Then the voice called him by the name of his birth: that he had never divulged to anyone since his turning. They were all long gone now and past being hurt, but his surname was one he’d endured torture to keep secret: Angelus had been a firm believer in the very thorough and violent dissolution of all human ties. Hearing it spoken casually, without hesitation, was a shock.

A chill ran down Spike’s back, and his free hand went to the new locket Willow had made for him. “Don’t you say that again. Ever.”

“What would you prefer to be called, sir?” responded the voice calmly.

“No need of that. If you know that, you know what I want. Where can I find it?”

“A moment please….” After a silence, the voice said, “There are several potential sources. One is at your present location, sir.”

“Besides that.”

“The nearest would be…I’m terrible with maps. Would Murfeesboro be acceptable?”

“That would do.”

“Then the name--”

“Don’t need the name. I can take it from there. What do I owe you?”

“No charge. Professional courtesy. Is there any possibility you might be visiting Anaheim in the near future? I’m always glad of a chance to meet Mr. Osborne’s friends and associates.”

Spike contained and stopped the impulse to cut the connection. “None I see coming. Do you think
“No…. It seems not. Ah, well. Let me just say that it’s so pleasant to speak with someone who has confidence in our services. Too often, I find myself confronted with suspicion and incredulity.”

“Have that problem myself, love.”

“Yes, I see that you do. Well, we’re glad you’ve reposed such confidence in us. Be assured we will keep yours. If we were to receive any…sensitive communications for you, where might we direct them?”

Spike thought a moment. “Could tell Oz.”

“My impression is that our patrons would much prefer something more direct.”

Then Spike did allow himself to punch the button and end the call, muttering, “I just bet they would. Fucking bastards.”

Still not time to call Willy. Some way, he was gonna have to learn patience.

**********

That evening, sitting on the front porch steps Spike had coerced her promise not to leave, Dawn looked around at him. “You’re really rotten, you know that?”

“To the core, kitten.”

“I feel like bait,” Dawn complained, yanking fretfully at her hair.

A smirk was answer enough, since she was bait.

Wasn’t too long before he heard the bike and stood: not graceful, likely, but good enough. He leveled a finger and Dawn stuck out her tongue. Their agreement thus confirmed, Spike descended the steps and walked out to where Mike was settling the bike on its kickstand in a dark stretch on the opposite side of the street.

Stepping off the bike, Mike looked him up and down. “Thought you’d be worse.”

Spike shrugged, lighting a cigarette. “I set up that challenge fight for Saturday week. Just as soon get it over. Got other things to see to. Does that suit?” He already knew, having talked to Willy twice today. But it was also important to talk to Mike direct, because other matters hung by it.

Mike shrugged in response. “Well enough.” He started past, heading for the porch and Dawn, but Spike caught his arm, meanwhile looking the bike over.

Spike remarked, “Running all right for you, is she?”

“Decent little bike. Needed some work on the suspension: you beat hell out of it.” Mike was wary, waiting.

“Like to borrow it back. Just a day, is all. I’ll cover the gas and some over. Would twenty do it?”
Mike frowned, considering the bike too. “When?”

“Leave it tonight. I’ll have it back before sunrise, Thursday morning.”

“That’s two days.”

Spike just looked at him disgustedly, since they both knew perfectly well he wasn’t about to hop on the bike and take off in broad daylight.

“Make it thirty,” Mike said.

“It’s twenty, and you’re glad of it, because then you get to come up on the porch and visit. Otherwise, you push off.”

Mike lifted his chin, then shook off Spike’s hand and crossed the street to stand in the light of the streetlight there, plainly expecting Dawn to come running. But she’d promised, and didn’t. Spike smiled. Dawn’s loyalties might be divided, but he always could depend on her.

“Yeah, all right,” Mike said absently. He reached in his pocket for the ignition key and tossed it, high, to Spike, who put it away as he followed unhurriedly. Mike was already parked next to Dawn on the steps, and they were talking, by the time Spike came up the walk. Spike tapped the other vampire on the shoulder and, when he looked up, presented the $20 bill he’d begged from Willow, not having anything by the way of cash himself. Mike took it, frowning, and afterward kept looking around at Spike, who’d settled on the glider at the far edge of the porch, peaceably swinging just enough to make the suspending chains creak.

After about an hour, Mike went off down the street. Dawn came and flounced down next to Spike on the glider, demanding, “Is this the new regime, Mr. Obnoxious?”

“Nobody hurt. Nobody dead. You object to that, Bit?”

“I don’t know why I even listen to you!”

“Yes you do. Because in this, I put you first. An’ I look out for you. Even when you don’t entirely want me to. Long as I’m here, there’s certain choices you don’t have to make. And it’s better that way. Isn’t it.”

Dawn swung her feet. “Mike’s real peeved. Hadn’t fed in two whole days, so he could come to me clean.”

Spike thought it had been longer than that, but he didn’t say so. “And you,” he asked Dawn gently. “Are you peeved?”

“You don’t really expect an answer to that, do you?”

“Not really. You kept your promise. Don’t have to like it, so long as you do it. Now tomorrow night, I won’t be here. Gonna ask Buffy to keep an eye on things.”

Dawn looked at him alertly. “Where are you going?”

“Got an errand to run. If it all works out, I’ll tell you about it afterward.”
“Spike, why are you doing this? Why, all of a sudden, all this gratuitous chaperonage? Don’t you trust me?”

Spike gave her a quick hug, then held out his left arm and tapped the back of the hand. “What does that say, there?”

It was dark on the porch, but she didn’t have to see the tattoo to know. Mollified, she admitted softly, “It says ‘Dawn.’”

“Yes, it does. An’ it always will. That’s why it’s there. To remind me. And maybe sometimes to remind you.”

“You have something going; I can tell. What are you up to?”

“What I’d like you to do,” Spike said, “is hunt up maybe a dozen maps of Sunnydale. Photocopies, whatever, doesn’t matter. Big enough to see the street names. Single page size. And one of those big markers. Red would be good. And some tape. Any kind. Think you could come up with all that by Sunday, say?”

“Tell me why. Tell me what you’re doing.”

“You know planning’s never been my strong suit, Bit. Don’t want to embarrass myself too bad in advance. Just pushing at the pieces, trying to make a fit. Now I know where Buffy’s going, I can figure where I ought to be…. Seems like a good thing I gave Michael that bike. He’s had a lot of use out of it, seems like, by the mileage he’s put onto it in just a short while.”

Dawn just looked at him, not knowing what to make of that remark. Spike smiled at her and planted a quick kiss on her head. “You’re a great help to me, Bit,” he said, rising.

“And you just went completely off the weird scale,” Dawn retorted as he went into the house.

He found Willow in the den, squinting at the screen of the new computer. Noticing him, Willow said, “What you actually need is a touchpad: something you can write on. That would take care of the demon iconography. I’ll shop for one tomorrow after class. I see you have some notes on that first document, the one in Hu-Tesh. I’ve saved ‘em for you. Here, let me show you how to do that, or you’ll lose something.”

Obediently going to stand behind her, Spike watched her demonstration of how to save notes and even understood most of it. He’d figured out how to make the computer show the Hu-Tesh scroll, and how to switch back and forth between it and the screen that let him write notes. Not bad progress, he thought, for one day.

Willow said, “When you get that done, we’ll invoice the Council for your time. So keep track of it, OK? How many hours, how many minutes, on what days. I’ll make you a log you can fill in on each session. Suppose you spend, say, 80 hours total on it—that’s $8,000. Nice little sum, right?”

Willow grinned up at him. Spike stared. “Say that again.”

“Eight thousand dollars. As an expert consultant with absolutely unique knowledge they can’t get anyplace else, your time’s worth $100 an hour. That’s what Giles set up for you. Better than bartending, isn’t it?”
Spike leaned back against the wall.

Willow went on, “You’re gonna need a bank account. So you can-- Giles will take care of it, Spike. Before he goes. He’s still getting your papers together, to make you legal. You won’t have to--”

Spike said suddenly, “Make it so it’s Buffy’s. So she can have whatever she wants of it.” That was the only way it made sense: if he thought of it as the Council paying its Slayer like it should. Didn’t get them off the hook of actually paying her, but it would serve in the meantime.

That was the mortgage. That was repayment for all the food the SITs had eaten. That was repair of all the windows that’d been broken and the other damage to the house over the course of the battle with the First. It was what Buffy would need to do what she’d decided on: be Sunnydale’s Slayer and bring it out of the chaotic aftermath of closing the Hellmouth.

And of course Dawn would want to go to the mall.

Belatedly realizing that Willow had said something, Spike shook himself out of the daze of possibilities. “What?”

“I said, then you can pay me back the twenty you owe me,” Willow said, still regarding him kindly.

“Yeah. I guess….”

Willow laughed. “Now I know what dumbfounded looks like. You need to talk to Giles, Spike, about what arrangements you want made.”

“Yeah…. Tomorrow. Any chance you could front me another twenty?”

He had the bike, and it was only a short way to Willy’s bar. He thought his back would stand it if he was careful. But he was still enough on the outs with Willy that he could no longer run up a tab.

Nothing better to steady you down than getting outside as much liquor as you possibly could.

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When Spike rolled in about 5 in the morning, muttering to himself and bumping into things, Buffy knew he was very drunk. She supposed that was a good thing: it meant he’d built up enough energy to need to discharge it more or less harmlessly. But it also meant she’d slept alone, which she wasn’t all that pleased about.

Having pulled off his shirts (and almost certainly dumped them on the floor), he sat on the edge of the bed to remove his boots.

Rolling onto her side, Buffy ran fingers down his spine and felt him stiffen, then relax at the contact. Continuing to pet him in long, lazy strokes, she said, “Missed you. Did you have a good time?”

“H’lo, love. Didn’t mean to wake you.” One boot thumped on the floor. He changed position to work on the other. “In case. ‘F Bit goes outside tonight, could you keep a bit of an eye on things? Michael-wise, and all.”
“Yeah, all right. You gonna hunt the sniper?”

Laughing, he flopped back onto her legs, an arm bent across his eyes. So he wouldn’t simply fall asleep like that, Buffy hitched higher, to sitting, so she could fold herself over him and kiss him, petting his front instead. That was generally a good way to get, and keep, his attention. Besides, she liked the planes of his chest and abdomen and the reactions she could spark.

“What’s funny about that?” she asked.

“Mmm? Oh. Sniper. No, that will take care of itself. What was it? Oh. Got an errand to do tonight. Back by sunup. Being good: won’t forget the cell.”

She meant to ask what the errand was but he’d started kissing her back and that distracted her. Even drunk and running on automatic, he was an excellent kisser. After awhile, getting the rest of his clothes off seemed indicated and it got a little silly because one boot was still on and the pants wouldn’t come off over it. They rolled around on the bed, Buffy trying to work the boot off, Spike not interested in this preliminary and intent on getting her to hold still. That escalated into actual wrestling, strength against strength. Buffy’s bed didn’t have enough room for that: they tumbled onto the floor. Somehow getting the boot off didn’t seem so important after that.

Buffy wanted the initiative and kept it. Applying her mouth to his erection as though it were covered with chocolate only very serious attention would remove nearly always was enough to tame his aggression and make him lie back, babbling incoherent, mostly obscene endearments. Only after forcing him eventually to explosion did she remember that his back was still hurting and then was all contrition and concern, holding his face and demanding if he was all right, if she’d hurt him, in between hot open-mouthed kisses until he shut her up with a demonstration of his superior kissing expertise that impressed her forcefully with how all right he was. She could make amends, he said, with one of those nice, digging-in sort of back massages and promised not to fall asleep while she did it. Which still left the initiative with her, which she liked: he was often but not always thoughtful about things like that. Just enough exceptions to keep things interesting.

He nearly kept his promise--she thought he drifted off for a few minutes but it was hard to be certain, he was so bonelessly inert under her hands--but suddenly roused and pitched her onto the bed, announcing that it was her turn, which of course really meant that it was his. She was subjected to licking, nuzzling, and nipping until she was frantic to have him solidly inside her, but he wasn’t satisfied with frantic, he wanted desperate before he’d consent to go for completion, and she punished him with a bout of merciless tickling. He retaliated in kind, and they ended up on the floor again. He knelt to grab a pillow to slide under her hips. Then it became serious and slow, gazing into each other’s eyes, flexing and arching in tidal rhythms. His inhuman control brought her to climax twice. Before she’d settled from the second, she saw his eyes flash amber, his whole body more fierce, possessive, and demanding. As he bent to the mark, her third orgasm had already begun. She clutched him to her and within her, a completed arc of ecstatic claiming and possession, both of them fully lost in it, shuddering and convulsing, falling finally, after an unknown forever time, into satiated collapse. As he released the mark and bent his smoothed forehead against her neck, she was weeping until he stirred and began kissing her eyes, gentling her with his hands, murmuring, “Hush, love. Hush now.”

She shook her head. “Can’t. Love you so much. So much. Love you forever.”

What seemed like the next instant, her alarm sounded. Finding herself in bed, the comforter tucked up around her, and Spike cuddled against her back with one arm over her, spread hand on her stomach, she awoke happy and wondering how she’d done without him ever. He was the dearest man, alive or not, she could possibly imagine.

**********

When Buffy returned home after work and grocery shopping, she found Spike already gone though it wasn’t yet dark. Mildly disappointed not to be able to do the groceries-unloading dance with him, she pressed Dawn into service. Dawn pestered her with questions: where had Spike gone and what was he up to and was Buffy really gonna make her stay on the porch and then spy on her like she was twelve years old, which she never had been actually, and it was so not fair! The answers were (a) Buffy didn’t know (b) probably nothing (c) yes (d) then she should stop behaving as though she were and (e) so what? Dawn then demanded how it was possible Buffy hadn’t asked where Spike was going, considering it was gonna take all night on Mike’s motorcycle, and didn’t she care, considering he’d already been shot twice?

Buffy’s lightning retort was, “Go do your homework.”

“Fine!” said Dawn, flapping her hands, and left the frozen food in a pile on the island.

Putting the pile away herself, trying for the record in least-open-freezer time, Buffy was vaguely troubled: she hadn’t realized the bike was involved.

Maybe Willow knew.

Finding the normal late afternoon haunts empty, Buffy concluded that probably Willow had gone someplace, like to the library, or was visiting college friends at one of the dorms. Out with Oz, even. No reason Willow shouldn’t be anyplace. Buffy checked the answering machine attached to the tethered phone in the front room and found only the dueling recordings of aborted sales calls. Willow was such a methodical soul, it was unusual for her to miss supper and not have called or left word of her intended absence. Checking the least likely place, she found Willow laying on her bed with a microwave hot pack across her eyes and all the curtains drawn.

“Will, are you OK?”

Willow limply explained that she was on the point of death from mortification: Kennedy had registered to audit Willow’s Intermediate German class and moved twice to sit next to her. Tried to pass her notes. Nearly provoked a scene. Willow had been so upset that she’d barfed on the Founder’s bust. It had been awful, and she’d had to call maintenance, and looking at it had made her even sicker, and could she die now please because better that than explaining to Professor Grossmeyer precisely what the problem with the new auditor was.

“I’d rather clean an oven that’s cooked lasagna,” Willow wailed. “I’d rather have a big old hangnail that gets infected and swells all up. I’d rather listen to chalkboard squeaks for a month. I’d rather--”

“Why don’t you e-mail him/her/it? You’d still have to explain, but you wouldn’t have to watch his/her/its face while you’re doing it.”

“Oh, that is such a good idea! You’ve saved my life, Buffy!”
“Harassment is harassment, even when both of you play for the same team, gender-wise. Remember Cordelia!”

“Oh please, do I have to? I’m afraid I might barf again, and that makes my head hurt so bad--!”

“Yeah, I was wondering what was with the hot pack. Headache?”

Willow lifted the edge of the pack and opened an eye for a second, then pressed the pack back into place as though even that momentary glimpse had hurt. “I’d ask you not to tell anyone, except there’s nobody left not to tell. Don’t tell Dawn. That would be good. And certainly don’t tell Oz. There: that does make me feel better.”

“What am I not telling them?” Buffy asked.

“Killer eyestrain. I’m getting these headaches and everything goes all dark and soupy. Like New England clam chowder, only dark. Lumps and stuff swimming in it. I’ve never had geek disease! I’d do a divination, find out if somebody, Amy maybe, has put some kind of hex on me, but that involves yucky stuff and I just know I’d barf….”

“Maybe when you feel better,” Buffy suggested soothingly. “Just one thing, then I’ll let you go back to dying. Did Spike happen to mention where he was going?”

“No, he was too flabbergasted about the money.”

“What money?”

“You mean he didn’t tell you? Oh, maybe he meant it to be a surprise, and I’ve ruined it, and now he’ll hate me--!”

“Willow, Spike is not gonna murder you. However, I may, thereby solving all your Kennedy problems. What money?”

Willow chanced another peek. “When I told him Giles had wangled him an hourly rate of $ 100 per, for consulting, I thought he was gonna faint right there in front of me. Then you could practically see the wheels turning, all the stuff he’d like to do with it. He was gonna talk to Giles about it today, setting up a joint account and everything. Giles would know. I think I could keep tea down. Would you make me some sassafras tea? And dry toast.”

“Sure, Will,” Buffy agreed, and wandered back downstairs in a daze. A surprise? Not likely: Spike was Mr. Instant Gratification. Not that he didn’t have any self-control but he saw no need for it. The first time they’d met, he’d made this big threat to kill her on Saturday. Then he simply couldn’t wait and showed up in the middle of parent-teacher night and raised hell until Joyce battered him about the head with a fire axe. To think, or to feel, was pretty much to act, with Spike. When he couldn’t, he got all wound up and was apt to explode sideways and take out the equivalent of a city block, complete with shrubbery and small animals. No, she didn’t buy the surprise theory.

True, neither of them had been much inclined to talk, this morning. As drunk as he’d been, at least to begin with, it was possible he’d simply put the matter out of his mind and forgotten. He did that sometimes, even with urgent stuff. But if he’d reacted as Willow had described, why hadn’t he told her right then? Why had his (obviously) first impulse been to go to Willy’s and get himself bombed?

Was there something about the prospect of the money, or the work itself, that bothered him the way
the blood deliveries had initially bothered him? And he wasn’t gonna say anything until he’d sorted it out and decided? Sitting at a desk and working for hours, for days, certainly wasn’t part of her image of Spike…or maybe his, of himself. Although he’d agreed, might actually doing it strike him as…too William?

Realizing she was just spinning her wheels and making herself crazy to no purpose, she located a packet of Willow’s nauseatingly healthy tea and set water to heating. A fresh occasion to use the tea infuser. Waiting for the water to boil, she collected her cell from its stand on the hall table and punched in Giles’ current number. But the conversation didn’t really clarify anything, only confirmed Willow’s account. Yes, Spike had called today to make arrangements for a joint checking account, with credit cards appertaining thereto. It was to be a business rather than a personal account--better for tax purposes. And if Spike applied himself diligently, the average monthly income could reasonably be estimated at between eight and sixteen thousand dollars, at least in the short term, dealing with a backlog that had been centuries in accumulating. Giles expressed himself as surprised by Buffy’s surprise: many lawyers, doctors, and the like charged comparable or even higher rates for their services.

“I don’t know, Giles,” Buffy responded, tucking the cell into her shoulder to continue talking while pouring the boiling water into the teapot. “To little miss $12.50 an hour, here, it’s fairly mind-boggling. And Spike ‘applying himself diligently’ just does not compute, somehow. Tell me honestly: do you expect this to blow up in all our faces?”

“I see no reason why it should. If his academic background conforms at all closely to what I’ve come to suspect by little things he’s let drop over the years, frankly, he should regard it as a piece of cake. Complete with frosting. Very little actual research involved--drawing almost completely on what he already knows. If mere research were all that was required, these works would have been deciphered and annotated long ago. Buffy, has this somehow become a source of tension, even disagreement, between you?”

“No,” Buffy said, scissoring the envelope and coaxing the tea into the infuser. “The opposite. He hasn’t said word one about it. Or the money. And it’s probably nothing, but that’s started to worry me.”

“Then simply ask him, for heaven’s sake!”

“I will. Just as soon as I see him. Thanks, Giles.” Buffy closed the connection and set the cell down. She thought of calling Spike’s new number, but it was nearly dark now: she visualized him on a motorcycle doing something like eighty when his cell beeped or buzzed and decided against it. Anyway, she wanted to see his face when she brought this up. See all the eloquent body language she’d learned pretty well how to read. This wasn’t something for a phone anyway. One of the face-to-face things of life.

She popped the infuser into the pot and added the lid, checking her watch to estimate brewing time. Nearly twelve hours before Spike was apt to get home.

And where the hell had he gone?

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By the time Spike reached Sunnydale on the return leg, he well and truly had the road in his bones and was too tired to slow down. He took corners at eighty, straight-aways at ninety, and noticed the
traffic signals not at all. Fortunately there was barely any other traffic moving and what there was
saw him coming soon enough to get out of his way. He didn’t spare a glance or a thought on them.
Sometimes near the end of a long trip, it was that way: a clear, effortless focus that saw everything in
distinct contrasts of light and dark.

Approaching Revello, he thought vaguely of people sleeping. Then he thought *fuck it* and jammed
the bike into a skidding turn only the absence of parked cars let him complete. Finally braking,
stopping, felt so strange that he stood awhile, astride the inert bike, before he could trust his balance
enough to dismount and set it on its kickstand. Pocketing the key, he unstrapped his carryall from
pillion and crossed the street with the sense of vibration, ghostly engine noise, and wind still pushing
at him.

He’d done something like 500 miles in less than eight hours on the road. And even that had been
cutting it fine: it had taken longer than he’d expected to ask around and identify, then locate, the
witch he was looking for. But it had all worked out. He had what he’d set out for and brought it back
safe. That was all that mattered.

As he started up the stairs, Buffy stood from the glider where she’d been waiting, wrapped in a
comforter she still held around her. “Heard you coming,” she said dryly. “From quite a distance.”

He turned aside to kiss her, very glad to have beaten the sunrise and be home. Some of the vibration
bled away at the contact. Holding her in a one-armed hug, he steered them inside, then shut and
bolted the door.

“Shouldn’t have waited up,” he told her, all easy gentleness, concern freed of confusion. “Almost
time for you to start getting ready.”

“Where did you go?” she asked, going into the front room and dropping onto the couch, so he trailed
along and sat beside her.

“Town called Murfreesboro. To pick up something I wanted—piece of equipment. Borrowed
Michael’s bike. Long haul for a little bike like that. Ran fine. He’s worked on the suspension.” He
settled and leaned back, still trying get accustomed to the loss of hurtling motion. “You have any
trouble with him?”

She shook her head. “Everybody on their best behavior. The occasional Stare of Vicious Death, but
I’m used to that.”

“Good.” He got up stiffly. “While I think of it, I’d best give the bike key to Dawn. Michael won’t
come for it before sundown now, and that way, he’ll be sure to get it.”

Her voice caught him in the doorway: “Willow told me about the money. Why didn’t you tell me?”

He wheeled around, a little surprised at the question but not at all put out. A bit more distance, calm
and objective, was the first difference he’d been able to notice. “Because there isn’t any yet, and
Rupert hasn’t yet set up an account to hold it. Can’t very well cut the cake till there’s a cake to be
cut.”

“Are you OK with it?”

Seemed to be something she’d worried about. Spike wondered why. “Take money from the
Watchers’ Council? Won’t trouble me for a second. Ninety percent of what they want looked over is
metaphysical claptrap and some git’s puffery about how he had these grandiose plans to raise himself up a demon, an’ then something went wrong and nothing happened whatever, told in detail and at exhaustive length. That and the alchemical equivalent of grocery lists. A whole lot of magic in the world and not much of it in words. If they’re fools enough not to know that, it's no concern of mine.”

That felt right, and odd, in about equal measure. So it was gonna take some getting used to, after all. He’d expected that, though there was no way to know exactly what or how in advance. Strange that it should be strange, when it should be so familiar. But so much had changed….

On impulse, he went back and held out his free hand. Lifting Buffy out of her nest of comforter, he bent to kiss her searchingly and her arms came up around his neck. When they separated, she seemed to have put aside whatever had been troubling her. He said, “Come on upstairs. Time for Bit to wake up anyway. By the time you have your day things set out, I’ll be back for the show.”

Going with him up the stairs, Buffy remarked, “Willow had a run-in with Kennedy yesterday at college. Lost her lunch over the Founder’s bust in the rotunda, and then a bad sick headache afterward. All weepy and morose.”

“Her eyes,” Spike agreed. “That will be better soon.”

“You say that like you know it.”

“It’s pressure, is all. I think there’s a way to get some of that pressure off her and keep it off. Then it’ll all sort itself out.”

At the head of the stairs, they separated. Buffy went on into her own room. Spike tapped at Dawn’s door. “Bit, it’s me. You awake?”

“Am now,” came Dawn’s sour reply.

“Can I come in a minute?”

Instead of answering, she came and opened the door, leaning so only her head and shoulders showed. “What?”

“Want you to keep track of something for me. OK if I come in?”

She moved aside to make room. She wore a long animal-print T-shirt, mostly yellow on white, that made her look as though her legs ended about at her breastbone. But his sense of her was completely unchanged. The distance was right. The warmth was right, and the cool fondness. Wouldn’t have to worry about that, then.

Setting the carryall on a chair, he unzipped it. A faint, pale silver light showed through the opening. Cradling it carefully because it weighed hardly more than a soap bubble, he drew it out with both hands and placed it on the floor: a clear orb, about melon-sized, set on a wooden base, shining with a cloudy glow. “Not as fragile as it looks,” he remarked, as Dawn went down on one knee to touch it with a tentative finger. “Take a hammer or a big rock, something like that, to break it. So you won’t need to be careful of it that way. But you need to keep it safe for me. Hidden.”

She looked up suddenly, then back at the globe, her fingers stroking the curve. “I know this. How do I know this, Spike?”
He hadn’t wondered about that, but it made sense that she’d feel the connection. “Likely because you have a little piece of it. It’s my soul.”
Dawn gaped at Spike, filled with excitement and admiration, and blurted exactly what she was thinking: “You actually did it! You are so freakin’ awesome!” She sprang up and nearly knocked him over, hugging him. “How does it feel? Do you feel all eeevil again? Did you—” (She pushed herself to arm’s length to look, suddenly sober, into his eyes.) “--you know, eat anybody on the way home?” Seeing the answer she sought, she raced on, “Oh, this is so incredibly neat! No chip, no trigger, and now no soul!”

“No hostages,” Spike said flatly. Then his hands came up and he removed the locket, on its chain, from around his neck. He dropped it on the floor and crushed it under a boot heel. Meeting her eyes again, he added, “You keep yours. Just in case. ‘Cause you got custody of this.” The toe of a boot nudged the Orb. “You don’t tell nobody: not Buffy, not Willow, not your little friends at school. And certainly not Michael! Nobody. You don’t even hint. It’s important: can you do that, Bit?”

Dawn solemnly crossed her heart, then zipped her lips. “But you got to tell me absolutely everything!”

“Later. When you get home from school, come wake me and we’ll talk. Have to go now.” He turned to leave, but Dawn caught his arm and he looked at her and waited.

She said, all in a burst, “I know, I can see, you’re tired and all. But…are we different, Spike? Do you…still love me?”

He leaned and kissed the part in her hair, which Dawn considered a good sign, as far as it went. “You remember that summer? Before I went and got it?”

Reassured, Dawn kissed his cheek, hardly having to go to tiptoes at all to do it. “That’s all right, then.”

“Nothing changed at all between us.” He gestured at the Orb. “You tuck that away someplace safe, now. And we’ll talk later. Oh, and here’s the key to the bike--for Michael. You see he gets it. And don’t forget about those maps.”

When he was gone and the door shut, Dawn hopped from foot to foot, fizzing with excitement that he’d actually gotten rid of the soul, or at least separated himself from it. Gone back to plain pure vampire--and there was absolutely nobody, nobody, better at that than he was.

The main problem with the Orb was the glow. She looked wildly around her room, considering various hiding places, finding none suitable. Then she popped the Orb into her backpack and hotfooted down to the basement. She dug into the pile of camping equipment--stuff she knew hadn’t been touched or noticed practically forever--until she located one of the insulated sleeping bags. Unrolling it, she thought this would have been good to have up in Oregon, but neither she nor Buffy had thought about anything except getting there. Singular lack of practicality. Probably went with the superhero mentality. Oh, well.

Sliding the Orb inside, she re-rolled the sleeping bag, then replaced the bag within the pile and laid other stuff on top so nobody would notice the heap had been disturbed or give it a second glance. Giving it a final pat of approval, she danced back up the two flights of stairs to start getting ready for school.
All through her classes, she thought of hardly anything else but Spike’s separating himself from the soul and parking it out of the way, where it couldn’t interfere. Served it right, she thought fiercely, considering the nuisance it’d made of itself, making him feel fundamentally wrong all the time! Who’d put up with that if they didn’t have to? It was beyond cool, what he’d done: it was ice.

In Biology she started making notes on what she thought the changes and effects were likely to be. In American History, doodling in her notebook, she drifted into a once familiar speculation about whether she, former mystical key of energy, had a soul. And then she smiled, realizing of course she did: she had his. Just a little scrap, only enough to hold her together, not enough to nag or dictate. And he’d trusted her with the rest. Nobody else—just her.

It had felt familiar. Something like a cherished stuffed toy you hadn’t quite outgrown, so that you still loved it but didn’t altogether believe that it was real anymore or that it loved you back. But Spike did. Loved her back. Because, as he’d reminded her, he always had.

That was all right, then.

Galvanized to action, she surreptitiously munched her bagged baloney sandwich and drank her stick-a-straw juice in the library at lunchtime, deciding among various maps of Sunnydale she unearthed from the local history stacks. Selecting the one least dependent on color coding, she toted it to the big new photocopier and made twenty good copies (black and white, naturally).

In Algebra there was a test, so she had to pay attention and didn’t accomplish much during that period. But Gym was next, and she took occasional breaks from the required exercise routines to do cartwheels along the edge of the ballfield in sheer sunshine exuberance.

She bought a red marker at the drugstore where the bus stopped on the way home. Tape, they already had. So that was everything.

Rushing in the door, she found Willow in the den installing a touchpad on the new computer and invoking curses on hardware quirks and software incompatibilities.

Standing, clutching her backpack against her chest, Dawn asked, “Are you feeling better today?”

“A pox upon handshaking!” Willow said in a terrible, ending-the-world-now voice, then turned to Dawn with a cheerful smile. “Only eyestrain, just like I thought. I gave myself a break from squinting yesterday, and when I woke up this morning, all gone, poof!”

No more hostages, Dawn thought. The Powers knew they could no longer get at him that way because he no longer cared. Not that he’d hate Willow or Giles or Oz or anything like that. Just a well-fed predator’s cool detachment. Could be dangerous if any of them crossed him, but they were no longer likely to do that, and that would keep them safe. At least that’s how Dawn saw it.

She dashed upstairs and hammered on Buffy’s bedroom door. “Spike? Spike, wake up, get decent! We have to talk. Spike?”

She heard his voice but not what he said, but at least it indicated he was awake. Eventually he came out: jeans on, barefoot, shirt hanging undone, carrying the cellphone. He went right past her without a glance or a word, obviously still mostly asleep, and she trotted along behind to the kitchen and tried to be patient while he removed a packet of blood from the insulated box on the counter, next to the refrigerator, and started to assemble coffee makings. Dawn said, “Here, I can do that,” and he
nodded wordlessly and let her. Unselfconsciously he vamped to pierce and then drain the bag. No mess: he didn’t miss a drop. Same with the next. Dawn thought him even more gorgeous in vampface, and he knew it; all the same, he wouldn’t have done that to feed, even in front of her—not without some remark to acknowledge and blunt the edge of the strangeness. The first true change she’d seen. Mentally, she noted it down, sliding the prepared cone into the top of the coffee maker and the pot underneath. Taking no chances, she’d made enough for several cups.

She picked up her backpack from the counter, where she’d laid it, commenting, “I got the maps. Want to see?”

“In a minute, Bit. Let me catch up with myself first.” He rubbed his face with both hands, then disposed of the third bag from the morning’s delivery. Lifting the cellphone, he carefully touched in a number, then held it to his ear. “Me. No need to fetch any more today. I’m good. But I want to talk to you and Kennedy after you have your dinners. Maybe seven. Casa Spike. Tell Kennedy, no excuses.” He ended the call as abruptly as he’d begun it, so Dawn figured he’d left voicemail on the machine at the Webster lab. For Rona. Her guess was confirmed when he touched one of the speed dial numbers and again waited. After time for a few rings, he said in one of his polite voices, “It’s Spike, the trainer at Ms. Summers’ dojo. Might I speak to Amanda, please.” Another wait. Then he said, “‘Manda. Spike. I called a meeting for tonight, seven, Casa Spike.” He listened, then said, “Understand about that. Still want you there, so you’ll know what’s happening. All right? Fine.” He closed the call and put the cell away in his pocket. He nodded to himself, and Dawn imagined him putting a checkmark on a mental list: that chore accomplished.

Game face smoothing, he said, “Want you there too, Bit. How’s the coffee?”

Dawn glanced. “Another few minutes.”

“All right. Smoke first, then.” He went off, down into the cellar.

Dawn dithered a second, then decided to wait and take the coffee with. Pulling down a mug, she added two more notations to her mental file: he was being very methodical, which meant he had quite a lot of this planned out—unusual; and he was moving, purposeful, toward some specific goal.

She held that thought as she carried the coffee mug down to him. Handing it over, she asked, “What you’re doing: for the Powers, or against?”

“Both.” He took a big swallow of the scalding coffee: pretty much impervious to hot, cold. As Dawn took the other chair, he continued, “So far as our ways agree, got no objection to doing what they want. Not past, that, though.”

“And what do they want?”

“For me to set myself up as Master Vamp of Sunnydale. With all the trimmings. Like it used to be, with the Master: centralized power. And then bring it all down. Couldn’t neither of us take something like that on until all that, with the Hellmouth and the First, was settled. They had no instrument. And I…wasn’t settled enough. Not even to try. Not even to think about it much, though the notion did pass through my mind a time or two. Not possible. Everything too confused.”

“Because of the soul,” Dawn said knowingly.

“Partly that. And partly, learning how to get on with the children. The SITs. Learning how to delegate. And run things without having to fight every inch of the way. Not having everything fall
apart the second I turned my eyes away. Learning how to look after Michael. And that business with Angel. Getting that finally sorted. Nothing left to prove there. Not fighting ghosts anymore, issues that should have been dead and gone a century ago. Won or lost, doesn’t matter anymore. They’re settled, done. All of that.”

Dawn was quiet, thinking it out, while Spike finished the cigarette and most of the coffee. Then she asked, “What’s it like?”

He flashed a small smile. “Knew you were gonna ask me that. An’ I’ve tried to think. It’s simpler. A lot of things I was concerned about, just gone away.” He flipped a hand, open-fingered. “Can’t at the moment see why I bothered about them at all. But I know I did. So I’ll be cautious about them, about doing something different that would affect them. Feels good. Feels free. But I know the price of that is gonna be blind spots. Things I just won’t see anymore when they come up. I’ll need you to help with that, Bit. If you think there’s something I’m not seeing, not taking proper notice of, you tell me. May not always do what you say, but I’ll listen because I know I have to.”

“Listen to Buffy,” Dawn advised, very seriously. “Because I don’t think I’m the best one to know any better than you do.”

He was shaking his head. “Can’t. Because she won’t be with me in this. It’s what she needs, but not what she wants. She’d never agree. She’s gonna fight it every inch. As soon as she knows about it. Might even come to the point of staking me over it. I know it, and if it comes to that, I’ll let her. I have to know that, going in. And you have to know it too, because you’re gonna be pulled both ways. You already are. Because Michael comes into this, too. So I’m telling you now, no harm will ever come to Buffy by my hand or with my consent. No matter how bad it gets and no matter what it looks like. If there’s no other way, I’ll let her dust me and not lift a finger against her nor let anybody else do it neither.”

“Nor me?” Dawn asked very quietly, making finger pleats in her school skirt.

“You, I’m prepared to be a little more flexible about.” Spike reached and tugged at her hair. “Dawn, what would happen to you if I go?”

Dawn shrugged, refusing to look at him. “I don’t know. How would I know?”

“Dawn.”

“Well, your soul, that little bit I took, is what I’m built around. Anchored to. So if it flies free….”

“Sort of what I thought. So could be, neither one of us, you or me, will get out of this. But I can’t not do it, Dawn. That’s a choice I don’t have. On account of the hostages. Can’t let the Powers do ‘em like that, on my account. I believe I’ve stopped that for now. They know they can’t get at me that way anymore. And I’m at least setting out on what they got…mapped out to be done. But the second I cross ‘em, and they know it, they’ll try to put anything handy in my road. Got to expect that. Might come at me direct, but that doesn’t seem to be how they do. So it’s one thing to risk myself. It’s something else to pull you into the pot with me. Is that gonna be all right with you, Bit?”

“Would that stop you?” Dawn rejoined bluntly.

“No,” Spike admitted.

“Then what are you asking me for?”
“Dunno. Feel better about it, I s’pose, if you told me to go ahead. Never have liked being on the outs with you. You know that.”

Dawn folded her arms and raised her chin crossly. "Go ahead, then. I don't care."

"Then I will," Spike declared.

"Fine."

He considered the empty cup. “That was fine coffee, Bit. Past ordinary. Did you maybe spit in it?”

She jumped out of her chair and hugged him with every ounce of strength she had. He didn’t hug her quite so hard because it would have cracked her ribs.

**********

Of the nine vampires gathered in the side yard of Casa Spike shortly after sundown that Friday evening, it occurred to Spike that he was the only one who went by a self-assigned name. Unless you counted Huey, who’d indifferently kept the name Spike had set on him as a minion. The roving vampire biker gangs still kept to the old ways in that respect: names like Razor, Fang. But it seemed that holding onto their prior names and what of their prior identities they could was the custom among Sunnydale vamps. Odd. Spike decided he didn’t care as long as they showed up when summoned.

Only seven of the nine were invited. Mike had somehow gotten word and showed up on his own: hunkered down on the other side of Dawn, visibly proprietary of her, so that the other vamps stayed well clear.

Dawn stank of lily-of-the-valley. Could have smelled her a block away, easily. Her own deeply attractive scent nearly drowned in it. Which was the idea.

Gesturing with his cigarette, Spike told the vamps, “Got a proposition for you. There was a girl who was mine, with my mark on her. Restfield vamps took her and turned her, couple weeks back. In my old crypt. You all know Restfield’s always been my territory. But they moved in, set up a couple nests, without so much as a by your leave and hunted it an’ took one of my cows and turned her.” Spike knew Kim would have been appalled to be referred to as a cow, but that was the part of the relationship vamps would understand. “I’ve had other things to see to. Now it’s time I see to them.”

Spike left it at that, looking around at them: the vamps who’d gone up against the First…or more precisely, against the Turok-han, which they’d hated like daylight. No need to spell it out for them: they knew what was due for an insult like the one the Restfield vamps had slapped him with. The fact that he’d issued a summons to this meeting, at Willy’s, said the rest.

Huey, a tall, dour vamp who was currently the bartender/bouncer at Willy’s, asked, “What’s in it for us?"

“I don’t come after you. Ever.”

Isadora (flapper-thin and wearing bright yellow hot-pants and a red tank top that showed off her bony shoulders, apparent age maybe 16), asked, “And the Slayer?”
Spike shook his head. “Slayer has no part in this. You take your own chances there. Keep clear, if you’re smart. This is mine.”

Isadora turned her bobbed head, and lifted her hand, toward Dawn. Mike went threateningly game-faced. Isadora set her hand back on her knee, not challenging.

Spike said, “Dora, whose mark does Dawn have on her?”

“I can’t tell from here, with that smell. I guess it’s Mike’s, though, by the way he’s guard-dogging her.”

There were some scattered laughs at that. Likely because Mike was so young he wouldn’t have been allowed to say boo on his own, much less claim sole rights to a cow, in the old style of things: in the Master’s day. Although Spike didn’t know precise ages, he doubted any of the other vamps was under thirty and some, like Huey and Isadora, he thought were considerably older.

Spike stubbed his cigarette out in the grass. “That smell means she’s also mine, regardless of other signs. I don’t dispute Michael’s claim. This is a different thing. Somebody smells like that, you stay the hell away or I’ll rip your head off.”

Taking the point fastest, Huey said, “There’s going to be more?”

“A few. They’ll be along.”

Another of the women, Mary (black, with a great mass of tangled hair and a sharp, hungry profile, apparent age about 40), commented, “Still don’t see why I should enforce your boundaries. It’s not like I’ve ever had to worry about keeping clear of them, or you.”

Spike looked up briefly while lighting another cigarette. “Things are changing, Mary. There’s gonna be sides. One is mine. Which do you want to be on?”

Huey asked, “Beyond Restfield, you mean?”

“Could be. That’s for another time. But whoever backs me now has hunting rights on whatever territory I claim. With some limits.” Spike tipped his head toward Dawn.

Everybody was quiet then, and Mike looked around, shedding game face as he looked at Spike. Didn’t have to hold up a giant sign for them to take the clue that this was the beginning of something larger.

Mike said, “What d’you mean?”

Spike smiled at him. “Shut up, Michael.”

Again, some answering smiles at proprieties being maintained.

Mike glowered. “We’ll talk about this.”

Spike nodded calmly. “Certainly will. Saturday week.”

Mike and others stirring, changing position, realizing a different weight had been set on the challenge fight: no longer merely personal, but dynastic. Order of Aurelius business, done right out in public,
open for betting. Those who’d caught it looked alert, interested. Only Michael looked surprised, and showed it. Well, he was young yet, and not Spike’s own get nor his minion anymore, so he’d likely not realized until now that just the fact of him constituted a challenge Spike was obliged to answer. Mike hadn’t learned how such things worked, never having been a part of an established vampire clan.

All the vamps looked up: Rona had arrived, and Kennedy behind her. Dawn immediately got up to dab them with the strong-smelling perfume, then resumed her seat between Spike and Mike. Rona dropped down at Spike’s right and a little behind; Kennedy remained standing, wary and nervous at the assemblage of silent vamps, nearly all of them regarding her yellow-eyed and interested.

Spike lifted the crossbow from the grass and set it conspicuously on his knee. Nobody made any move toward the two SITs.

Kennedy demanded, “Spike, what’s going on here?”

Rona muttered, “Ken, shut up and sit down.”

Kennedy insisted, “I want to know--”

Spike looked around at her, game-faced himself. Kennedy dropped hastily where she was, then scooted forward to be next to Rona. When the vamps’ attention shifted, Spike knew Amanda had come. Spike caught Dawn’s eye and pointed behind, sending her to set a perfume mark on Amanda, too. Spike heard a brief mutter of conversation between them. As Dawn returned to her place, Amanda settled in front of Rona, directly to Spike’s right. Interesting to see how humans sorted themselves without words: Amanda had been troop leader, and her position claimed that role despite her reluctance to show up at all.

But Spike looked past her to Kennedy. “You wondered what this was about. Tonight I’m going after the vamps that turned Kim. Likely nothing much you’ll have to do. Just keep any that try to run till I can get to ‘em.”

Kennedy gestured at the vamps. “And them?”

“Need more than three to cordon off the patch. ‘Tisn’t like you never worked with vamps before. As this is for Kim, I thought you’d want to sit in. Rona--you coming?”

Rona said, “Damn right I am.”

Spike returned his glance to Kennedy, who thought another minute, then said, “All right, I’m in.”

Only then did Spike look at Amanda, with the two acceptances pushing at her. Frowning, she said, “For Kim…. Yes. I’ll go.”

Which was about the way Spike had figured it would work out if played properly. He handed Amanda the crossbow.

Huey inquired, “That it?”

Spike nodded, surveying all the vamps. “Gonna count heads afterward, so if anybody’s leaving, now would be a good time.”
A vamp named Benny, toward the back, inquired, “You mean there’s gonna be a quiz?” and then ducked half-hearted smacks from those around him.

Seeing nobody offering to leave, Spike pointed at Huey. “You see that--”

Mike interrupted, “No.”

Spike turned to consider him. “Didn’t ask you here, Michael.”

“That don’t signify. Kim was my friend. My claim is second after yours. I’ll be answerable for the rest.”

Spike didn’t bother checking the other vamps’ reactions. If Mike claimed responsibility for their behavior, any failure in obedience would be his to sort out. Spike weighed the possible loss of some against the possible benefits of naming Mike his second so early in the game...and what it might cost to reject Mike’s claim.

He decided against trying to think that far ahead. For now, Mike had claimed authority, and Spike was inclined to let him have it.

“All right. You do that. Mark is the north gate of Restfield.”

As all the vamps and the SITs stood, Spike caught Dawn’s arm, holding her in place. He and Michael, holding Dawn’s hand to bring her with him, traded a long look. Mike apparently had the sense to realize Dawn was safer with Spike and the SITs than with him and a bunch of vamps unaccustomed to minding anybody, much less him: he released her hand and led the others off toward the mark.

Kennedy said, “I don’t have a taser.”

“Bit has stakes,” Spike replied. “Doing this the old-fashioned way.”

He saw no reason to inform them that Dawn had a taser: for her own protection.

Amanda told the other two SITs, “Spike’s called the mark. Let’s go.”

**********

Dawn had run with the SIT pack before. She’d never seen a vamp pack on the hunt, though…and still hadn’t because the minute Spike came within sight of the cemetery gates, Mike (already inside) gestured to the rest of the vamps and they were simply gone, vanished. Dark into dark. Spike pitched each of the SITs to the top of the wall, and when it was Dawn’s turn, she found Mike waiting to catch her when she jumped. The next second Spike was down, rebounding straight into a run, too fast to follow. Taking the bag of stakes Dawn had carried, Mike hung back to guide them for the first few hundred yards but then was gone, too impatient to hold himself to their slower pace.

Amanda kept on, running all but blind now among the tombstones and trees. Rona and Kennedy flanked out to the left and the right and dropped back slightly, leaving Dawn directly behind the leader, hoping that ‘Manda knew where she was going because Dawn hadn’t heard anybody name a mark.

Amanda ran straight into a vamp, coming headlong in the opposite direction, and they knocked each
other down. There hadn’t been time for Amanda to load the crossbow, so she punched up with a bolt as though it were a knife. The next second, Rona and Kennedy slammed into the tangle and the vamp exploded into dust. Then Amanda was on her feet and running, the flankers again moving wide.

The encounter had been so fast, Dawn could only assume it’d been a vamp because it’d dusted, only hope it hadn’t been one of “theirs.” She didn’t like the suddenness or the dark, didn’t like having to strike out instantaneously at whatever they met. It could be anybody, she thought. It could be Mike.

The next contact was Rona’s: a dark shape springing from behind a tombstone, bowling her over. As Rona hung on, Amanda and Kennedy converged but before they could dust that vamp another came onto them from behind. Dawn’s taser took it down. She was grabbing for a stake when the vamp poofed all over her, staked by someone in and already out before she’d had a chance to look.

“You watch that,” said a voice she recognized as Dora’s: the vamp in the hot-pants. “You could hurt somebody.”

The three SITs got to their feet, having dispatched the vamp that had jumped Rona.

Dora’s eyes flashed yellow, maybe catching some distant street light, as her head turned. “Wait,” she said, and they all stood uneasily, catching their breath, not sure if they should be taking Dora’s orders or not. Amanda armed the crossbow and Rona complained softly of having cracked her elbow against the tombstone.

“Go on,” said Dora after a minute or two. “The hunt’s gone past.”

Amanda led on at a walk, up a low hill. Dawn knew where they were now: leaving the common burial sites, entering the more exclusive district of mausoleums, elaborate crypts, and three-dimensional statuary, the latter mostly perched on columns. Coming to a paved path, Amanda followed it toward a trio of mausoleums. No trees were nearby, and the wall was in sight again, with street lights beyond: Dawn could make out what was happening.

Around the farthest of the three mausoleums, vamps stood in a widely spaced circle. Just inside the circle, one vamp was on the ground, not moving. Two more kept trying to break out but were shoved or beaten back. In the open space, in a blur of motion, Spike was fighting three vamps. Dawn knew him by his pale hair and then by his motion: nobody moved like Spike. Reaching the circle, Amanda started to bring up the crossbow but didn’t resist when Dawn pushed it down. The fight was too fast to be sure of a target, and a bolt that missed altogether stood a good chance of skewering someone on the far side of the circle.

As one of the fighting vamps burst into ash, Dawn realized they were all fighting unarmed. As Spike had said: the old-fashioned way. He’d literally pulled the other vamp’s head off. One of the two remaining vamps broke then, came straight at them. Amanda put the crossbow bolt through his ribs and he was gone—close enough that Kennedy sneezed and fanned her face. Spike and the last vamp were squared off a couple of yards apart, Spike with his weight on his back leg: a defensive stance. He said something and then laughed, and the other vamp came at him. The other vamp landed a blow but Spike held stance, stuck a hand bladed stiff into the other vamp’s rib cage and yanked out his heart. Turning immediately from the dust, Spike lifted a hand and somebody pitched him a stake. With two terse blows he dispatched the vamps who’d been trying to escape, then finished the one lying still.

Abruptly the circle of vamps was gone. Nobody left but Spike, wandering toward them making the
nose-holding gesture for bad smell.

Dawn blurted hotly, “Not funny, Spike!”

“Hell yes it is, second most fun to be had while sober. Nobody gonna come within a mile of you children tonight. An’ he’s left you again.” Spike sighed theatrically. “Didn’t I tell him to keep his third eye on you lot?”

He meant Michael. And though the rest of his face was just ordinary except a couple of bruises that would go purple, his eyes were shining gold. Remembering the cool violence of his disciplining Mike for disobedience another time, Dawn felt ice slip in under her collarbone. “He stayed with us,” she protested quickly, and after a glance Amanda chimed in, “Yeah, and we got here all right,” without any great enthusiasm or even truthfulness, but she said it.

“Is that it, then?” Kennedy asked, making a near challenge of it the way she always did.

Spike lit a cigarette and squinted against the smoke. “That was the opening. Still the finale to come. But don’t have to rush this one. Beaters will be collecting them up. Come on, children. Mark is the Davis mausoleum by that big chestnut tree and the pond.”

He led them off, just an easy pace, keeping to the paved path, and it seemed almost normal again, jogging in the darkness toward a named mark, everybody alert but unafraid because Spike was with them.

Dawn took longer strides until she was moving level with him. “You’re uber-creepy tonight. Just so you know.”

He replied, “Pity Kim’s not here. She’d have enjoyed it.”

“Well, you’re enjoying it enough for both of you.”

“Think so, do you?”

“Yeah!” After a few more strides, Dawn said, “What’s this fighting barehanded? It’s like you’re playing with ‘em.”

“Ignorant little bint, aren’t you?”

“Well, it’s not like you actually explained anything, Spike,” Dawn retorted.

Spike made a tch click. “Keep forgetting you’re so new an’ all, don’t know nothing. Well, I’d just as soon hose ‘em with a flamethrower but that’s not how it’s done, pet. Keeping it personal here. Nothing between. Beat the living shit out of ‘em, then dust ‘em—every last one. Three purposes to be served.” He held up fingers on a hand already battered bloody. “One: do the sods. Two: edification of the troops. That I want so fucking terrified of me they’ll think twice before crossing me or forgetting to do what I tell ‘em. Michael, for instance.”

Dawn heard it then: he was being provoking, to get a rise out of her. Which didn’t mean he didn’t mean it, every word. So she did what she did when he was provoking: pretended to ignore it. “And three?”

He chuckled. “Three: have a fucking brilliant fight with half the world looking on.”
“Not Buffy, though,” Dawn jabbed.

“No. Not Buffy.” His voice had sobered. “That would put the wrong meaning on it, you see. This is my business, not hers.”

“Vamp business, you mean. Then why are we here?” Dawn demanded.

“Not just vamp business, pet. My business. Can’t be just us against them because that’s not how it has to end up. ‘Mine’ includes whoever I say it includes--humans, vamps, puppies, garter snakes, no matter. You. The children. And not just for territory but on account of Kim. Got to make ‘em see that, know that, accept that. For what comes afterward. To see that my word holds, and not just for vamps. From the beginning.”

They were coming to the pond: a concrete-bottomed eyesore full of gunk and mosquitoes and not enough clear water to reflect the dim lights spaced around its perimeter. The path curved around it. Reaching the first of the lights, Spike said, “Here,” lifting an arm, and they all stopped to his word and his gesture.

Facing around to them, he said, “You’re past the beaters now. Come on slow. Anything comes at you, take it down. Otherwise, watch and mind Bit, like always. This is mine again now. I go in first and alone. Clear?”

There was the reflex chorus of right, Got it, and Clear, Spike from the SITs. Dawn waited until Spike looked at her, then said, “Rule Four.” She held up her hand, thumb tucked in. “You do them. They don’t do you.” She folded the hand into a fist.

She’d succeeded in surprising him. For a second the gold faded from his eyes and he looked tired and grim. Then he smiled and reached to smooth her hair. He said, “You smell absolutely horrible. Hardly need to chaperone you no more,” so she batted his hand away.

Then he spun and was running, half the distance to the Davis mausoleum almost before she had time to blink and focus, and the circle coming in from behind, driving a few vamps before them. Spike yanked the door open and was gone inside and it all began again, terrible and beautiful.

**********

Buffy woke abruptly from an anxious dream. Finding herself alone, she rolled over and looked at the clock’s illuminated numbers: 2:10. Restless, she pulled on a robe and padded to the adjoining room to check on Dawn. Buffy found her sister asleep clutching an oversized teddy-bear with frowning determination as though hanging onto the last tokens of childhood.

Shutting the door quietly, Buffy shook her head, wondering if she’d bring up the violation of Dawn’s 10:00 curfew. An outing to the mall with friends was a perfectly permissible Friday evening activity, and Dawn’s seventeenth birthday was approaching--for most teens an event that brought fewer restrictions, sometimes a part-time job, a car. The threshold of adulthood. Although Buffy wasn’t comfortable with the role or responsibilities of surrogate mom, the thought of surrendering them also made her uneasy. Sunnydale was such an unpredictably dangerous place. And Dawn was so fragile….

As she started down the stairs, Buffy noticed light from the den spilling into the hall and went faster. Spike was working at the computer despite an eye swollen shut and both hands bruised, swollen, and
stiff. Clothes dirty and torn, with patches of dried blood. Blood crusted in his hair, too, that had run into his collar and dried there as an irregular band, nearly black. Obvious post-fight dishabille.

When he didn’t immediately react to her presence, Buffy leaned in the doorway and folded her arms. “You’re a mess.”

“Oh, hullo, love.” Glancing up, his good eye was all blue: no visible pupil at all. That and something about the abrupt, jerky way he moved told her he was drunk or high or likely both.

“C’mon,” Buffy said. “Shower and inspection.”

Again intent on the screen, he shook his head. “Nearly done with this, need to get it finished. Red can do the invoice. Dunno what the hell it means, likely nothing, was an abysmal git with no redeeming qualities whatever an’ his chronicle the biggest piece of puffery since Ozymandius, oh fuck, lost the screen again, no there it is, gone down into the corner, yeah. Took ‘em all on, cleared the lot. Fantastic fight, love, wish you could have seen it.”

Buffy bit her lip. “I would have liked to. If you’d told me.”

“No, no, not possible, shiq’far, what the hell is shiq’far, something to do with obedience, yeah….”

Getting his left hand, with some difficulty, around a stylus, he drew big looping cursives on a smooth-topped device next to the keyboard, remotely guiding the hand’s motions with his tongue like a four-year-old fisting a crayon—completely blitzed, oblivious, flying.

Smiling a little to herself, Buffy collected the first-aid box and then a basin of water and a hand towel. As long as she didn’t block his view of the screen, Spike didn’t mind and paid little attention to her cleaning and checking his head and neck. Getting him to let her pull his shirt off was more complicated and a bit of a wrestle, all to the running counterpoint of his stream-of-consciousness babble that in disconnected bits and pieces made Buffy realize that he’d cleared Restfield.

Well, she’d known it was coming. From their last go-round on the subject, she understood some of the reasons for her exclusion. She gathered he hadn’t gone alone: he’d had some other vamps and the remaining SITs for backup. And he’d survived it with no damage that wasn’t already healed or healing. So she guessed she should just be glad it was over.

“--and done,” he announced abruptly, slumping back in the chair.

Buffy set the basin and towel aside. “C’mon, then: nice hot shower.”

Except for drawing her into a detour to the kitchen for several glasses of cold tapwater, Spike made no objection to being guided upstairs, stripped, and pushed to stand in water as hot as Buffy herself could tolerate: she’d stripped too and got into the shower with him. Having finally dropped focus, he was practically asleep on his feet and would likely have leaned against the wall like that until the hot water ran out, if not longer, if she’d let him.

Drunk, exhausted, warm, safe, Spike would go along with almost anything that didn’t require him to move much or open his eyes. Malleable and even poseable. As Buffy continued her examination of all the bruises, checking for broken bones that might heal wrong or internal injuries that might remain unhealed for days and surprise him with weakness, leaving him vulnerable if not given enough healing time, he’d quietly report “Ow” whenever the kneading and poking hit something particularly sore and otherwise accept whatever way it pleased her to touch him. As it always did. What with warmth, privacy, intimate contact and concern, and lots of slippery, sensitized skin, the post-patrol
shower-and-inspection drill often was the opening act of the post-patrol shagfest. Rubbing shower gel over the planes of his chest, Buffy wasn’t surprised at the awareness of growing mutual arousal. She lifted up on tiptoes to share a languorous kiss, then laid her cheek on his shoulder, her arms around his neck, drawing his head toward his mark, that was already tight and tingling in anticipation. Her blood was healing to him, and loving intimacy, and one of the deep ways they related to one another. But although she felt the change run through him, the bite didn’t come. His arms drew her close and he butted his wet, thickened forehead against her collarbone. He was breathing in arousal and strong emotion.

Lifting her head, she kissed and then licked his ear, asking softly, “What?”

His response was a nuzzling back-and-forth motion against the upper part of her breast.

“What?” she asked again.

He murmured against her skin, “Not just now, love. No. Wouldn’t be--”

That was when they lost the hot water. Buffy jumped away and started grabbing towels. Spike was slower to react. Although he loved warmth, he was indifferent to cold and continued to stand, head bent, arms fallen and hanging, despite the frigid water pounding down on him from the shower head. Buffy dropped the towels on the floor and turned off the flow. When she looked, his face was in the last seconds of smoothing from the harsher contours of his vampire countenance and his stance was relaxing from the change too. She had the sense that he was forcing it away, imposing human appearance on himself, pushing away the energy and the appetite and looking lax and rather forlorn in consequence.

As soon as she’d taken his wrist and drawn him out of the shower enclosure, though, he turned brisk and almost normal, bending to scoop up two towels—one to wrap around her and the other to dry her hair with, invisible behind her in the steam-fogged mirror that reflected her own image only vaguely. It made her think of the bare Oregon hillside, her uneasiness about the fog lifting, full of the wrong concern; parting with him there.

Reaching past for a wide-toothed comb, he remarked, “Taken more from you than I should, this past week. Should let up on that for awhile.”

She looked half around, saying, “There’s always more.”

“Want to keep that for special. Not like you’re my cow, after all.”

“Cow?”

“Now, said you weren’t, don’t get all huffy. Hold still or I’m gonna do your ear a mischief here.” He continued to comb and smooth out the tangles, something Buffy always found relaxing.

When her hair was dry enough, Spike dismissed her back to bed, saying he’d be along presently. Buffy put on fresh pajamas and waited, sitting on the edge of the bed, knowing him quite capable of curling up naked on the bath mat and sleeping there, ready to startle Dawn or Willow in the morning. But eventually he did wander in, a towel around his hips, that he discarded as they both slid under the covers and Buffy turned out the light.

He shifted around about four times, trying to get all the sore places comfortable, ending up on his back with his hands behind his head. “Can’t shut it up,” he murmured presently. “Rattling along
sixty to the dozen. Said they were painkillers….” After another silence almost long enough for Buffy to fall asleep, he remarked, barely above a whisper, “Words to frighten child and adult alike: ‘Spike has a plan.’”

“What plan?” Buffy inquired drowsily.

“So how’s yours coming, then?” Propped on an elbow, he was looking at her. “Hardly had a chance to ask.”

Yawning, Buffy reported her progress: on Monday, she had an appointment with the new principal (the last one having resigned after the trauma of the major subsidence) to discuss offering evening self-defense and aerobics sessions in joint sponsorship with the Sunnydale Community Center, whose director’s agreement Anya had already secured, given their shared membership in the Chamber of Commerce. She figured to start on a twice a week basis and patrol the other nights. Promising participants, she’d try to recruit for her planned escort service, along with the SITs: she hoped to have at least twenty semi-trained volunteers by the time holiday parties were due, and sixty plus an outreach program, going door to door with fliers, by Senior Prom weekend and graduation in the spring.


“Huh?”

“Pay ‘em. They’ll turn out for that. Should have enough then. An’ you get paid, too. That’s what it’s for.”

Buffy thought about finding him, blitzed and banged up, at the computer, doggedly working away. She remembered Giles’ voice saying, “If Spike applies himself diligently….” She thought she understood then what he’d meant about his having a plan and snuggled close and kissed him, full of love and gratitude for his uncommon diligence.

“An’ I’ll have some…samples, like, for you to pass around,” Spike went on. “Vamps, they don’t like lily smell. Too much like funerals, and like that. Gonna get a bunch of samples, week or so, the little bottles. Give ‘em out at the school, to start with. Newest thing. Uber cool. Bit can help with that, and ‘Manda. Smells really strong. Really foul. Vamp would notice a block away.”

“Really? I never heard that.”

“Well known fact, pet. It’s garlic that’s the myth. More like garlic than not, myself. Well, you know that. Lily smell, though…. He made a retching sound. “Don’t you tart yourself up like that, love. Couldn’t abide it.”

“Note to self: avoid repulsive lily perfume. Sounds like a good idea,” Buffy mused. “If we could sell the cheerleaders on it—”

“No cheerleaders, love. Unless you want, of course. Get the geeks and the goths to take it up: they’re the real trend-setters, that lot. The thick glasses and the black nailpolish type. Could be Red could do somewhat, make children think it’s cool, attractive, all that sort of rot…. Have to remember to ask her.”

“When’s the last time I told you how amazing you are?”
Major smirkage. “Don’t recollect. Not recent, anyways. Likely, not ever, things being what they are.”

“You are amazing. Right now.” She was gonna kiss him, try to get something started, but as she reached, he rolled and was on his feet and gone out into the hall, carelessly naked. About a minute later he was back, having resumed his jeans that had been left on the bathroom floor. Passing to the window, he patted his pocket, explaining, “Need my fags. Even hung the towels up. Amazing, hey?”

“Who are you and what have you done with Spike?”

“Good question, love. ‘M trying to learn, trying to do better for you. Trying to remember all the fiddly bits….” Shoulder leaned against the windowframe, he’d pushed the curtain aside and was looking out into the night. “Can’t shut it up, though. It just goes ‘round and ‘round…” Lifted level with his head, his hand demonstrated the spinning. “Said they were painkillers…. You just settle, rest. I’m goin’ out on the roof here, have a fag, some air. Be back shortly.” He opened the window, ducked through, and considerately shut it from outside to keep the cool air out.

Left startled and alone in the bed, Buffy glanced at the clock. The lighted numerals said 3:43, and since midnight it had been Saturday with time at her disposal. She dragged a hoody fleece sweatshirt from a drawer. Pulling it on, she raised the sash, ducked through, and dropped down beside him on the slope of the roof, knees tucked up inside the sweatshirt and bare feet braced on the shingles. The air was clear and the sky was bright with stars. Spike’s bare torso shone like ivory.

Buffy mentioned, “You make a terrific target like that.” He made a derisive noise and didn’t move except to draw on the cigarette and then rest that wrist on his knee. “So,” she prompted, snuggling close and then held close, “tell me about the fight.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Just vamp stuff.”

“Fantastic, you said.” Buffy poked him in the ribs. “So tell me: you know you want to.”

“Well…. First nest was that Lovinger box, all the pillars and crap angels on it, north end. Came up quick, pack circled to drive in any they found roundabout, went straight in and there were eight of ‘em there. Caught ‘em cold, and the second they saw me, they weren’t in no doubt what I’d come about. Put away two right then, they didn’t know no better than to try to come at me all at once, getting in each other’s way. No organization.”

“What,” Buffy interrupted, “by way of weapons?” Because that was always a critical issue in conducting any fight.

Another shrug. “They had the various usual--knives, couple clubs, broken bottles an’ like that. Nothing serious, and three or four of ‘em fledges, they’re so fucking dumb. Took them out first, they just clutter up a fight, you know how they are. Well, first off, couple of ‘em tried to catch hold, lock me down so the others could come at me. Broke the one’s thumb an’ while he was yelling about that, tossed him into the other one an’ they both went down, see, and then--”

Listening as he described the flow of the fight and each of the technical problems it had presented, happily remembering and creating it for her, Buffy agreed it certainly did sound like a nice fight, one she regretted having missed.

**********
With at least some of the bruises from the claiming of Restfield still showing, Spike held court, Saturday evening, at Willy’s. He, Mike, Mary, and Isadora shared a table off in the left back corner; Huey came and went with drinks and occasional conversation. On the table, one of the small sample bottles of lily-of-the-valley perfume—chosen mostly because it was the cheapest he could find—stood pungently open. There’d already been complaints about it, in words and by gesture and expression. Pretty soon, there’d be a fight. No hurry, Spike thought. Still had a ways to run before the real killing began.

He wasn’t there to do but a couple of things. Mostly he was there to be seen, with a few other vamps around him that he treated as allies, not minions. Wasn’t time yet to start collecting or accepting minions, a personal household staff. That far, he already had planned out clear in his mind. No use thinking much beyond that: the situation was too chaotic and subject to change.

One thing he’d already accomplished was dressing Huey scathingly down, slapping him around some, busting him up a little, for offering oxycontin but providing goddam amphetamines. Huey claimed he’d gotten them mixed up in the dark, but that still was no excuse and Huey knew it as well as anybody. He’d taken his punishment without complaint or any serious attempt to defend himself. He had it coming: Spike had continued uncontrollably hyper to mid-morning before crashing, totally out for some ten hours. Threw Spike’s whole day off and was a nuisance to boot, having to guard every fucking thing he said or did with both his mind and his mouth in freewheeling overdrive.

At least he’d been able to retain the sense not to fuck or feed on Buffy. Couldn’t have controlled himself in either of those situations. Anything could have happened.

She’d realize soon enough that something was off. But it would be fucking moronic to give the game away first crack out of the box and then have to contend with that, too, on top of everything else.

He’d postpone that falling-out as long as he could. But as things developed, she was gonna notice and start wondering. Eventually, she’d know. Probably not everything, but enough. No help for that. Had to have his fallback position in place before that inevitable blow-up happened.

Setting the soul aside largely took the brakes off. Let him plan ahead as best he could, then launch directly into action without a whole lot of crap reservations, second-guessing himself, useless sympathy, and preparing for contradictory consequences, all of which couldn’t happen. Fuck the consequences. He’d deal with them as they arose. His love for his Slayer was just as intense, but it would have been stupid to imagine it unchanged. She was still unequivocally his; but he had less awareness that he was hers. Which was as it had to be. In this, he had to own himself, keep a sharp focus.

Knocking back her drink, Mary complained for about the fifth time, “This is so fucking boring.”

Spike felt about the same. But her complaining was starting to get on his nerves.

Grabbing the bottle, she found it empty and tossed it against the wall. “I want more,” she announced.

Spike said, “No.” He had money for maybe one more, and there were still four places to hit tonight.

“Why not?” Mary demanded.

“How about because you’re a whinging bitch?” Spike replied.
Mary started to come up out of her chair. Grabbing a fistful of Mary’s hair, Isadora yanked her back down, commenting, “If you want something, I can give it to you, chica.”

Spike was beginning to like Dora. Had at least two grains of sense to rub together and occasionally seemed to think about what she was doing. As she and Mary commenced yelling at each other, Spike smiled at Dora. Thus encouraged, Dora popped Mary in the eye, Mary blew out the door screaming curses, and things settled down again. Sorting themselves out in respect to him. Perfectly normal.

A couple of demons, a Navcoombe and an Akmar, wandered by, wanting to know if next week’s challenge fight was still on, considering he and Mike were sitting there so chummy, not hollering insults or anything. The Akmar, red-skinned with black freckles, was pissed off because he’d lost money when Spike had defaulted. Mike offered to arm wrestle him for the sum and broke his arm. The Akmar went off threatening unspecified mayhem. The Navcoombe said, “It stinks over here.”

Spike replied untruthfully, “I like it.”

The Navcoombe said, “You would.”

Dora flicked Spike a glance, checking, then put a knife in the Navcoombe’s belly and Mike stomped him until the Navcoombe went liquid and mostly seeped through the floorboards.

“Tidy,” Mike remarked, resuming his seat.

Huey came from the bar with three shots on a tray. Setting them out on the table, he said dryly, “Leavegeld, Spike. Willy wants you to take your custom elsewhere and I’d sooner not have to dispute it with you.”

“Making the customers nervous, hey? Or just Willy?” Spike downed the shot, deciding it would be his last, even free.

“Willy doesn’t want the place wrecked if nothing’s bet on it.”

“Understandable. Presently, then, Huey.”

Spike was nearly satisfied with the impression he’d made. He got out a map and the marker from the tote he’d brought along. Frowning at the tiny lines, he boxed in Restfield, and two extra blocks on all sides, with a thick red line. As he was drawing a big-headed T with a point on the end for the benefit of the illiterate, Dora said, “Hey, you want to fuck?”

Spike glanced up and found she was talking to Mike, who responded, “Sure, why not.” To Spike, Mike added, “Meet you at the next place, fifteen minutes?”

“Have a good time. Make it twenty.”

They finished their shots and left, and Spike put the final touches on his signature glyph. He taped the map to the wall under the odds board, attaching it on all sides so a single grab wouldn’t tear it free. He told Huey, “See that stays there.”

“As best I can,” Huey responded. “You know how it is.”

“All right,” Spike conceded. “Let me know who takes it down, then.”
“I’ll do that.”

Returning to the corner table, Spike reflected that one had to be reasonable about such things. It was word of the formal territorial claim he wanted spread—the map itself didn’t matter. He’d be posting another, with different boundaries, soon enough.

There was no mechanism in place for claiming territory anymore, so he was making one. That was what signified. Already, three vamps had gone to that wall to find out what Spike had posted there.

He emptied the little ounce bottle of perfume on the table, careful not to get any on his hands. The stink was considerable and would be all but impossible to get out of the rough plywood. Discarding the bottle, he capped the marker and dropped it back in the tote, among the stakes.

Leaving Willy’s, Spike took a roundabout way, threading through alleys and cutting behind buildings, mindful of the sniper. He figured that annoyance would have resolved soon; but timing, and hitting all the places he’d chosen for posting the map, was important tonight and any delay or distraction would be unwelcome.

Near the familiar alley behind the Bronze, the smell of blood hit him, drew him. Next to an overflowing dumpster, Mary was crouched over a fresh kill, feeding. Habit from years of incapacity kicked in: when the only way to taste human blood had been to drive other vamps off their victims.

He wanted it. Though there was no need anymore, no sense. The change flashed through him.

He wanted her. Wanted to lick the blood off her face, beat her into submission, pound into her, maybe rip her throat out as he came.

He was dizzy, rigid, and aching with how hard he wanted it. He saw, imagined, it all happening, felt how it would be for his demon to collapse on the corpses, spent and satisfied.

He thought incoherently, *Dru…Pace…Non serviam.*

With his demon upon him and overmastering him, he could feel no reason to deny himself the full of his desire. But this wasn’t tonight’s business. Not what he’d come for.

*Dru,* he thought. If Drusilla had been with him, if it had been her kill or his gift, they would have shared it. Had done, lots of times. He wouldn’t have felt icily isolated, connecting to no one, nothing. It didn’t have to be like this. There’d been Dru. He missed Dru, wanted Dru, making his own kills or sharing hers, no matter. Profound company even his demon respected and deferred to. Not this annoying trull too trivial and meaningless even to kill.

He didn’t want his schedule thrown off, what he’d planned and thought through, by being blindsided by a random kill he didn’t even need, a woman he didn’t want, except that he did. Didn’t want to be controlled by such things, whether it was the First, the Powers, or the fucking Council of Watchers. *Non serviam.* I will not serve.

The fucking Order of fucking Aurelius controlled their goddam demons or else they were no better than the least raw fledge, prey to every passing impulse, every appetite, every fear. They chose. They refused to let the demon dictate.

But he wanted it. All of it.
He slid down the wall and sat hugging his knees, changed face bent onto them, trapped and shaken between the extremes of flaring heat and utter cold.

He wanted Bit. Dawn. Deep connection, chaste involvement without the confusions of passion. Wanted her here with him or himself wherever she was, no matter, no issues of dominance or control. Holding himself easily apart from her, not feeding from her or even truly wanting to, easy in her companionship. Mustn’t ever let his demon get past him or Dawn would be hurt, with no defenses except that she had a taser now, mustn’t let her ever forget her taser, make Michael keep his distance while she learned and chose, precious Bit, his sister-child and pure mother, always looking out for him, always so peaceful being with her. *Pace.* Peace, stability, trust, comfort. Antidote to extremes. *Pace...Non serviam. Pace.*

He wanted that. Not that other: what the demon was drawn to. He chose otherwise.

Eventually he was able to still his harsh compulsive breathing, unlock, find his balance, and stand, every careless trace of intoxication gone. The drained kill was cooling: hardly any hot bloodsmell left. Mary was gone. Nothing left here that he wanted. And he was late now to the next demon bar on his list. Best get on with it then.

He picked up the tote by its handles and moved on.
The Leper Prince

It was Video Viewing Night, and getting booted (metaphorically) off the couch Anya and Xander were bookending, the better to trap Willow and Oz in the still vacant middle, Spike settled on the floor with the end of the couch to lean back against. He was roustted from there by Anya, who’d apparently not forgiven either him or Xander for Xander’s intended indiscretion with Bowling-Girl, expressing her displeasure with an actual kick that set off a wisecrack from Harris. Vacating that place too, he hung about in the door arch, defensively hugging himself and waiting for everybody else to arrive and get settled to see what was left on offer. He felt very ill-used.

It seemed as though with the addition of Oz and the absence of the SITs, the Scoobies had regressed to a prior state that required no respect be shown Master Vampires. Master Vampires were to be budged at will and derided as a form of entertainment because it was assumed said Master Vampires wouldn’t dare try to retaliate. Were in fact helpless and defenseless against whatever ill treatment said Scoobies felt like dishing out.

Spike hadn’t liked it before and liked it less now.

He imagined going game-faced and eating Harris for no particular reason except that he’d wanted to for so long. Just habit, really. No reason except now he could. Seeing the highly satisfactory surprise and dismay. The looks on their faces. Not that he really would or anything. Buffy would object. With her fists and possibly weaponry, with the weapons chest so handy and all. Which imagining Spike found very appealing: it’d been a long while, months, since he and the Slayer had had a proper go-round. Maybe just threaten to eat Harris…..

Wolfboy drifted in and was bribed onto the couch by Harris with the offer of pork rinds and wide, welcoming gathering-in gestures like aborted hugs. Spike had always had his doubts about Harris and maybe Oz did too because he perched gingerly, equidistant from Harris and Anya, as though prepared to bolt. When Willow came downstairs she was neatly backed into position beside Oz by Dawn, talking fast about some claptrap or other. The minute Willow was down, Dawn forted herself strategically at Willow’s feet over a monster bowl of popcorn she lifted overhead for the couched captives to dip into. Least she could do, considering she was locking them in place unless they were willing to step on her or give her a hearty shove.

As Buffy came in, trying to wrench the rental video box open, Spike slid in quietly next to Dawn, taking a small handful of the bare, non-buttered, non-cheesy popcorn as a pretext. Doing something constructive: adding to the barricade. Assisting the whole Get-Willow-and-Oz-Back-Together thing, wasn’t he?

“What ya got, Buf?” Harris grinned widely as though he thought that was a funny remark. Ponce. Git. Moron.

Wrenching at the pink plastic box, Buffy lifted a distressed face. “It’s a remake of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dawn has to do a report on it, and I think I read the Cliff’s Notes Sophomore year, so I thought…” Her voice trailed off and she yanked at the stuck box some more.

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rigid, Spike picked it up and held it out to her. Automatically he took in the label. Just for a second his eyes widened. He thought, *Mis-shelved, most like. Or she didn’t bother actually reading such a long title....*

“Thanks.” Shooting him a quick, uncomfortable glance, Buffy laid the offending box aside on the weapons chest, then stooped to insert the video into the player on the shelf underneath the TV and coincidentally presenting a great view of her ass. She muttered, “I was afraid I’d break it.”

“Yeah, Slayer strength an’ all. Could happen,” Spike agreed, tossing popcorn and catching it in his mouth. Tasted like styrofoam but made a good crunch. Would be better with garlic or mixed into blood, but this was what was on tap, so he made the best of it for the sake of harmony.

Seemed he did quite a lot of dumb stuff for the sake of harmony. He wondered how that’d got started. Oh: the chip. Chained up to things. Get punched in the gut or the nose whenever he said something a Scooby didn’t fancy. Right. That was how.

Anya was announcing to the air about six foot up that it was good this had been set up for Sunday night because if it’d been set for Saturday, she would have had to ask for a storm check. So predictably you could have set watches by it, Harris corrected her: “Rain check, Ahn.” Anya told even higher air, “Rain, storm, what does it matter? Like any normal human, I had a *date* last night.”

Harris began to combust. “A date? With who--Clem?”

“No, Clem’s seein’ some bint in Mosley,” Spike supplied helpfully.

“A demon’s a demon,” Harris contended nastily, and Spike looked at him over the tops of imaginary glasses.

“Have you *seen* Clem lately, Harris? Or have you forgot? On account of the hot sun all day on that piss pot yellow hat of yours?”

Anya screeched, “Not Clem! Who’s a perfect gentleman, unlike some I could name. Took care of removing that stray that had slunk into the basement somehow, no bother, and all of the kittens. No, my date was with Albert Mongohan. President of the Sunnydale Chamber of Commerce.” Anya smacked her hands down on her knees with *so there* emphasis. “We did *not* go bowling. Albert has refined tastes.”

*So does Clem*, Spike thought. *Specially when it comes to kittens.*

In between the squabbling pair, Willow looked cramped and seemed to be imploring the ceiling for deliverance. Oz stared straight ahead like somebody waiting for root canal. Obviously it was true love.

“*Mongo-han*?” Harris hooted. “Now you’re dating Ming the Merciless? Always liked his taste in collars, but jeez, Ahn.”

“I’ll have you know--” Anya launched but Spike was distracted by a nudge in the ribs.

Bumping shoulders, Dawn muttered crossly, “Get off, Spike. I’m all bunched in. All day you’ve been crowding me. Clingy. Can’t you just--” She turned her head, still talking, and stopped abruptly, staring at him. “Why are you vamp-eyed?”
Spike tossed popcorn, keeping an eye on Buffy, who was perched unhappily on the weapons chest and playing with the box, trying to get it to close properly. Not watching the video either.

Almost as good as a show, waiting for it. Onscreen, two lesbians were stripping down. They’d got as fair as their half-slips. Considerable eye-contact and lip-licking was going on. Neither looked remotely like Willow. Blonde wasn’t bad, though no way was that her natural equipment.

Oz remarked, “I must have read a different version.”

Following Oz’s rapt stare, Willow wailed, “Oh, my GODDESS!”

Harris looked. And looked.

Finally consenting to lower her chin, Anya frowned. It made her eyes look beady and too close together. She rendered her annoyed verdict: “The blonde’s too well endowed. No one looks like that naturally.”

Dawn Eeked and clapped a hand to her mouth, leaning forward over the bowl as though considering puking into it. Her eyes were enormous. “Spike, what are they do-ing?”

“Revising their dreams of stardom, I expect.”

Puzzled, Buffy said, “What?” and spun to look at the screen just in time to see the blonde start getting busy through her partner’s slip. “What?”

“Think maybe you misread the label, pet. That last word, it’s not ‘Cities.’”

“What!” Buffy dove to get the video out. Hit eject without hitting stop. The tape jammed, freezing an interesting image on the screen. Lying full length on the floor, Buffy stuck her hand in the slot and opened parts of the player not supposed to be adjusted by the user. The player bulged and yielded to superior force. Buffy’s hand came out with the cassette trailing about six feet of stuck tape. “You knew, you bastard! You knew and you didn’t--”

Getting hit in the face with the cassette made Spike miss the descending popcorn.

**********

The aggrieved males assembled on the front porch with the beer that had never been distributed. Oz brought it and handed Spike’s can to him first. Spike nodded thanks but set it on the step unopened.

Harris was ranting on about demons, how you never could trust them, they’d leech onto you and suck out everything good, all of it they wanted anyway, and leave you with nothing, but it was no use, Spike wasn’t gonna eat him tonight no matter how much of a pillock he made of himself. Spike was saving himself for better things.

Finishing a cigarette, he broke open the beer and drank about half of it. Thin, American. Went without saying. He drank the rest of it.

Willow came out, head low and constrained, and asked Oz hesitantly, “Wanna take a walk?”

Oz said, “Sure.” He set his beer on one of the hip-high brick pillars and he and the witch went off together. Taking the wolf for evening walkies.
Harris stomped back inside. Spike could hear his voice and Anya’s criss-crossing, accusatory and unhappy.

One of the better things ventured onto the porch and sat on the top step behind him, wrapped her thin arms around his chest, and laid her cheek against the back of his head. “I’m a dork,” Dawn murmured contritely. “You were upset and I blew you off.”

Spike held up the empty beer can with two fingers. “Fetch me another, will you, pet?”

“Sure thing.” She collected the empty and scampered off with it.

Spike half rose and reached to snag the can Oz had set aside. He’d put that away by the time Dawn returned and resumed her former position, handing the beer down to him, then hugging him close again. His back absorbed her heat like a liquid. Reminded him of times on his old bike and Dawn at pillion, hanging on, gleeful squeaks in his ear.

As he worked on the beer in more measured swallows, Dawn asked, “When you get all rich and everything, you gonna get a new bike?”

“Might do. Thought about it.”

“Can I help pick it out? Bookmark internet sites to look at? Research?”

“Whatever you please, Bit.”

“You’re still mad,” Dawn observed sadly.

“Don’t take no notice of me. Mostly has nothing to do with you. ‘Snot you. Just sometimes I get fucking sick of being reasonable, is all. Want to want what I want an’ just go after it…. You do something for me: tell your sis, Casa Spike, ten minutes. Tell her, sneakers and workout kit.”

Finishing the beer, he set it on the step and rose out of Dawn’s embrace. Instead of cutting through the yards, he took the longer way: pacing the sidewalks from one streetlight to the next to the corner and making the turn, hands stuffed in pockets and shoulders hunched, a plain target. The sniper didn’t disappoint him. He heard a distant small crack, and an ice-pick of pain jabbed into the back of his left thigh. He whirled to confront the ranked bland houses, the row of anonymous street trees.

“Quit fucking around! Got no time for these bloody pissant games! Do the thing proper or else leave off, moron! Game’s changed. Stakes have changed. So leave off this fucking foolishness!”

There was no second shot, and no use and no need to go haring off trying to catch the wanker. At least a block away, and likely up on a rooftop or high in a tree, and by the time Spike could even get near, the sniper would be long gone. Refusing to limp, Spike continued on to Casa Spike. Entering, he was freshly aware of how insecure the place was—without a rightful living resident, without protective spells, the walls and locked door wouldn’t present much of a barrier to any form of attack, physical or magical. But it should do a little longer. He hadn’t claimed but Restfield yet. Only posting his next claim would arouse more than half-hearted, disorganized opposition.

Hearing Buffy come in at the back, he met her in the hall and they went right to it. She grabbed his wrist and swung him into a wall. Rebounding, he dropped into a sweep kick and took her feet out from under her but only momentarily. She rolled, quick and tight, on her back. Instead of flipping up,
she set her elbows for leverage and kicked him high in the chest, not as hard as she’d meant to because he faded back ahead of the blow, caught her ankles, and flung her down the basement stairs. He didn’t bother with the steps at all, going down after her in a long jump, demanding, “Come on, come on! You can do better than that, Slayer!” and going at her the second his feet hit. She replied with an elbow to his throat.

They got more into the swing of it then: a continuous weave of strike and counter, neither backing off, presenting biceps or back to absorb the force of a blow while trying to land a good one direct to the belly, diaphragm, throat, or face, the one trying to catch the other on the rebound from walls, cabinets, furniture in the instant before balance was firm.

Buffy tried a series of whip kicks to his head and most of them connected. He spun, fell, tossed a cabinet at her, struck out, leaned aside and dropped into a retreating backward roll, moving nearly the length of the room in the process. As the next kick came at him, instead of ducking, Spike held his stance, took the blow on his shoulder, and launched straight into her while she was still balanced on one leg. They went over a couch into the carpeted pit with her underneath, taking the full force of the landing. He got in two or three good ones to her middle before she could double and kick him off. Enough bloodsmell now to wind things up hot and tight. Both of them breathing audibly. The good all-over ache of muscles banged enough to throw recovery into overdrive with everything running full-out, the real white-hot dance of violence everything in him loved and whose completion she could find nowhere else.

Hitting her, he was glad of her. Loved her ferocity, loved how she came back at him with everything she had. Loved the beautiful economy of her motions, the hair that had escaped its fastening and swung in a golden blur as she moved, slapping across his face when they spun together. Loved each of her fingers and the curl of her fists. Her arms and her sharp daggers of elbows. Loved the heated smell of her, was hard with it and wanted more. Took the front of her grey sweatshirt in two hands and ripped it, collar to waistband. Slammed her against the nearest convenient wall, lifting with hands at her waist so her toes kicked harmlessly against his shins, pinning her there, gnawing and sucking at her breasts with all the good smell there, starved for it and the taste of her skin, all of her flavors. Still pinning her, he shoved her sweatpants down over her hips and then freed himself, ignoring her yanking at his clothes, wanting him likewise bared to her touch. He was too busy and intent to take account of such things. She slid down a little and her legs closed around his waist like a vise as he entered her, clutched tight and hot within her slippery walls.

The pressure driving him and the pressure enclosing him felt fit to crack his spine but it still wasn’t enough. Had to get deeper and she was meeting him, clawing at him and drawing him in, slamming against him at each stroke impossibly agonizingly hard and nearly lost but not enough, still building and the sounds and then it started, like being yanked inside out and the smell of it so wonderful, them together, it hit him even harder at the base of the spine and his convulsing balls, flinging everything completely into her and at last altogether lost, gone into whited-out total ecstatic blank.

He was on his back and found her still mounted on him, drawing raking nails down his bared chest and belly slowly and again. Watching him with huge dark eyes and her hair all about her face, all steel and slow and predatory and the smell of them so strong: deep somewhere far below any surface. All dark and growing pressure, rocking into it all slowly with the sense of waves, of being carried without volition, breathing with and becoming the rhythm, slow rocking. He reached up and she bent to him, hot mouth, hot tongue that also moved to the motion, the soft hot wet and the hard teeth that bit, lips swollen and seeking, all the bruises that wanted her, the red wanting that rode on the beat of her blood. He felt that but kept focus on her shadowed face and on her eyes, watching him as she lifted and returned, sensation centered on their joining, her hands heavy on his shoulders, bracing and balancing, pressing and relaxing. He again drew her down, thumbing and tonguing her
nipples so that a shuddering current passed through her and returned to him at her core. He felt the circuit complete itself through them, building again with sudden jolts and sparks, breath hitching and held, everything beginning to tighten, heavy with a weight like fire. With crooning exhalations he let himself be quiet and drawn, quiet in his mind, letting it all come in as it would without conditions, waiting and empty to whatever chose to come, however she touched him and moved, all soft, all rocking. No harm would come that way. No hurting of her. The red heat was hers to do with as she pleased. No sharpness, no edges anywhere. When he came it was drawn from him like breath, nothing he forced, just taken and engulfed, so warm, so quiet. And again gone into the whiteness and what perhaps was sleep.

They were tangled together, peaceably stroking in the dark, everything touch and warm and soft. Her hand thoughtfully kneading his thigh roused a small twinge of pain her hand detected and faithfully reported. “Sniper. Again,” she commented disgustedly.

“Love. Gonna have to leave you for awhile. Bit of a lightning rod here. Have to keep clear.”

“Damn sniper.”

“That’s nothing. Doesn’t signify. Remember the Order of Taraka, that I set on you and your chums one time?”

“Mmmm. Bugman and Madame Kicky Knife Shoes.”

“Ahuh. Something like that. Can’t let nothing get past me. Nobody else to get hurt.” He laid his arm over his eyes, feeling it as a barrier, a defense. Nothing to get out, get past except what was needful for her to let him go.

She tugged at his wrist with a couple of fingers. “Who’s gonna send something like that against you?”

“Dunno. Find out maybe after it comes. Got a little time to get set before that. Need to get right with you so you don’t come into it.”

“Vamp stuff,” she deduced sourly, her mouth against his shoulder, blowing and sliding the syllables against his skin.

“Yeah. Started it. Now got to go on, get to the end of it.”

“Like the Hellmouth: when you tossed me out on my tail. Still don’t like that, Spike.” They fell into kissing for awhile but he could feel her thinking. Presently she said, “Let Restfield go. Stay.”

“Can’t, love.”

“You need us.”

“I’ll still turn out for patrol,” he offered. “But gonna be running my own sweeps soon. There’ll be edges that still touch.” He laced fingers through hers, tapped her lightly on the head with the joined fists. “Where I can. We can cog ourselves to it, love. Long while yet.”

She patted anxiously at his face. “Don’t want anything to get at you.”

“Nothing to get past me to harm you. Have to stand clear, love.”
“No.” But it was a protest, not a refusal. They both heard that.

“However it seems, I’m going where I have to. An’ love you just the same. Love you always. Treasure. Dear heart. Wouldn’t leave you except to come together again. However it looks, don’t turn loose or lose hope of me. Come through for you on the far side. I will. But for now, can’t stay close no more. Need your blessing: that you can be easy with it.”

“No. You need us. Just vanish and I’d never know, can’t--”

“Hush now. Won’t be that way. I promise.” He pulled her hand in and kissed it. “If it comes to that, Michael, he’ll come an’ tell you. I promise.”

She was still distressed, shaking her head. “I dream that sometimes, you’re just gone--”

“Won’t happen. Michael would tell you. And Bit would know. Long as neither of those things comes, I’m still on my feet and fighting. I know: I’ll give Red somewhat, and she can spell it an’ mark me on a map anytime. Hey? See you nearly every day. Though not like this, not as often, but we done that too, remember? Don’t like it much but can abide it, not like you’re gonna go all pruny with neglect, get old and forget how it’s been with us. An’ I’ll be good: take the fucking cell phone, not drop it off towers or nothing, yeah?”

She cried, and he held her, talked quiet reassurances to her until she slept, soft and still unreconciled in his arms. No need to take his leave of the Slayer: it was only Buffy that concerned him, that he’d hoped could be reconciled to it. But he couldn’t turn aside for that.

When everything in her went to sleeping rhythms he carried her to the bed and tucked her up cozy there, all as it should be. Then he dressed and put some things in a carryall and left, locking everything behind him.

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Monday morning, Dawn saw that Buffy’s bedroom door was open. By itself, that wasn’t definitive. Spike might be asleep, all shagged out, over at Casa Spike: Dawn had long since deciphered the code about wearing sweats, that were never seen again, followed by conspicuously lame mornings and the otherwise unaccounted-for bruises Buffy tried to cover with makeup and Spike only grinned when asked about.

Dashing downstairs, Dawn found Buffy listlessly pottering in the kitchen in a thick blue chenille robe, clutching a mug of coffee. Grabbing PopTarts from the cupboard and inserting them in the toaster, Dawn asked, “Where’s Spike?”

Buffy pushed at her face with the side of her hand--an odd gesture, as though she wanted to smear the flesh off the bones. “Gone.”

“Gone…as in what?”

“Gone as in moved out. Left. He’ll be in and out now. He says.”

Dawn grabbed juice and poured it into a paper cup. “Big fight over the video, huh?”

While Dawn gulped juice, Buffy stood suspended, mug halfway to her mouth. “You know, that
never came up. That was so excessively dumb. Makes me all itchy, thinking about it.” The mug resumed its journey.

“Now see, if Spike had picked up the video, everybody would have thought he did it on purpose. Since it was you, all clear, honest mistake.”

Dawn was trying to cheer Buffy up. Dawn figured she knew what was what: with the claiming of Restfield, things had developed to the point that Spike figured he needed a separate base of operations, further distancing himself from the Slayer. Also, Buffy was less likely to object to what she didn’t know about. Dawn was a bit annoyed, since he hadn’t said a word to her beforehand, but in retrospect it was plain. All that hanging close and clinginess yesterday, that had been Spike saying goodbye without, you know, actually having to say anything. Spike liked goodbyes but hated scenes, so he did sneaky goodbyes and then ran and hid. Like he had with the SITs.

The PopTarts leaped and Dawn collected them gingerly, dropping them on the counter to cool. “So where’s he gone?”

Buffy only shook her head. She faced away, apparently looking out the window over the sink. Dawn leaned and saw what she’d suspected: Buffy’s face all clenched up, fighting tears. Dawn hugged her carefully. “Hey! He’s not gonna leave! It’s not like Dad, or Angel!”

“Or Riley Finn, or Giles, or…nope, not gonna think about that.” Buffy’s eyes got the bladed-hand treatment. “He took the cell. I’ll be better when I’ve talked to him. He said he’d turn out for patrol, just like normal. I’ll be better when I see that’s a fact, not just one of those guy blow-offs, like ‘I’ll call you,’ or ‘Let’s do this again sometime except I’m all booked up for every day with a Y in it for the next gazillion years and by the way, I’ve lost my soul and, hey--murdering your friends? I’ll get right on it!’”

Dawn found the PopTarts cooled enough for consumption and bit into the first one, noting the absence of the hospital cooler by the refrigerator. No great hoo-hah, then: she’d find out from Rona, who’d known enough not to make a delivery this morning. None here, anyway. Therefore, someplace else. Rona would know.

Poor Buffy. She had abandonment issues. Notwithstanding that she hadn’t been able to beat Spike off with a stick for years, and not for lack of trying, the minute a guy left her it was Dad, all over again, and she went all paralyzed, miserable, and closed in. It had been about the same when Spike established Casa Spike as an answer to the question, “What do we do with all these SITs?” Buffy moping around, obviously feeling rejected and deserted. And that had been only next door!

Dawn was glad the divorce hadn’t traumatized her like that. Well, yes, there was the fact that at the time of the divorce, Dawn hadn’t existed. She remembered it, all the same.

Phoning Rona after school wasn’t as helpful as Dawn had expected. She found out only that Spike figured to be moving around and had told Rona he’d phone in the mark every day, where he’d meet her to take delivery. No help there. So Dawn was driven to do the flamboyantly obvious: call Spike himself. At a time of day when he was probably sleeping. But her first try was answered on the second ring and got Spike’s voice demanding, “What?” in no friendly tone.

“Spike, it’s me. Dawn.” She waited to hear a more moderate greeting.

She got: “So?”
So he was in a mood, too. Dawn sighed.

“Just tell me where you are, OK?”

Long silence except for banging noises in the background. Then, “Yeah, all right. 2073 McFarland.”

“Right, thanks.”

That address was way off at the west edge of town, among decomposing, mostly windowless ex-factories. It took Dawn two busses to get there, and then a fairish walk. 2073 proved to be a long, two story representative of the grey cinderblock and mesh-covered-windows school of design. Two rows of windows: tall ones below, and a line of narrow, horizontal ones just under the wavy galvanized roof. A faded sign proclaimed it the corpse of Miller Manufacturing. Its parking lot had been colonized by sumac saplings. The rest of the lot, like those around it, was covered by a sepia assortment of weeds.

Walking up the potholed drive, Dawn could hear hammering.

The first two doors she tried didn’t budge, and her pounding knocks roused no reply. Then she saw an “Office” sign on an annex poked out from the rest of the structure, and the door there gave. Inside was a fair-sized room, dim because all its outside windows had been spray-painted black. Four big old steel kneehole desks piled with junk. At a fifth desk near the far wall, in front of a line of empty office-green file cabinets interrupted by a door, a vamp she didn’t know had set down a magazine to look at her. Big vamp. Big sword on the desk.

Rising lazily, smiling, the vamp remarked, “Well, what do we have here?”

Clutching her taser, Dawn backed into the low afternoon sunlight, yelling, “Spike!”

Continuing to advance, the vamp picked up from one of the other desks a coil of rope with what looked like two big fish hooks on the end. He also collected a gun.

Dawn backed farther, bumping into a sumac tree, fumbling to get into her Hello Kitty backpack for her cell, then hitting the speed dial. When she got the same bored, annoyed, “What?” she blurted, “I’m outside, and some big goon of a vamp wants to shoot me or rope me inside or some--”

The call was cut off. About a minute later, she heard Spike cussing out the goon who’d turned back into the office while deflating by about a third. Then the goon guard got out of the way and it was Spike standing there, thumbs stuck in belt-loops, about an inch short of where the sunlight fell: all black and silver and peeved. Vamp-faced.

Dawn hustled, responding to his come-on gesture. Spike turned aside to let her by, cutting off the vamp guard’s excuses with, “Get a brain, or at least learn to pretend you have one.” Escorting her to the farther door, Spike mentioned to her, “Forgot to put on your smell, kitten. He didn’t know you without.”

“Oh.” Now it was Dawn who deflated. “I didn’t know I was supposed to. But you’d think he--”

“Food all looks alike. Got to keep things simple here. Next time, wear the smell.” As they passed through the door into the big, dim interior space, a spray can fell onto the concrete floor and cracked open enough to sneeze its contents out in a fan of black. Vamp quick, Spike jumped to avoid it, then spun, looking up, to yell. “Oi: watch that!”
A vamp with one foot in the loop end of a rope descending from a girder above made an apologetic noise. Down the length of the wall, two other suspended vamps were spraying east-facing windows. The west-facing windows, Dawn saw, had already been blacked out, presumably this morning. Most of the girders had ropes hanging from them. Dawn saw a female vamp--Mary, she thought--go up one, lickety-split, then sashay along the girder, casual and confident as a cat on a railing, to talk with a vamp working on something high on the far wall. Looking around as she followed Spike toward the back, Dawn saw other work in progress: the other doors were being fortified with 2 x 4’s fastened across, to leave just the single entry; some big fixtures were being removed and added to a line at the back--open space and barricaded space. Four vamps heaved up what looked like a stamping press and just walked away with it, to set it in the line. Dawn was freshly impressed with vamps’ strength and agility and saw they were being used as a work force to renovate the factory shell in a way unaided humans couldn’t have accomplished. She counted fifteen vamps before passing through the barrier. On the other side, a glassed-in foreman’s enclosure was having its windows washed. A substantial mound of junk, including several file cabinets, rolled ragged carpeting, and a couple of really old monitors, keyboards, and CPU’s, was piled outside. Inside was a bare cot, a table with a lantern on it and some mismatched chairs pulled up around it. Kennedy sat in one, writing in a blue spiral notebook.

Spike’s features had smoothed back into human, although Dawn hadn’t noticed when he’d changed. “Good sewer access,” he mentioned, waving at a large uncovered drain hole to the right, overhung by big wall-mounted bins that made Dawn think of moats and holes to rain molten lead down on attackers. Waving toward the other wall, he added, “Ain’t got the electric hitched up yet, but it should be, by tomorrow.”

Up on the girder, the vamp working on a big wall box waved, and Dawn realized it was Mike. She waved back.

Spike was continuing, “Have to ask Red about what will be needed to hitch up a computer here. If we’re gonna need phone lines or what. Don’t know my way around them well enough yet. Don’t want to get the city involved if I can help it. Started, anyways.” He shrugged, looking for her reaction.

“It’s so…organized.”

“Yeah.” He laughed with no amusement. “Don’t let appearances deceive you, pet. But a bit better than last time, I guess.”

“Last time?”

Kennedy leaned out the office door, calling, “Spike, I think I found another problem with the floor plan.”

Spike waved her back dismissively. “In a minute.” Then he said to Dawn, “So, you had the grand tour. You happy now?”

From beyond the barrier, there was a big crash. Spike frowned in that direction, took a step, then stopped, again looking at her as though waiting, none too patiently, for her to leave.

Dawn clutched her backpack to her chest. “Spike, why are you mad at me?”

He shut his eyes and sighed, making a random gesture. “Bit, you’re gonna have to cut me some slack
here. Not really into people mode at the moment. An’ too tired to take that on. Been at this all day.
Need to get the place at least defensible by nightfall, and getting vamps to turn out, much less work,
in daylight means keeping after ‘em every second. Then I have to turn out for patrol tonight. So don’t
expect too much from me just now. Maybe I’m gonna seem to you like I’m pissed off because most
of the time, I am. This is hard, pet. And very no fun at all. No matter how it seems, it’s…. Here,
now.” He suddenly swung around and hugged her--hard enough to make her Eek, squishing pointy
and corner-y things in the backpack into her front.

Dawn understood: he’d run out of words. Had to fall back on simple doing.

When he released her, setting his hands on her shoulders and looking her in the eyes, Dawn twitched
a smile and said, “OK, I’m cool with that. I can deal with vamp mode, you know that. Just so long as
I understand, I don’t expect you to go all polite with me, babysit every minute. I just need to know.
Wanted to know you were OK, where you were so I could see it in my mind when I think about
you. Maybe start to figure how I can help.”

“All right,” he said dubiously, without conspicuous enthusiasm. He glanced around at Kennedy
frowning over the notebook, then back at Dawn, and jerked a thumb. “That what’s got your nose out
of joint? Her playing second?”

Dawn hitched a shoulder dismissively. “I’ve seen things that thrilled me more,” she admitted.

“Fucking hell, Bit.”

“Guess you got to go to people mode after all. Sorry.”

“Yeah. Well. She’s better at it than I would’ve thought. Seen some dumb fuck-up stuff I hadn’t
thought all the way through. Like the smell--the perfume. A good percentage of the idiots that get
eaten by vamps are blokes, and they’re not gonna be real crazy about goin’ around smelling like
lilies. Just picked the stuff because it’s cheap. Didn’t think about the human guy side of it. And now
it’s too late to change. Gonna need some heavy-duty mojo from the witch to take the curse off before
we start pushing samples. But there’s still time…. ” He rubbed his eyes, asking, “What was I talking
about?”

“Kennedy,” Dawn said tightly.

“Yeah. Well, so she volunteered, didn’t she? An’ she’s got a better head for it than I do, truth be told.
And she’s thinking about dropping that class at the college she was sitting in on, that Red was
wound up so tight about. If she’s here, she’s not pestering Willow. And you got your school to see
to, and homework to do and all. So, good all around, yeah?”

“Sure, Spike. Good all around,” Dawn lied bravely, because he was so obviously frazzled with the
impossibility of satisfying everybody, doing the alien people thing without the soul’s guidance and
empathy to steer by. She’d figure out for herself how she was to watch for blind spots and warn him
in time.

**********

Because the days were shortening toward Halloween, Dawn knew she’d never make it home before
dark, not with two transfers on the bus line. As she stood in the open area considering the long
isolated walk to the bus stop and debating the advantages and humiliations of asking Kennedy for a
ride, a vamp dropped from the girder to her right and landed impossibly light, almost soundless,
folding into a show-off crouch right beside her.

“You jumped about ten feet,” Mike declared delightedly.

“Is that what you’re gonna do now--scary stuff, and then brag about it?” Dawn retorted tartly, trying to press her thumping heart back where it belonged. Anyway, even three feet would be an exaggeration. Probably.

“No harm, Dawn,” said Mike gently, rising to stroke a big hand down her hair a couple of times. “None meant, none done. Just thought, it being so late, maybe you’d like a ride back to Casa Summers. Have to wait here still awhile, but I’ll be off work at sundown and we can go, if you want.”

Presented with another option, Dawn considered it far superior. But as it didn’t do to give Mike too much encouragement, she shrugged and said, “Maybe. If I’m still here.”

“All right, then.”

He joined a bunch of vamps heaving at the last piece of big machinery still on the open floor. As Dawn watched, quite aware she was still being shown off to, Mike walked slowly around the machine, peering into crevices, trying to wedge his shoulders into places those shoulders were definitely not going. Then, without any preparation, he sprang to the top of the machine, at least ten feet straight up, paced around there for a while, then made an *aha* noise and waggled a hand, calling for a monkey wrench, whatever that was. When the tool was pitched up to him, he found a way to lie flat without falling off, working at something nearly flush with the metal that didn’t want to budge. Then he got onto his knees and started pulling it out, hand over hand: a thick metal rod that plainly had gone clear through the machine, top to bottom, and into the flooring.

Dawn didn’t notice Spike until he started clapping, congratulating Mike on having had such an enormous screw. Mike looked nearly as embarrassed as Dawn felt, pitching the long bolt aside and dropping down, pretending to take no notice of Spike’s continued remarks that the other vamps seemed to find funny, probably because the rough kidding was at someone else’s expense.

When the machinery came right up this time and was carried away, Mike returned, wiping his hands on a rag he pitched before reaching for Dawn’s arm. He didn’t say anything, leading her out to where the motorcycle was parked--almost invisible among the weeds until they were right on top of it.

“I’ve never seen Spike like that, exactly,” Dawn commented quietly. “I’ve seen him when he was drinking, he’d do stuff then, mostly fight. But this…is different from what I expected.”

Mike pushed in the ignition key, then stopped, leaning on the saddle, his back to her. “Oh, it’s nothing. Just how he does. On account of I’m the baby of the bunch. I see he gets some of it back, now and again. Don’t like it much, but I’ve had far worse hazing, some places I’ve been.”

“So you’re the goat?”

“Pretty much, I guess. Designated goat. Have to change that myself, if it’s to change. I get the chance Saturday.” He tapped the saddle thoughtfully with a fist a few times. “Probably jumps the betting some, too. Hadn’t thought of that before, but I expect Spike has. He thinks of stuff like that.”

“Yeah, he’s a superior planner. For a vamp.”
He looked around at her then, pale eyes shining in the last of the light. “He’s doing it, you know? Gonna claim the whole town. And oh, won’t there be howling and misery when the cousins find out about that! I’m not s’posed to say, of course. Except it’s you, and all….”

Mike looked hesitant, as if he worried that Dawn would tell on him, get him in trouble. “I know,” Dawn assured him. “Spike told me. The what, but not the how. And it’s been hard to get him to sit still any length of time lately, since he borrowed your bike that time….“ Dawn decided Mike didn’t need to know about the displaced soul. Besides, Spike had told her specifically not to tell him. So that was that. “Has he seemed…different to you, since?”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know. I just wondered.”

“Pretty much the same, riding my back all the time. But I don’t mind, truly. I get my own back, like I said. Except for you: watchdogging us like he’s been doing…. In case you wondered, I did ask him if it was all right, me taking you home. And he said go ahead.”

Dawn nodded, somehow not feeling much flattered but impressed with Mike’s earnestness. “Tell me about what’s happening. This is the base, I can see that.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, looking around at the dark roofline against the still-bright sky, “seems like he used it as a lair awhile ago, figured it would serve now. With some work. But we’d best get going, get you home before full dark.”

“Since I’m not wearing the right smell,” Dawn agreed rather sourly.

“Smell fine to me,” Mike offered, grinning and leaning quite close to her neck for a second, then swinging his leg over the saddle and starting the bike up. Dawn wasn’t really dressed for it, wearing her school skirt and all, but she tucked the plaid folds under her knees as best she could and then slid her arms around Mike’s waist to signify she was ready.

They bumped down the drive to the road. Then Mike opened up the throttle and they flew.

**********

You got to a certain speed and a certain level of complexity, add sleeplessness and drugs and endless details rolling in, each item requiring full focus and a decision, and presently it all came together and you had liftoff. Skimming.

Spike remembered a couple of months like that in Paris in the 1890s sometime, didn’t recall the details anymore but remembered the feeling. Like a hovercraft, he thought now: get everything right and it just lifted off, nothing of the doings even touching the water, the whole hull aloft, gliding along on its own breath and the skirts just there to contain it. Going fast because it stood to reason: no friction. Everything slid by, slid off. Not touching anywhere.

Too many jerks and starts, after clearing Restfield, to properly get off on it. And he wasn’t there yet, still bangs and bumps throwing him off. Needed to focus better, clearer, get slippery enough somehow to brush the distractions aside without substantial contact, and it would all become magically simple in a way you’d never expect unless you’d done it, knew it could happen. And of course hit a wave wrong or a rock, break the seal, and you’d have a huge fucking crash, everything
tumbling totally out of control, that was part of the fun of it: knowing there could be a smash, the knowledge electric on your skin every second, tight in your belly: utter fucking insanity and he knew that well enough.

This time, he knew what he’d taken and why, and he’d taken it on purpose. Never get through the night otherwise. And might achieve liftoff velocity if he could keep the pace, not go headlong into something that didn’t budge. Buffy, for instance.

That was the poetry of it: thinking in images, analogies, metaphors when what he was actually doing was running through a sewer under downtown Sunnydale, trying to get hold of Rona about the blood. Tension between fact and meaning, interpenetrant, like fucking Chagall.

Couldn’t get through, no answer, so he hit a speed dial number and got the machine at the lab. “Can’t make the mark at the time I said, sorry. Just take it home with you. I’ll collect it later.” He put the phone away, running steadily.

A couple of his crew had something resembling a car, but he’d wanted to reacquaint himself with the warren of lines in the industrial park. Since he’d be back and forth there every day from now on, he’d need to know where each diversion led, whether it had open access or dead-ended, what side lines handled overflow and connected farther on and could be used to dodge an ambush. Crew should know, too: he put on his mental list a rule against cars. Make ‘em know where they were, how they could go, the way he did. At the same time he knew he was afoot so Mike could get Bit home on the bike before dark. Had to keep track of all the pieces in play and most especially the two he couldn’t help but be connected with. They wouldn’t know how strong the pull of that connection was, all the rest superficial and manipulative but not those, could make him stop in his tracks or turn aside and pull everything into disaster but he’d cope with that, take it in stride somehow and keep moving as he had to, to stay just a bit ahead of converging events.

Making the turn, he reviewed his list, the agenda for tonight, confirming the order so he wouldn’t have to think about it, just go straight into the doing. Having done that, he blanked out and moved. Almost restful: he hauled out of the sewer on Revello, right by Casa Summers, and replaced the cover with the sense of shutting away a blurred interlude. Like you forgot the commercials when the program started up again.

This was real. This was home.

He immediately sought out Buffy, finding her in the kitchen, doing dishes at the sink. He went right up behind her and grabbed, lifting her off her feet, renewing contact like a magnet locking on. No surprise or stiffness: she knew him instantly, the same as he did her: by touch and ambience. “You washed,” he murmured into her hair, vaguely disappointed.

“A habit I got into. At about the age of three.” She pushed to be set down. “What did you expect?”

He spun her around and kissed her as thoroughly as she’d let him with other things on her mind, until Dawn came in and interrupted with a pained, “Please!”

He let Buffy retreat to arm’s length, considering her, seeing that all the bruises were gone except one at the side of her chin, that he kissed, quick and away, as recognition. “I know. The whole desertion scenario, right? An’ all the times you thought about calling today and didn’t. And all--”

She set her hands on his arms, disengaging. “Stop. Just stop.”
“Best get used to it, pet: you’ve not got rid of me. Have to try harder than that.” But he saw she’d have to have her fuss out before she’d be ready to hear such things, so he said over his shoulder to Dawn, “All well here? Got home all right?”

“Perfect,” Dawn replied flatly, and left.

Spike put his hands on the island behind him and bounced/slid to seat himself there. “So--where are we headed tonight, love?” He banged a short riff with his heels.

She gave him a really huffy look. “Get off!” When he didn’t move, she added, “We eat there!”

Spike smiled at her pleasantly, asking, “And…?”

For a second he thought she might do it, come fling him off into something, but she made a sour face and marched away. Upstairs, his ears told him. To get her patrolling kit, then, most likely. He wondered if she’d like help getting into it but then reflected that patrolling was Slayer business and the Slayer didn’t like that sort of play much and when she did, it tended to get bloody. Which would have delayed the patrol considerably and therefore throw the rest of the schedule off and that wouldn’t have done, oh, no. So instead, he went looking for the witch because that was several agenda items.

Not in the front room or the den by the computer. Upstairs, yes: sitting crosslegged on her bed with her laptop open before her but not tapping away on it, only looking out rather forlornly into space.

Spike slid to a quick seat on the throw rug there and popped her prezzie: the news about Kennedy, how she was helping coordinate and plan, and how this connected with the class.

Willow seemed both pleased and alarmed, looking down into his face, both of them with their heads appealingly tilted. “I haven’t seen that eager puppy look on you in way long. Is it an anniversary of something?”

“And…?”

Willow seemed both pleased and alarmed, looking down into his face, both of them with their heads appealingly tilted. “I haven’t seen that eager puppy look on you in way long. Is it an anniversary of something?”

“Have to keep in practice, sweet. A lot of expressions you haven’t popped out of your trunk in considerable. Might like to try one on, see if it fits. Smile, maybe?”

And she understood, she did smile, and almost reached out and petted him on the head. He wished she would, that would have been nice.

“Splendid!” he told her. “Takes positive years off, you have no idea.”

“You think?” Willow scrambled off the bed and went to inspect herself in the mirror because she could do that whereas all he had for mirrors were other faces. She looked at herself so hopefully, face and reflection, but that was an anxious expression, which rather defeated the purpose.

Spike told her that as she looked around, disappointed, so she tried again but it was no better. “Now you’re all self-conscious and that never works, that’s the problem. Try again after we’re gone an’ maybe get Dogboy to coach you if you can’t find better.”

She trailed back, lagging steps, and thumped down on the edge of the bed, commenting, “The magic there is gone. Poof.”

“Nonsense. Just ain’t looked hard enough yet. He’s a good enough lad and gender’s mostly forgivable among friends.”
“Now I know you’re off the map and into the clouds someplace. What are you on and can you get me some?”

“Maybe could be arranged. I’ll consult about it. Meantime. The invoice.”

“Oh! Yes, and it’s been wired in. Paid. You’re an undead person of means. I’ll show you. Or would you prefer ‘formerly living person?’” she asked over her shoulder, sprinting down the stairs with him right behind.

Firing up the computer, she showed him how to reach the account and see the balance, both total and broken down. She set bookmarks and, in an encrypted note, put the login and password to get there himself. Then she pulled out of a drawer the debit card tied to the account that he could buy things with, online and everything, adding sternly, “Remember, don’t lose it and if you do, tell me right away. And all it is, is the money in the account. Not the Federal Reserve. Blow it on an Aston Martin, which you’re not within light years of the bracket of yet anyway, and it’s gone, capice?”

“Asunto. That’s Pylean. Other card, that’s for Buffy, and half of what’s there.”

“Half the present total. And your half less my sixty dollars,” said Willow firmly, and with rapid keying transferred that amount to her own account. Spike watched hard but couldn’t see the money move. “It’s not instantaneous,” Willow explained patiently, amused, “but it’s done, we’re all square now. And why is your chin on my shoulder?”

“Comfy,” Spike explained, but straightened since it seemed he wasn’t to get to see the money moving. He slid the card into his pocket, made sure it was down there all the way. “Can a consultant have a consultant?”

“Now you’re talking taxable income, mister. You watch out or you’ll be all respectable, won’t be able to frighten small children anymore.”

“No fear there, sweet. Need advice. Need magic.”

“Who doesn’t? What, specifically?”

So he explained about the perfume and the gender problem, which should be something she’d see right off, as he hadn’t. “Now I got the dosh, I’ll order in bulk, but I’m starting wrong-footed here, if you see where I’m going.”

“I think I do. Coded protective smell, not an actual repellant, right? Doesn’t matter what it is, so long as it’s highly distinctive.”

“Emphasis on the stink,” he confirmed. “But that’s what I started with, with my crew. Don’t want to change now, confuse ‘em. They’re moderately stupid, you know how that goes.”

“I figure. Don’t order, Spike. Give me a sample and I’ll work with it. What’s your timetable here?”

“Saturday. Has to be in place Saturday.”

“OK, order a little. But for mass production, we’ll do designer. I’ll make you something as pungent that genders process differently. Aromatherapy. Pheromones. Give you the lily undertones, that vamps will pick up on, but something more musk-based for the human olfactory system, that will
smell different on guys than on gals. Layered. That sound about right?"

“Lost me at aromatherapy,” Spike responded cheerfully. “Doesn’t matter. Don’t care. Don’t need to understand it, just have it, in bottles, to pass it around.”

“Are we talking lifetime supply, every human in Sunnydale?”

“Pretty much. Ain’t figured how to do the kiddies yet, but that can follow.”

Willow tapped her teeth thoughtfully with the stylus. “Got the concept. Have to put together manufacture and delivery, after I figure out the formula. I’m thinking different delivery system: won’t sublime so fast. A patch, maybe. Talking major moolah here, long-term and short-term, to get it up and running. You better hit those books big-time to roll up those numbers. You gonna be up to that?”

“Have to be, don’t I? You gonna be able to take this on and deliver?”

Willow shrugged and smiled--eyes, nose, and mouth all crinkly and just right. Perfect. “I didn’t have much of a life anyway. I mean, who needs it? Practicing sorcery consultant--Spells & Smells. Sounds like a career goal to me! So stick with the ill lily for now. If that gets the guys eaten, tough. Thin ’em out a little. Mostly jerks anyway, right? This is a start-up operation, gotta expect some lag in a few components. I’ll have a base supply, low volume, ready in two weeks. And then… What?”

“Good omen, Red: a real smile. You keep practicing, you’ll get it. All right, that’s sorted. You can get a sample from Bit. Now the second thing is the computer. Connecting it up, where I am now.”

Spike explained a little, what was in place and what would be in place, until Willow interrupted him, “Have to look at it for myself. Where is it?”

Spike hung his head and looked at her sideways. “You’ll know it.”

“What? You mean the factory? You’ve gone back to the factory?”

“Well, yeah. ‘Cause I know how it connects. That much less to learn. Gonna be a problem? In case I never said, sorry about that other. Didn’t know you then. Not really. Still all evil and everything, didn’t know no better. Didn’t truly mean you any harm. Just preoccupied with Dru and all. Used to get distracted like that. Now it’s Buffy, I keep it all real clear,” Spike assured her earnestly.

“Sure you do, Skipper.” Willow absently gave him a hand pat, which wasn’t as good as a head pat, but nearly since it was kindly meant. “That was a long time ago,” she decided slowly, “and we both were different people then. And Xander…. No, no problemo. Need a password, something, to get in? Oh: smell, right?”

He gave her a *Got it* thumbs-up.

She said, “OK, tomorrow, after French, I’ll come out. I like French. All romantical and everything.”

“Certement. Comment?”

“Ooh, that’s good. I can practice! And of course you’d know French, if you know Pylean and Ancient Whatisis. Maybe someday, a long time from now, I’ll let you turn me after all: all that time to learn all that great stuff! What?”
“Never happen, pet. That franchise has been closed.”

“Only joking,” Willow protested.

“Not a thing to joke about.”

“Well, all right, Mister Righteous Boots. See if you get any cookies next time! OK then: tomorrow afternoon, with smell. What’s next?”

“That’s all that’s on the agenda for now.” Spike planted a kiss on her hair, that smelled all good and Willow-y, then retreated before her startled look. “Necessary, pet: not official, without.”

He had a flashing image of canting his head and biting down into her neck. Didn’t mean anything, just part of the mental landscape, automatic reaction of the equipment, was all. Like catching sight of a prime fuckable girl, getting hard. Just what happened, no harm, no blame. Just the awareness that he could. Not like before, when he’d thought of hardly anything else, because he couldn’t.


“Don’t have to. Do,” he conceded, and shook her offered hand on the sub-consultancy, at least until she snatched her hand back. So he’d added a thumb-rub to the back of it. Had to be something special, something personal.

“What is with you?” she demanded.

He shrugged. “Still evil, pet. Have to take me how I am.”

“No I don’t! And how’s your locket?”

Buffy was in the hallway, smacking a sword against her leg impatiently. Turning to join her, Spike said, “Not an issue anymore. Except you keep yours, all right? That’s important.”

Then he collected his usual axe and followed the Slayer out on patrol.

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Buffy watched him, trying to figure him out. Before they’d left, Willow had made a wide-eyed silent Oooh and finger-spinning-by-temple sign behind his back, and Buffy figured that was pretty much right. Wired to the max and loopy with it. Like the night he’d gone out on the roof, wouldn’t play at all, and next night sent her the sweats-and-no-underwear message (via Dawn no less) and totally all over her from the get-go. Not that it hadn’t been nice, they needed a total blowout now and again, her as much as him. But completely Looney-Tunes, no question.

Something different. But also something familiar. The two of them out patrolling together, no SITs, no Scoobies, wide open to everything, aware in three dimensions and he just loved this, you couldn’t help but see, feel, know. This was real old times only better because they were totally a team here like one nervous system, one set of reflexes, knowing exactly how he’d move or hold back, giving her the option, and it all was dancing just like he’d told her a few times but she hadn’t believed him then. Hadn’t been willing to listen because that would have meant taking in all the other crap he said and she couldn’t afford that then, couldn’t afford to let it in. Let him in. Now she had, and now she knew. He was right: at its best, it was all dancing. And she loved it as much as he did.
Loved him, too, when she set aside the whole desertion scenario, a little regretfully. It was an old friend, after all—far older than BuffyLovesSpike—and she knew its ways and was oddly comfortable with it. Happy as he was now, in balanced intent motion as he was now, he was just so gorgeous she felt her heart wasn’t big enough to contain it all. He’d always been beautiful in motion, there’d never been a time she hadn’t admitted that, even when she was denying everything else. And now there was the themness factor: the fact that she completely knew he wouldn’t be moving like this with anybody else, he could try but it wouldn’t be the Slayer and her Vampire. Never before and never again, afterward.

Whenever it was that she was to die, the best would be if it was like this. Be caught up suddenly in the perfection of herself, that she couldn’t be without him either. Nobody to match herself against then. Or be matched to, strength for strength, never having to hold back. Or any other kind of matching.

His attention switched and she saw it, felt it, turning with him without a missed beat, and there were three vamps pursuing a lone jogger. They hadn’t caught her yet, all of them running full tilt along the sidewalk at the edge of Morris Park where they’d probably picked her up and gone into hunt mode after her. Stepping out, accelerating, Buffy saw two were in game face, and the leader not, yet. A would-be Master Vamp, that would be, and two fledges. A training hunt.

Spike tapped her arm and gave a Go-ahead point, himself veering into the street, conspicuous standing there in the open space between the lines of street lights and parked cars. He whistled a high, piercing note. The leader glanced back and said something to the pair. Then the three of them turned, all game-faced now, and were coming full tilt back at Spike, leaving the jogger to escape. As Buffy and the three came together, she lunged to engage but was just shoved off, spinning a second on one foot because she hadn’t expected to be brushed aside, ignored.

The clang was Spike tossing the axe aside on the pavement. He was crouched a little, balanced, grinning and doing fingertip come-on motions, both hands, in the second before they all slammed together. One was tossed, upside down, into a parked car, setting off its alarm. One dusted. Casting the stake away, Spike reached to grab the third vamp’s head, practically chinning himself on it, legs and feet swinging up and around into a headlock. Continuing the same motion, Spike flung himself backward, sending Third Vamp flying full-length until checked by the grip of Spike’s knees. Bone cracked. Buffy punched her stake into the fledge rebounding from the car. She turned just in time to see Spike follow up the broken neck with a head twist that dispersed the final vamp of the trio into the air.

Dusting his hands together, Spike walked backward from his disappearing handiwork, showing one of those ultra-pleased grins that curled his tongue against his top teeth as though the satisfaction were a taste. He leaned, a downward swoop, to collect the axe, then caught Buffy’s eye and strolled on, heading back for the sidewalk, as the porch light of the nearest house went on and the owner (presumably) of the yelling car came outside, shaking his fist and hollering after them, “Damn kids!”

Not bothering to turn, Spike replied with a rude gesture, of which he had many.

“And what was that about?” Buffy asked, falling in beside him. “Somebody…you knew?” She hated having to ask that kind of thing. It didn’t matter to him, but it did to her.

“Nope. Never saw the bugger before, that I know of. Or his get.”

“He knew you, though. They let that girl get away to come at you!”
“Yeah. Did, didn’t they?” He was doing ultra-smug.

“So why?”

“Beats me, except that you’re traveling with the semi-famous, here.”

“Compared to the Slayer?”

“Don’t be jealous, love. We move in different circles. ‘M sure the next one will be all properly terrified of you an’ all. For about three seconds. Maybe three an’ a half. You were slow engaging there, you know.”

“Well, I didn’t expect they’d run right past me!”

He gave her a level, sober look. “Since when do you have the luxury of expecting, love?”

He was right, which always made her grumpy.

As they came to the park boundary, with a cemetery beyond the cross street, he tapped her arm, again pointing. “Off there’s the nest we found empty, that patrol when we came on the fire, afterward. When we took the van. Likely those three came from there.”

By way of answer, she turned, they turned together, to enter the cemetery and check on the nest. This time, four of the residents were home….for a minute or two after Buffy and Spike arrived. They each accounted for two—all easy kills. Buffy was even able to get in quippage.

In lunge position, making figure eights loops in the air with her sword tip, Buffy challenged. “Wanna critique that?”

Spike was leaning back against a tombstone, axe head on the ground and the haft leaned comfortably back too. “Good enough, pet. Passable. But…when’s the last time you had a proper workout?”

“Not counting…?”

“Not counting that, no, nor patrols, neither. Workout. Training session. How’s your one-footed balance?” Strolling to her, he gave her a sudden shove, and she was on her butt, gaping at him. She grabbed the hand he held down and was lifted up again neatly, leaving the sword still on the ground. “Like that. Or--”

She held up both hands, palm-out. “No more demonstrations--I get it! There’s no time, Spike. I’m sitting on my butt all day, and then--”

Ambling away to collect the axe, he looked back over his shoulder. “Got time to get dead, do you?” Leading off, just a walking pace, back toward the street, he continued, “I’m fixing up my old factory. You know it. Gonna have the doings for a good training area, couple more days. Specially if you’ll let me borrow--borrow!--some of the gear from the Magic Box annex for a couple weeks. You come there after work regular, could speed you up a bit. Give you a nice workout. Vamps there that are not me. You know all my tricks, or at least most of ‘em.” He cocked the scarred eyebrow at her. “Don’t know theirs, though. Give ‘em a little respect for the Slayer, give you a good workout, nobody dead, nobody eaten. What d’you say?”
“You vouch for them?” Buffy asked slowly, not liking that idea, and she was sure he heard that.

He considered, head tilted. “Kill any one of ‘em sets a finger out of line. And they know it. And you know it. So what’s the problem here, love?”

They’d come to the cemetery entrance. Buffy walked a tight, uneasy circle just inside, brushing her hair away from her face with her left hand. In her right hand, the sword swung minimally with her steps. “I make exceptions for you. Mike too, I suppose. Angel. Harmless demons like Clem and a few others. But I’m not gonna get to the point where I have to do a Miranda on vamps, sort out which ones to dust and which to let alone. I’ve stretched the line as far as I’m going to. As far as I can. Me and vamps are not all buddies together, poker pals, training chums. I do not want to know their names, or when they were turned, or their opinions on the pennant race. Not gonna happen, Spike.”

“Yeah.” He kicked at a clump of grass. “Kind of figured you might feel that way. But might be worth a try, and you need the training. Just come once--”

“No. Not discussing this any more.” She spun on her heel and left the cemetery, turning left at the street. Seven vamps was enough. She was declaring this patrol ended.

He fell into step alongside. “Can I borrow--”

“NO, Spike! What are you doing? What are you doing it for anyway? I didn’t understand it when you started taking minions. I didn’t understand it when you dumped them. I don’t know what you want with Michael or why I’m supposed to let him hang around my underage sister, when he’s not safe to invite inside the house. How much safer is he on the porch, Spike? In the yard? On the street? Bringing her home on the motorcycle you gave him? I want this stopped. No matter what Dawn says, no matter what Mike wants. That’s not my concern. I am supposed to be killing vampires to keep them from eating people, not letting one suck on my sister! This isn’t right, Spike, and it has to stop!”

Spike went quite a while without saying anything. Figuring she’d laid it all out on the line, Buffy waited because afterthoughts, nagging the details, would only sound like whining.

Finally he said, “You want to tell Michael, or you want me to do it?”

“I’ll tell Dawn. You tell Michel.”

“That’s fair. All right. I’ll see to it.”

She waited some more, walking along, but it seemed that Mike’s insane semi-courtship of Dawn was the only part of what she’d said he was willing to deal with. So she finally asked, “What about the rest of it? What is it you’re doing here, Spike?”

He delayed, getting a cigarette lit. His face had gone closed: she could read nothing in it. Certainly there was no laughter there anymore.

“Got a mission of my own, seems like. Obliged to it. Like I was obliged about the Hellmouth. Not asking you to help. Not asking you to look away. You do with vamps what you have to. What you’ve always done. Not asking you to change that. Within three months, the vamp population will be half what it is now. Maybe less. Doing your work for you in a way. But it will never be none.”

He looked at her steadily for a few paces. “On your own, with your patrols and a few vamps dusted,
a few nights a week, you don’t even keep level with the rate they’re turned. I’ll do more to control vamp numbers in Sunnydale than you have since you set foot in this town. But I’m not in competition with you here, Slayer. Got my own thing running now. I was Master Vamp of Sunnydale till you dropped a church organ on me and set off a little intermission. An’ then there was the damn chip. Slowed me down considerable, it did. For awhile… Now I see a way to it again. And I’m gonna have it. I don’t expect you to like the method, but I swear to you on my mother’s soul you will like the result. And that’s all I’m gonna say about it.”

“That’s quite a statement,” Buffy said after awhile.

“Intend it to be. Not playing games with you. We don’t see alike on this, and that’s just how it’s gonna have to be. I’ll keep it out of your way as best I can. Taking my own place, that’s part of it. Taking my own chances here, too. Not expecting you to cover my back, like I cover yours. Still turn out for patrol with you, like I said I would. Though I’d appreciate a schedule. Know where I’m to be and when, what days. So I can work around it, things I have to be seeing to. Still have to sweep Restfield tonight, for instance. Don’t expect you to come. Don’t even want you there. Like I said before, this is mine to do. That’s not changed.”

“All right,” Buffy said slowly. “I can make you a schedule. Principal Doty approved my self-defense club thing, by the way. So Tuesday and Thursday are taken. I’ll have to work around that… This is so strange,” she reflected. “Like ‘Have my people get together with your people and work out the details.’ Like ‘Let’s do lunch sometime.’”

“All your fault,” Spike remarked. “You were the one insisted I had to have the damn cell phone. Everything follows from that.”

“In a pig’s eye!”

He just gave her the eyebrow twitch again. And she was feeling her way into the strangeness, seeing ways she could adapt to it without outright confrontation, that she knew neither of them wanted. After all, Spike had closed the Hellmouth in particularly spectacular fashion. Until Kim, he’d kept all the SITs alive, although Giles had been dead set against her handing them over to him. And no way was Kim his fault anyway. For all those things he deserved some credit, some credibility. Trust. And she did trust him, just about every way there was for one person to trust another. So what, if he wanted to hang out more with vamps, now that he could, now that the chip didn’t make him an object of ridicule? How was it different from the present regimen of challenge fights and kitten poker? Didn’t she think the soul meant anything, after all the grief she’d given him for lacking one? Besides, she thought, this was Spike: when had he ever had a plan that wasn’t a ludicrous disaster? When this blew over, she’d patch him up and give him a good push and everything would be the same, only with Dawn taller and older. And Giles gone….

Out of her thoughts, she said, “Next week, Giles is leaving. I don’t know when he’s coming back. Or if he ever is.”

“Oh, he’ll be back, certain sure. Sometime. But there has to be a proper do for sendoff. Maybe Anya–” He read her face. “OK, not Anya. Dawn, then. She could fit up a proper do. I’ll put up the dosh for it. Whatever you want. The invoice for the first lot’s been paid--Red can explain. Half’s yours. And there’s a card.” Fishing in his pocket, he produced a silver plastic card with the American Express logo. Buffy stopped under the next street light to examine it. The name of the card was Spike Enterprises, Inc., followed by William London. The back was as yet unsigned. “Another one, just like it except for the name, is yours,” Spike explained. “Still a working partnership here, love. For a
change, there’s something I can contribute to it. Don’t want to be just leeching off you. Like I have, sometimes. Not because I wanted to, though."

Buffy found it a great relief to turn and hug him hard, dismissing all the uncomfortable conversation they’d just had.

“Dawn needs somewhat to busy herself with,” Spike commented, rubbing a hand over the back of her head, fingers stroking through her hair. “Keep her mind off…things. Specially now you made up your mind about Michael, and all…. Setting up a sendoff for ol’ Rupert sounds like just the thing, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Just the thing.” She tugged at his wrist and drew him into a jog, handing back the card for him to put away. “Have to get home, get it started, if there’s only a week. I’ll tell her about that first. Leave Mike for later.”

“Yeah, all right.”

“But you tell Mike now. I don’t want him around her. As of now.”

“Same difference, I suppose,” Spike reflected. “He won’t be pleased. Figure it’s my doing. But I’ll manage that….”

When they reached Revello, Buffy’s mind was full of party planning details and she didn’t worry about what was occupying Spike’s thoughts. But when he stopped dead, and she looked where he was looking, she knew what they were both thinking about. From the next block, whirling red lights painted the landscape roundabout and Casa Spike was going up in flames.

She grabbed Spike’s arm. “Order of Taraka?”

“No. Too happenchance. They’d have made sure I was inside first.”

Again, she couldn’t read his face. All closed up like a stone mask.

He added absently, “But this is the first of it. Somebody’s got creative, jumped the gun. Thought this kind of thing would hold off till Saturday. But it’s nothing organized yet. That will be later…” Spike handed the axe off to her and in something of a daze, she took it. “Leave you to tell Bit, then. About Rupert.”

“Rupert. Right.”

“I have to see to Restfield now. Tomorrow, you call me. Not like today.”

“Yeah. Right. Not like today.” Buffy stared at the fire. When she thought to look, Spike was gone.
The Action of the Tiger

It was the cell phone that woke him and the cell phone that gave him away.

Trying to process the information that Willow and, unexpectedly, Harris were up at the factory, not knowing where he was except it was close and dark and safe, Spike rolled onto his back to put the cell away. Brighter light flooded the space when a curtain was lifted.

“Spike, what the hell you doing under my bed?”

Oh.

Rona backed as Spike put his fingers in the bed spring to shove himself out. He pushed to his feet, feeling creaky and dim. Blinking and rubbing the back of his neck, he asked, “You got any coffee?”

“The hell with coffee, what is this shit? You never named this morning’s mark, I didn’t know where to take nothing, and I hear this phone going off, and here’s a vampire under my bed!”

Spike lifted the bedspread and bent to look. Yeah: the plastic husks of three empty blood bags under there. Well, it had apparently seemed a good idea at the time.

“What’s the time?”

Rona checked her wristwatch. “Going for four thirty.”

"Gonna have to break down and get one of those," Spike reflected. "No coffee, then?" He read her face: puzzled and irritated. Clearly no current prospect of coffee. "Bring the whole day's blood ration up to the factory. Soon as you can collect it and get there."

As he started out of the drab little room, Rona demanded, “I still want to know what you were doing there!”

“Sleeping. All peaceable. And you can count your blessings I didn’t take it into my head to do it the old-fashioned way--top of the bed and a live snack in the bargain.”

“That ain’t funny, Spike!” she shouted after him.

What Rona hadn’t grasped was that it wasn’t meant to be.

Descending the stairs at a loose-kneed arrhythmic shamble, Spike decided he was swearing off amphetamines. Kept you going, as advertised, but the price was too high. Couldn’t recall but snatches of his sweep of Restfield. Coming to the boarding house to get the blood at the end of the sweep had been the last agenda item. Seemed as if that’s what he’d done but he had no memory of it whatever. Totally bugfuck bonkers. Around the bend so far the zipcode had a different prefix. Couldn’t afford that. Things could go irretrievably pear-shaped in record time if he was careless or too blanked out to track.

Probably meant he couldn’t allow himself to get more than a little drunk, either. Pathetic. Couldn’t hunt or have a nice quiet drunk; couldn’t shag till this was done except very circumspectly and all thought out beforehand, and he was pretty certain Buffy wouldn’t be open-minded about the vamp
custom of indifferently fucking the nearest available orifice.

Being responsible sucked. Almost worse than the soul.

Nothing left but the cigarettes between him and the compleat bloody nancified prat.

Moodily he went from window to window on the ground floor, cautiously shifting curtains and peering out, to figure the best route to the nearest sewer cover.

When he hauled out of the pipe back by his office at the factory, he saw Willow and Mike inside, and it was bright: the electric was hooked up. Shrugging his clothes straight and trying to slick back his overlong hair with two hands, he faced the belated start of his day. He opened the door and entered the overpowering smell of lilies. “Hullo, Red. Sorry to keep you waiting. Michael been seeing to you all right?”

Smiling wryly, Willow lifted foil from a plate with three cookies on it. “I made sure some were left for you. Crashed?” she asked knowingly.

“Splat,” Spike admitted, around a mouthful of cookie. “Didn’t even bounce. Not gonna do that no more.” He thought a minute, then decided it was a good story even if it was on him. “Woke up under Rona’s bed. Gave her a bit of a turn. Hell, gave me a bit of a turn.”

“You’re not staying here, then?”

Spike shook his head, reaching for another cookie. “Can’t. Moving target’s harder to hit. Won’t be the first time I slept rough. Miss the amenities, though.” He waved the remainder of the cookie.

“If I ask why under Rona’s bed, are we gonna have to do the whole ‘elephant in your pajamas’ routine?” Willow asked, setting the empty plate back on the table.

“No clue, except that’s where the blood is.” He considered, chewing. “That didn’t come out exactly the way I thought. I meant like Willie Sutton and the banks. Rona’s all right–only surprised and not all that pleased.” He caught Mike’s eye. “Got the electric going, and took up the slack with Red and all. Good on you.”

Visibly pleased, Mike ducked his head, smiling small. Would be bad, telling him, Spike thought. He decided to do it while Red was here as a buffer. But not just yet. See to the rest of the agenda first.

“So what’s the bad news about the computer?”

“You’re gonna want it in here?” Willow asked, gesturing at the office.

“By preference, yeah. Not if that’s an issue, though.”

“It should be do-able. Not a cable modem: no lines have been strung out this far. Eventually the best bet should be a satellite phone connection: Ethernet. But for now, dial-up broadband should be good enough. You need the broadband because of the international data exchanges with Watcher Central. Take months, otherwise–uploading, downloading. You still with me?”

“ Barely. I got do-able. Go on.”

Willow glanced aside, and through the surrounding windows Spike saw Xander Harris pacing
toward the office with Isadora drifting along behind like a hungry kite. Assigned as a minder, Spike figured. Whelp looked in one piece, though, as far as Spike could see, so good enough.

Coming in the door, Xander asked Mike, “Can we lose the hotpants bloodsucker now? It’s like being stalked by Brittany Spears.” As Spike waved Isadora off with a minimal gesture, Xander continued, “Which I wouldn’t actually mind, except for the sucked dry factor. Or…let me rephrase that.”

Before Spike could comment, Willow explained rapidly, “I asked Xander to come with because he’s the practical construction expert. Sub-sub-contractor, all right?”

Staring at Spike, Xander cut in viciously. “And the memories are so great here. No way was I letting Will come out here alone. We’re not an item anymore and shouldn’t have been then, what with the getting caught in the clinch and kissage and the assorted badness of your kidnapping us and having to listen to you whine about that bitch Drusilla dumping you, which was actually worse than your threats of mayhem to be committed on our tender, semi-innocent young persons.”

“Stick a cork in it, whelp.”

“Fine: then see if you get your phone lines connected!”

“I got people who know things too, you know.”

Xander leveled a finger. “No, you don’t have people, Spike: that’s a delusion. One of many. You have pre-industrial monsters who think the internal combustion engine is run by teeny tiny imps sprinting on treadmills.”

“Boys,” Willow interjected in a quelling voice.

Unquelled, Xander continued with his rant. Spike counted to ten. Then made it twenty before opening his mouth. “Harris. Xander. SHUT THE HELL UP!” The moment of startled silence that followed gave him time to say, “I already apologized to Red for that, and we’re square about it, right?”

“Right,” said Willow, putting on a face of determination.

“So I’ll apologize to you too if that’s what will get you back on track here. Sorry I interrupted your pizza deliveries, or whatever it was you were wasting your life on back then. Sorry the cheerleader got hurt, though that wasn’t none of my doing. Sorry that you got scared--”

“I wasn’t--!”

“Bad choice. Pace, puer.”

Xander asked Willow, “Is that dirty? Is he talking dirty to me in foreign?”

Spike rubbed his forehead. He needed coffee. Badly. “I appreciate your coming out to look over the doings. Even might pay you for it, if my associate approves. Can we get past the sins and stupidities of youth and come back to today?”

Xander glowered. “It wasn’t your youth, Spike. What’s your excuse?”
Spike appealed to Willow, “Do I need one? If so, we’ll never be done here. I was dumb. Also drunk off my ass. It happened. I’m sorry, won’t do it again. Would take it back if I could but life’s not like that. End of story.”

Willow’s eyes were quiet and sympathetic. Looking to Xander, she said, “He’s apologized. What else do you want, Xander?”

“You shouldn’t ask that or we will be here all day. Where’s a Vengeance demon when you need one?”

Spike went halfway through the door, saying over his shoulder, “When he’s done venting, let me know.” He walked as far as the barricade. Leaning against one of the machines, he phoned the Espresso Pump and ordered coffee delivered. Then added donuts and some pastry. Even thought, before he ended the call, to check that he could pay with the plastic. Then he strolled out to the entry and alerted Emil, who was on guard, to expect a delivery in about fifteen minutes and cautioned him that the delivery person was not part of the order regardless of what he/she/it smelled like. He remembered Rona was also due, and warned about that, too.

He felt a headache winding itself up behind his eyes like a snake about to strike.

Heading slowly back toward the barricade, getting a cigarette lit, he saw Willow waiting for him there.

“The bottom line,” she said, “is yes, the existing phone connection can be replaced with a fiber optic line and then run out to the pole at the end of the drive and connected there. Take about two hours. The equipment would run something like a hundred dollars, not counting labor.”

“Thank you.” He meant for giving him the summary version, not requiring him to pry the information out of Harris a detail at a time. He thought she took his meaning. He rubbed his forehead again. “Got any painkillers?”

“Nope, not on me. Sorry.”

“Got a couple bottles of something or other, but I don’t know which is which and I think I’ve done all the experimenting I want to, just now.”

“Headache?”

“Yeah. Coming on.”

Willow held up a hand, silently asking permission. When Spike nodded, she set her palm on his forehead, just across the bridge of his nose, covering his eyes. Felt warm. Felt good. Then there was a whoosh sensation: like a sudden gust of wind that blew the gathering headache away.

“Help any?” Willow asked, lifting her hand.

“You have now convinced me to keep you chained up in the basement.” Spike took a deep drag on the cigarette. “When can he do it?”

“Now. He’ll have to go get the parts first, of course.”

“I got coffee coming. Ten minutes or so. Stick around for that, yeah? Thanks for the cookies, by the
way. Expect the crew liked them.”

“I figured it would be a distraction. Throw the lions meat, they’ll leave the Christians alone. Speaking figuratively, of course.”

“You been real good about this, Red. I appreciate it.”

She regarded him soberly. “When you asked for the lockets, I knew something was up. Last night, and burning down Casa Spike, that was a wake-up call.”

“Right. It was.”

“You’re playing with the Powers again. And that’s taking the proverbial tiger by the proverbial tail. All you can do is hang on and hope to survive the ride. And hope the tiger doesn’t turn on you. I know some of what you’re trying to do now. And it seems like a good thing to do.”

“Wish you’d tell Buffy that,” said Spike, and wasn’t able to keep all the sourness out of his voice.

“Buffy’s real good at not hearing what she doesn’t want to hear. If we gang up on her, it will only make her dig her feet in harder. Better if I keep mum.”

“Maybe. I expect you’d know best about that. Appreciate the support, though. Yours, I mean.”

Willow smiled: a good little smile. Friendly. “You’ve learned to ask for help. That’s kind of a big deal for you, I think. You want this, and not for yourself. Also a pretty big deal. So yeah, I guess I’m in. I’ll try real hard not to let you down.”

Willow offered her hand. Spike batted it away. “Already done that part. And you didn’t like how I shake hands: all personal like.”

Hearing his name called, Spike swung around. Emil, and inside the entry were Rona with the cool box and a skinny, scared looking boy wearing an Espresso Pump T-shirt, holding two large sacks.

Fishing for the card, Spike thought that whatever the Powers were, this once he was prepared to be grateful to them for at least small mercies.

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After Harris, reduced for some time to muffled monosyllables by donuts and Danish, had left to get the phone line components, Willow said, “Oh!” and pulled a paper from her carryall. When Spike unfolded it, he found a roughly handwritten calendar: the patrol schedule for the next two weeks. Days and locations.

As he thoughtfully refolded it, Willow asked, “Are you gonna do with that what I think you’re gonna do with it?”

Spike put the paper away in his pocket. “Any vamps she finds, she’s welcome to.”

“And your people will keep well clear.”

“If they can remember more than ten minutes at a time, yeah. If they can’t, she’s welcome to them too. I’ll take ‘em out myself if I come across them. Somebody that dumb, I don’t need. Better
“weeded out.”

“And she just gave it to you?”

Spike shrugged, with a smile that faded fast. “I asked.”

Willow sipped her double mocha, lips pursed around the straw, eyebrows wrinkled and serious. “She’ll go ballistic when she realizes what you’re doing with it. And I can’t believe she didn’t—”

“Slayer’s pretty much like me: doesn’t think past step one unless forced to it. It won’t be for long. City will be divided into districts. And there’ll be a schedule of who’s allowed to hunt on what ground, which nights. Who picks the Queen of Spades, that’ll be just their bad luck. Like it is now.”

“Who makes the divisions, if that’s not one of those ‘If I told you, I’d have to kill you’ deals?”

Spike met her eyes calmly. “I do.”

“And who makes the schedule?”

“Me.”

“And who enforces it?” Her eyes said she already knew.

“Yeah. Me and my…people. Who get four days out of the seven in the best hunting district-- downtown--as a reward. Any vamps they run into not authorized to be there get dusted. It’ll cut down the poaching real fast. Vamps are stupid but they’re not dumb. Not in that way. Except for fledges, of course. Cut down fledges wherever we find ‘em.”

“That’s gonna be a bloodbath,” said Willow in a low voice.

“Yes. It is. Short, if I can manage that. And as bloody as it comes. Mostly dust, but the principle’s the same.”

Willow glanced up just for a second. “Is this the part where you have to kill me?”

“There’s things you still don’t know. But short of that, whatever you want to know, I’ll tell you. You said you were in. That’s good enough for me.” Spike downed the last of his double espresso, extra sugar, and reached into the bag for another.

“Not sure I want to be that in,” Willow commented shakily, picking up a tall plastic spoon to dab into her drink.

“All right. Won’t tell you unless I need you to do something or it affects you. Safer for you that way. Once it starts, it has to go fast. Won’t be no secrets soon, so no need to find ‘em out.”

“Who knows now?”

“Us three.” Spike nodded at Mike, watching silently, seated a little back from the table. “Dawn, most of it. And that’s all. Except for the Powers, of course. Not blocking ‘em anymore. Whatever they want to know, all they got to do is look. So far, I’m doing what they got laid out.”

“So far,” Willow repeated warily.
“Just so.”

“Ahuh. Goddess, you’re giving me the shivers.”

Spike went on, “Can’t say somebody hasn’t guessed--the shape, if not the details.”

“Torching Casa Spike.”

“Seems likely. There’s a few vamps around who aren’t fools. But before they can organize, they’ll be too busy with internal fights to put much of anything together.”

“You gonna kill ‘em?”

“Hell, no: tie ‘em up with bows, if I could. The ones levelheaded enough to make a good fight of it are the ones who’ll keep to the schedule once things have settled. And see that their people do, too. Any that don’t, yeah, I’ll cut ‘em all down, assign that territory to somebody else who’ll fucking mind.”

“That’s really cold-blooded, Spike,” said Willow, attending to her straw.

“Vamps are cold-blooded, Red. How d’you think the Master sorted this place to begin with?”

“I don’t think I want to know. Can you…can you actually do that?”

Spike understood perfectly. She didn’t mean was it possible; she meant was he capable of going through with it.

He considered telling her about setting the soul aside. But that knowledge would be a daily burden on her, living with Buffy. And she hadn’t asked. So he kept it as it was, only between himself and Bit.

Instead, the next time she raised her eyes, she was looking into his vamp features, that some called “true face.” He said, “I guess we’ll find out, won’t we.”

“And on that note…” she said, setting her cup aside, but settled when he put fingers on her arm, asking her to stay put.

“Michael. Got some bad news for you. Dawn’s off-limits, from now. You don’t go to the house. You don’t slide off and meet her someplace else. You leave her 100% alone.”

Spike took his time lighting a cigarette--ready every second for Mike to come at him.

Mike had gone vamp-faced too, staring at him. Considering. Holding himself in check. Spike hadn’t been sure the lad could. Was prepared for damn near anything. After several minutes, Mike said, “It’s on account of the fight, right? To make me mad.”

Spike shook his head slowly, “Nothing whatever to do with the fight. Only to do with you, and with Dawn. The Slayer will tell Dawn presently, in her own time. I’m telling you now. It’s ended. As of now.”

“It ain’t,” Mike growled. “I won’t. And you can’t make me.”
“Yes. I can. And I will. I got a lot of fondness for you, Michael. Vamps don’t much have friends, but
I consider you as one. But if you make me choose between Bit and you, you don’t even come into
the account. For awhile, I thought Bit was OK to look after herself. Decide for herself what she
wanted and didn’t. And thought you’d abide whatever she decided and not try to force her. Let her
be, if that was what she wanted. I changed my mind about that. ‘Snot against you: it’s for Dawn.
You don’t begin to know what she is. She looks like a child, but she’s not. She ever tell you how old
she is?’

“Sixteen an’ a half!”

“She’s older than the oldest vamp that ever walked. Thousands of years. She’s trimmed herself down
to what can be in this space. Be like a person. But she’s not. She’s part of the gate between whole
universes, Michael. And she has a choice to make, that you know nothing about. She has to be left
clear to make that choice. Nobody putting pressure on her. Not me, and not you. Till she makes it,
she’s not for you, lad. And once she chooses, won’t me or anybody else be able to control what she
does. Then, it’s up to her. But till then, we both respect her need to decide on her own. Me and you
both.”

Flatly, Mike said, “That’s horse shit. That’s a goddam lie.”

“No,” said Willow carefully, not looking at either of them, “it isn’t. So she still has her keyness,
Spike?”

“She’s a piece of a Power. I don’t know precisely what that means. No need I should. They took her
back. You recall.”

“Well, if that’s the same as saying I remember that I didn’t remember, and still don’t--”

“Yeah. And I made such a nuisance of myself, they gave her back. Because she wanted to come. We
made them let her go. But if she hadn’t wanted to come, nothing I could have done would have
changed it. She’s still a part of a Power. She can’t be forced. And she’s coming to a point where
she’ll have to choose the one side or the other. Change, and mortality…or what she is. And she’s got
to be let alone to do that.”

Bolting out of his chair, Mike said, “You two discuss it. Spin your tales. I know what she is. I tasted
her. She has my mark. That’s all I need to know about it.”

“Michael. You cross me in this, I will kill you dead.”

“Then you better start practicing. ‘Cause you cross me like this, I can bring this whole thing down on
you.”

“See you Saturday, then, Michael. You’re off the rest of the week. If I can’t depend on you, I don’t
want you here.”

“Fine,” Mike responded, and stormed out.

Spike sat stirring his coffee. Willow sat very still. After awhile, she said, “Buffy?” Spike nodded.
Willow asked, “Does she realize what’s involved?”

“No reason she should. It’s her call to make. Not gonna blame it on her: if Michael has to fly out,
better he flies out at me. He goes up against the Slayer, she’ll kill him.” Spike smacked his hand on
the table like smacking a fly. “I always got choices, that she don’t--right up to the last, anyways. Can
kill him a little, so to speak. Bust him up so bad, he’ll be six months in healing. Like when I got hit
with that organ. Time to think over a lot of things, stuck that way. Not that I made any good use of
the time.”

“Why’d you want me here?” Willow asked.

“Just made the best use of what was to hand. Boy has good manners. A lot better than mine. T’isn’t
good manners to try to rip somebody’s throat out in front of a guest, and a woman at that. I thought
maybe he’d come at me and I’d have to kill him on the spot. But you being here, he had to think
about it first. So he decided to wait.”

“You told me once I wasn’t fit for vampire conversations. During the Supplice d’Allégance. Too
squeamish, basically. I think you were right.”

“That’s what makes you human, sweet. Be glad of it. It’s a cold, cold place, outside the limits. You
don’t want to be there. But it’s where I live. It don’t do to forget that.”

“All right, Spike--you creeped me out enough for one day. I’m going home, unless you need me to
stay to keep Xander from going postal on you.”

“Oh, I can handle the whelp. Been meaning to get him sorted a long while now. Maybe now’s a
good chance.”

Willow gave him a look. “If you hurt him, I’d be very displeased. Extremely displeased. Furious, in
fact.”

“Yeah, I heard something of what you do when you’re furious. Pity I wasn’t here to see it. Sounded
to be quite the thing. Busted up whole city blocks, the way I hear it. Really scary.”

They traded impenetrable looks. Then they both broke the stare and laughed together at the
posturing.

“Don’t kill him, all right? Not even a little.”

“Intending no such thing. And won’t do no such thing. I know he’s precious to you, Red. An’ I
don’t want to be forever on the outs with him, on that account. Time and past time I attended to that
lad. Won’t hurt him even a little. Scout’s honor.”

Willow shot back incredulously, “You were never a scout!”

“Now, you don’t know half of what I’ve been. Even patchwork Adam was a scout. At least part of
him.…” Spike gave her a sly smile. Then he sobered. “You recall I told you never to get in my head
no more. I know you do, because you’ve abided by it. If something should come up with Michael,
and it’s past what you feel good about handling yourself, or if the Slayer’s not there…anything like
that, you tell me right off. And any way you can.”

“Understood.”

“That’s good, then.”
After Willow left, Spike found it a great relief to finally get at the blood. His manners weren’t as good as Michael’s, but he did have some. When he thought about it.

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Trailing along behind Harris or roving in front like a ball on a tether, Spike could find nothing that worked. Nothing that would get through or around the settled hostility to common ground. He tried the time he’d spent in the git’s basement, with the parent war raging overhead, sometimes soft, mostly loud and hateful; he tried the time he’d spent, mostly crazy and drifting, in the closet of Harris’ apartment: sleeping small on the floor, wishing to disappear, the soul so heavy in him then it didn’t seem he could contain it. Got him nothing but nasty looks and a few dismissive remarks but mostly silence.

Tried common interests, but that was mostly Scooby-related and Harris grudged that they had those things in common—that Spike had “wormed his way” into Willow’s tolerance, Anya’s pants, Buffy’s bed. Maybe Dawn’s heart, but they somehow avoided mentioning Dawn.

Harris needed to get at the old phone connection that was high on the wall, up by where the power came in; and there was no ladder. Git looked at the rope, then up at the wall, back and forth. Muttering, “Bloody hell,” Spike yanked a loop in the bottom of the rope, swarmed up to the girder, got Harris to step into the loop, and drew him up like Venus rising from the sea. Once standing, Harris could walk the girder competently enough, and the phone box was within his reach. So Spike backed off and sat sullenly on the beam for a minute or so: as long as it took for Harris to drop the first component and direct Spike to fetch it for him. The first three times, Spike went along with it, letting the boy have his fun. Then he whistled and had Isadora take over as minder. Nothing got dropped after that.

Going by smell, heart rate, and breathing, the lad was terrified of Dora. And he fancied her. Maybe fancied her because he was terrified: seemed to take some blokes that way. Spike had seen it happen. Or could be no more than that she had the right number of tits and openings. And was a demon: Harris seemed to have a surprising affinity for demons, given how much and how indiscriminately he claimed to hate them.

Like nearly all vamps, Dora didn’t care two beans what she fucked, or how. Spike gave serious thought to turning her loose on the lad, but that would mean standing right over them to keep her from feeding or others from joining in—not an appealing prospect. Besides, Red didn’t want him broken and at the best, the boy would be wandering around in a daze for a week or worse, hanging around here for more, and that would get awkward real fast. Likely end up getting him dead, since Spike couldn’t always be here to see things didn’t get out of hand. And that would mean losing Dora, who was shaping nicely into a useful second and was getting on really well with Kennedy. So Spike gave that idea a pass.

Hard and frustrating to think everything through to consequences, and more consequences still. Especially with no clear plan to follow at the end of it. Spike wished Bit were here, to put the matter to her and have her advice. He was coming up dry: maybe one of the blind spots he’d figured to run into. Then he accused and convicted himself of nineteenth-century thinking and got out the cell phone. He thought of it readily enough to order coffee or leave instructions, but when it came to making contact with a person, it was the last thing he thought of.

Dawn’s sleepy voice said, “Hello, Janice?”

“No, Bit. Just me.”
“Spike! Is something wrong?”

He slid down the side of the office glass to sit on the floor. Something tight in his chest unwound. “Guess this is like telegrams used to be--never but bad news and emergencies. No, nothing wrong, Bit. Except the usual, of course.”

“You never call!”

“Yeah, well. Calling now.”

“And nothing’s wrong?”

“I’ve waked you up. Sorry. What time’s it got to be?”

He heard what he thought was a yawn, and the sounds of her turning over in bed. “About eleven.”

“Gonna buy me a watch. Bet you thought you’d never hear me say that. Friday, at the mall. Ain’t been out there for awhile, you an’ me. Interested?”

“Oooh! Sure! Willow says you have money now! There’s this top, it’s sort of a buttercup yellow--”

She was certainly all waked up now, with the prospect of a raid on the mall, armed with money. “’Course you can, Bit. Might get myself togged out, too. Most of what I had extra went with Casa Spike. That scare you any? The fire?”

“I knew you were out on patrol. Not there. So no, it was exciting. I never saw anything so big, burning. And all the fire engines and lights and the big hoses….”

Spike chuckled at her enthusiasm. “I think sometimes you’d have made a proper vamp. You like seeing things busted up near as much as I do. Without the downside of it…. “ He wasn’t gonna mention Michael. It was clear Buffy hadn’t spoken to her about that yet. So he told her instead about Rona and the bed, with a few more details than he’d let out before, and was happy with her giggling through the tale at the other end of the line.

Then she quit giggling and turned serious. “Whatever you’ve been taking to stay awake, I think you should quit. If you’re blanking out, you’re letting the demon steer. Like your demon, mostly. When it’s fed up, it’s no trouble, anyway. But I don’t trust its judgment.”

Spike hadn’t thought about it quite that way and said so. “Got to agree with you there, pet. Willing to try most anything once. Some things, even twice. But those pills don’t help the focus. They only seem to, for a time.”

He paused, changing hands on the phone, and Dawn’s voice in his ear observed, “You’re lighting a cigarette. I can hear you.”

“Right you are, pet.”

“Spike?”

“Yeah?”
“You sound like you again. You didn’t sound like you, yesterday. I…. It was strange. And making fun of Mike, that was just plain mean. I don’t like it when you do that.”

Spike sighed out smoke. “’S a hard time, Bit. Not at my best, trying to do what I have to, be responsible. Gets old real fast. Seems like all I done today is tell people I’m sorry. Don’t like that much.”

“Then quit doing things you have to be sorry for.”

Spike burst out laughing.

Dawn, slightly indignant: “I don’t see what’s so funny about that!”

“Well, if you don’t know, good on you, pet. Expect you’ll learn and be the sadder for it.”

“Spike?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell me a story. If I don’t say anything when you finish, I’m asleep, and you can hang up then. All right?”

Leaning his head back against the glass, Spike shut his eyes and tried to think of what might be a good going-to-sleep story. He’d quit telling Bit stories awhile back—at the moment, he forgot why.

“All right, this was in Aberdeen, in the winter. That’s in Scotland, love, and winters there are pure misery. Not exactly a pleasure spot the rest of the year, neither. Herself had set her mind on getting into the prison, eating the prisoners there, so we all traipsed up on the railway…..”

About halfway through he stopped and thought about what came next, how he’d got his tongue frozen to a lock and Angelus and Herself too busy fucking to take any notice, wondering if this was the best story to be telling, and heard the silence. So Bit was asleep and he didn’t have to decide after all.

He told the phone softly, “G’night, love,” and closed the connection.

When he looked up, there was Harris glaring at him: about five feet away. He’d got so caught up in the story, and feeling connected to Bit, he hadn’t even noticed.

“Were you talking to Buffy?” Harris demanded, both fists clenched.

“No, Bit. Dawn. Not that it’s any of your--”

Harris said, “Oh,” looking suddenly deflated and puzzled, and walked away. Grabbed up a big spool of phone line and kept walking, out past the barricade.

Spike wondered what that’d been about. Then he recalled he’d meant to ask Bit about dealing with the git and had completely forgotten about it. Forgotten to ask how she liked planning the going-away do for the Watcher, too. Had to focus better, keep all the agenda straight, or this would never come out well.

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When Harris finished running the line, it was about midnight, and the factory was deserted except for Emil and Dora, who had guard duty. The rest were out hunting or doing whatever they pleased. Spike begged a ride in Harris’ truck as far as downtown, to choose a fresh place to lair up.

As word got around, as it inevitably would, that he wasn’t sleeping at any set location, the chances of attack on either Casa Summers or the factory should be minimal for the time being. Since the torching of Casa Spike, Willow had extended the protections around Casa Summers into virtual lockdown, once everybody was home and accounted for: pretty much a force field nothing could get through until she opened it at daybreak, as Spike understood it. Sounded secure enough.

He hadn’t asked any magical protection for the factory. This was still vamp business: he wanted to face the opposition on an even footing, not provoke a standoff between dueling sorcerers with magic he couldn’t control and didn’t understand. Vamps and magic never had mixed well, and he was pretty sure if he didn’t begin it, the opposition wouldn’t resort to it either.

He was thinking about places he could lie up where nobody would be likely to look for him (other than under Rona’s bed), when Harris asked suddenly, fiercely, “So what’s with Dawn? Why do you bother? What’s in it for you?”

Spike clamped down on the first three responses that came to mind. “We get on.”

“Are you into corrupting children now?”

Spike looked around at him, feeling very still and cold. “Let me off here.”

“I want an answer!”

Spike opened the door and dropped, rolling. The truck’s brake lights flashed for a second. Then the truck speeded up without having stopped. Spike rose and brushed himself off. One knee banged. No worse than a spill on the bike.

A good way of being unpredictable, he thought, was to be unpredictable. Retreating to an alley, he looked around, getting his bearings. McFarland and 10th: the west margin of downtown. Good enough. A generalized awareness of vamps in the area, but that would be true anywhere downtown, the favored hunting district.

He was easing down the alley when he heard a whistle pitched at the edge of human hearing. It came from above him: spotters on the roofs. And it was answered. He moved faster, grabbing a broom handle from a trashcan as he passed. It took only another minute for him to reach the nearest sewer lid and slide through, but he didn’t wait to replace the cover. The hunt was up.

He hadn’t expected anything this organized this soon. Michael, he thought grimly. Running his mouth off in some bar, full of his own sense of injury. Had a bad habit of doing that and was all sorry later about the fallout he hadn’t the sense to see coming. Have to lesson the boy about that, Spike thought, and put it on the agenda.

Eastward, this line ran for six blocks before there was an intersection. Back toward the factory, westward, there was also a long uninterrupted stretch. After that, though, it fanned into multiple branches laid to service the whole industrial park, many of them with curved storm drains set high, that looped back into the main pipe and were only filled in times of high runoff. Spike resisted the temptation to head east into the heart of the hunt. Since there were sentries posted here, there’d be more on the line between here and the factory: his known starting point. But he had a better chance
of taking them out than facing many opponents at once.

Spike wasn’t interested in escaping. He wanted to decimate the opposition.

When they didn’t find him eastward, they’d mass and come in behind. So he had to move fast to stay ahead of them for the time being. He saw two vamps in the main pipe ahead and went right at them, diving low at the last minute, quicker than they could jump and clear him. Both went down. He dusted one immediately with the broom handle. Jammed the other one in the throat, then did a whip kick to his head that quieted him down nicely, sprawled against the walkway. Since the time of the Turok-Han, Spike had the habit of carrying a length of piano wire in a back pocket. No handles, but it would do. He looped the second vamp’s neck cross-handed, yanked, and that one was gone. He’d noted the faces. One was a fledge: nobody. The other mostly hung around with a loose group that laired in what he now thought of as District 7: next over from Restfield.

He listened, attended. Running, but still far away. Nothing close. Good.

The first vamp he’d taken out had been armed with a nice pool cue. The very thing Spike would have chosen himself. He cracked the broomstick to be handles for the garrote and looped the wire in a half hitch around his right arm. He jumped to the walkway, to be level with or above whatever he ran into next. Still hearing nothing close, he stopped to pull off his boots, then ran on, light-footed and silent.

Through the balance of the straight stretch, he found no one. That likely meant guarded at both ends. Approaching the first junction, he smelled tobacco smoke. Moron. Flat against the wall, he listened. A couple of words: at least two of ’em unless the moron was in the habit of talking to himself. Figure on two, anyway. He dropped back into the main channel, down on all fours with the pool cue tucked into his armpit. On fingertips and toetips, in a way no human could have moved, he scuttled just far enough to get his eyes past the corner for a second and then back again.

Five.

He choreographed it in his mind, how to take two of them out at once, left and right, and then sweep the legs out from under at least two of those remaining. Because there’d likely be no chance later, he took another quick look, noting faces. Two more District 7’s, a stranger, and two anonymous fledges. Only the fledges in game face because they couldn’t help it. The mature vamps, the stranger-smoker and the two others, standing casually, the smoker even with his back turned. One of the others a woman. Spike rearranged the order and placement, and changed the choreography to take out the two blokes, leaving the bint and the fledges. Ran through the sequence once in his mind. Then he went.

The smoker and one of the male vamps were gone before they’d even seen him. The woman had time to move, so he impaled her shoulder instead of her heart. She started coming up the wood at him as one of the fledges caught him low in the back with a knife before he could fully turn. So much for choreography. Freestyle. He yanked in the fledge with the knife and head-butted him to the face, then followed with a braced elbow to the bridge of his nose, already turned away, knowing that fledge would be down a good minute or two with part of the skull driven into the brain. The bint with the cue was coming at him, and the other fledge was to his right. He drop-kicked the fledge in the ribs, catching the point of the cue on the way down. Sent the thick end back, better aimed. That was the bint, gone. Just the two fledges left, both of them down. And he had the knife, once he’d braced a moment and removed it from his back. Hurt like hell, but a good thin blade: cut would seal reasonably fast. He listened a moment, decided he had time, and decapitated both fledges. A sword would have been better, but a knife was what he had. He made do. Didn’t have to get the whole head
off, just cut the spinal cord at the neck, separate the brain from the body.

It took him less than an hour to locate and dispatch the other seven vamps posted on this stretch, all spaced at junctions along the main tunnel. They hadn’t bothered covering the branches or didn’t have the numbers available to get them in place fast enough. Or some had simply gotten bored and wandered away, as nothing seemed to be happening. Went like that, a good part of the time. No discipline and hardly any organization.

Total of five District 7’s. Only vamp worth anything he knew of active there was called Digger. Spike filed that. Maybe worth holding onto, or maybe just the quickest to be scared, figuring Spike would move on him next. Might be just another idiot. Leave that as pending. No other districts notable yet as fielding substantial opposition.

Although the knife wound had quit bleeding, it was stiffening up. Lowering himself a bit gingerly to a seat on the walkway, Spike had a cigarette while debating whether to retreat to the factory or lie up in one of the storm drains, wait for the pursuit to pass, then see what kind of wholesale mayhem he could inflict on them. Drive as many as possible into the side-passages, scatter them, then pick them off at leisure. He now had nearly all the weaponry he could want, including two shotguns, four pistols, and sufficient ammunition for one of the shotguns to successfully face a fair number at once. The impact of a .45 could knock a vamp off his feet; but a shotgun blast to the head or chest would blow them utterly away. Although they lacked the up close and personal satisfaction of doing someone with a stake, a pool cue, or a garrote, Spike liked shotguns for their sheer bloody destructiveness combined with noise that would leave your ears ringing for minutes afterward.

True, there was the risk of getting boxed; but he was confident none of the opposition knew this system of drains as well as he did. The idea of none of the vamps who’d come after him reporting back was very tempting. Or maybe one: a witness that he’d done this alone, without any of the crew as backup. That pleased him more.

He threaded all the handguns onto the wire by their trigger guards and attached them to a belt loop. No need to leave useful weaponry to be found. He bent the barrel of the shotgun that had only one shell left and shouldered the other, hiking toward the storm drain he’d chosen.

Most of the day had been a waste, and he’d started late; but he figured by sunup, he’d have accomplished a lot. Pity about the boots, though: he’d send one of the crew to look for them in the morning.

**********

The next evening, it was back to Willy’s--this time in force, with crossbows. Including Rona, Kennedy (she and Dora dressed like improbable twins, like savage Barbie dolls), and Amanda, whom Spike had finagled into attending yet again on the promise that there wouldn’t be any fighting. All three stank of lilies. So did the whole room: Spike had had every table anointed with one of the tiny sample bottles. The smell would last for months. Spike wanted it memorable.

All the crew were well turned out. Spike had paid for all of them to get fresh kit: anything they wanted, so long as the colors were black or red. Spike himself stayed with the black, his feet encased in much-resented new boots, the old ones having gone missing. Pity, that: he’d had the others the best part of thirty years. It annoyed him to think somebody else had a piece of him. No help for it. Nothing he wouldn’t shed at need. No hostages.

He wore every piece of jewelry he owned, collected from Casa Summers in the early evening, when
he’d gone with Huey, in Huey’s car, to collect the computer. Red was back at the factory now, hooking it up, making sure it all worked right and could access the online accounts. Huey would take her home when she was done.

For his own people, the only permitted liquor was on Spike’s table, and he doled it out sparingly. None at all for himself. Soda for the children, of course, except he suspected Dora of sharing her ration. Frankly, he didn’t care. Wasn’t gonna try to control things down to the least detail. Knew he hadn’t the inclination or the aptitude and it was probably impossible anyway.

As word got around, vamps drifted in to see what kind of do he was gonna stage. By general agreement, Willy’s bar, human-owned, was neutral ground except for whatever fights erupted privately and were promptly shunted outside and those scheduled by the management: vamps knew they were safe from open, general attack here.

The other demonic breeds, rightly feeling unloved and outnumbered, made themselves scarce. Presently the place was nicely packed (Spike hoped Willy appreciated the custom he’d brought in), and Amanda reported an overflow crowd out in the parking area.

Spike stood up, and no more than that was needed to get silence and attention. He nodded to Kennedy, who began passing out flyers—photocopies of the map and the rules that Spike held a laminated version of. Crossing the room (the crowd cleared away from him), he held the laminated paper up against the wall, under the odds board, with the flat of his hand. Surveying the crowd, he pointed at those nearest the bar, remarking, “You might want to stand clear.” The instant they’d edged away, Amanda and Dora impaled the top corners of the map, above his hand, with impeccably aimed crossbow bolts.

Spike faced around, hands on hips. Separated from his own people by maybe a hundred vamps—few if any of them wishing him well. He let on he hadn’t noticed that, didn’t care. Well, the fact was, he didn’t. And anyway, it was all style, all face—the way it was in most vamp power games. Spectacle and demonstration...backed up with the eager willingness to answer opposition with force.

Behind him, the map had a red circle drawn around the whole of Sunnydale. Fifteen districts were outlined in black and identified by numbers. District 1 enclosed the old industrial park—depopulated and therefore bare of vamp nests until Spike’s renovation of the factory.

To the side of the map was the schedule of which districts were allowed to hunt District 15 (downtown) and District 3 (an area including the mall) between Thursday and Saturday midnight.

Spike knew he couldn’t control hunting over the whole of the town. Let the districts police their Spike-imposed borders from poaching themselves. A whole lot of vamps would get dusted in the process. Fine with Spike. He’d determined to concentrate on the prime hunting areas. Limit the number of vamps allowed there on any given night and he’d have as much control as he thought would be needed to regulate and limit vamp predation in Sunnydale.

Simple was best. Especially when dealing with vampires.

Most of the vamps now had flyers and were frowning at them, trying to make out what they meant. Likely most of them could read, but you never knew. Backed by Dora, Kennedy had gone outside with the rest of the supply, distributing them there.

“Let me tell you what this means,” Spike said casually, making no attempt to raise his voice; they were all vamps here, or all that needed informing. “It means the end of the sloppy, disorganized,
confusing mess this town has been since the passing of the Master. If some of you are too young to remember that, ask around. This town used to be run right. You knew where you stood, who you answered to, who you could beat up or dust with impunity. Whose orders you had to take, or take the consequences, and who had no business telling you to do anything. Fledges were made only in reasonable numbers, what the food would support, and only with authorization from the top. Only by Masters capable of siring anything but doomed, stupid animals, few of them lasting out their first week or two, risen. Brought up right, sire and childe, acknowledged. Protected and taught till they were fit to hunt on their own, with some chance of surviving immortality longer than a year. Learning how to do, how to be. Learning the lore of our kind and why we are the way we are.

“That’s all been lost. I’m bringing it back. They were good days, under the Master. Won’t say he kept the peace because what do vamps want with peace? Vamps want stability—not everybody getting in everybody’s way, vamps dusting each other in disputes over the food, raw ignorant fledges blundering around underfoot everywhere you look, ruining the hunt, putting the food on its guard. Vamps want things to make sense.

“The Order of Aurelius has ordered this town for as long as it’s existed. And we were here before, on account of the Hellmouth. Those of you who know me know I’m of that bloodline: sired by Drusilla, who was sired by Angelus, sired by Darla, who was sired by the Master himself. The oldest blood there is and one of the few ancient bloodlines still intact, sire and childe, acknowledged.

“Sunnydale is mine, and I’m claiming it. All of it. Gonna make things work here the way they ought to, and the way they used to, despite the Hellmouth being gone now. That just takes the pressure off. Fewer tourists.

“You look at that map and figure out where you belong on it. Which district. Then you’ll know when your turn is at the best hunting territories. Everybody gets a turn. Not gonna deal with individuals here—just districts. You sort out for yourselves who runs your district and let me know, and I’ll deal with him. Or her. I’ll settle disputes between districts. After this is sorted, no more wholesale feuds that go on for decades. No more poaching: each District Master has the territory intact, nobody lairing or hunting there except with permission, and I’ll help enforce it as needed. I’ll keep order. Won’t say I won’t play favorites: loyalty and obedience deserve rewards, and I’ll see that they get them.

“If you don’t like it, don’t like your District Master’s way of running things, get out. Nobody’s making you stay. In his own territory, a District Master can run things any way he pleases, so long as that doesn’t cross me or my rules. If you’re still here, it’s a sign you agree to abide by the rules, accept the order. Anybody out of order will be summarily dusted as I see fit.

“Starting Sunday midnight, anybody hunting District 3 or District 15, like you see on the map, except my own people, will be dusted on sight. That lasts till Wednesday midnight, when District 4 and 6 have their turns. My people will still be abroad, but only enforcing, not hunting.

“Last of all: you smell what it smells like, in here. That’s what’s mine: my protection. Any food you come on that smells like that, you leave absolutely alone. No matter what night it is or what your hunting rights are. You don’t eat it or touch it. Anybody who does is marked from that moment. Won’t dust ‘em. Keep ‘em for instructing the fledges in torture. Vamp can last nearly indefinitely like that, except the fledges get careless. That smell, it’ll mark you if you touch it, and I’ll know. A few of you will test that out, I know that. Need you for stock. For the fledges, like I said. Weed out the stupidest ones that way: always a good thing. So you go ahead, be dumb. Be on the wrong ground on the wrong day. You’re a waste of the space and the feed, and I’ll see you’re attended to.
“Now get yourselves sorted into your districts, decide who you’re gonna answer to. Sooner this gets organized, the sooner things will go back to making sense around here. That’s all.”

As Spike started back to his people, there was a stir by the doorway that made him stop and turn, ready to dive if he had to. But it was the last thing he expected: the Slayer, in full gear, with her favorite sword and a big department store plastic sack with handles. Kennedy and Dora went ahead, to left and right, clearing the way for her, but she took no notice of them or of the vamps, coming straight to Spike.

“Hope I’m not interrupting anything,” she said casually, setting the sack down. Looking him in the eyes all the while. “But it’s starting to get cool, and I was reorganizing the closets, getting the jackets out. I came across this. And I thought you might want it.”

Then she looked down and stooped and drew from the sack his old duster, that he’d thought long gone. Assumed it’d been pitched into the trash, after that night he’d left it at her place, when he’d thought about it at all. Never asked about it, of course. Didn’t want to know. Shied away from anything connected with that night he’d fled and taken himself off to Africa to become something more nearly like a man for her because the alternative was unendurable.

She laid it across her arms and held it out to him.

He was caught totally wrong-footed. Major flabbergast. “Dunno what to say, Slayer.”

“Don’t say anything, Spike. Just take it. It’s yours.”

So he did that: took the familiar weight. Shook it out—all supple, no permanent folds. Leather was like that. Swung it around behind and shrugged into it, the good familiar feel of it. He couldn’t help grinning in plain delight. He felt at least a foot taller, and invincible. Like he’d truly live forever and want to.

No way the Slayer could know it was the trophy of another Slayer, but she knew what it meant, right enough. And her return of it signified her acceptance of that. Not approval, maybe, but understanding and consent that he be what he was.

Except his vampire existence itself, and her love, he didn’t think he’d ever been presented with a greater gift.

His throat was all tight. Took him a minute to pull in enough air, swallowing a few times, to feel it would work right for him. Looking around at the crowd, he said, “This is my Lady--the Slayer. She killed the Master-that-was. But we have an arrangement. She’s got no part in this. You look at her hard, and know her. Stay well clear of her because if she had her way, there’d be no vamps in Sunnydale whatever. Except me, of course. If you don’t answer to me, you’ll answer to her, soon or late. I am, from this night, Master Vampire of Sunnydale. Because I say so, and I’ll make it so, and cut down anybody who disputes it. But she’s Death to our kind, absolute, and always has been, and always will be. So you stay clear of her, and of me, when I’m running with her. Because on such nights as that, there are no exceptions. We see you, you’re gone. Now get out of here.”

The place cleared in record time.

Spike said quietly to Buffy, “You done me proud, love.”

“That was the general effect I had in mind. I heard about last night. You had the cell. You could
have called. You didn’t. If you won’t let me back you, if I can’t be there, I want something strong between you and harm.” Her hands, the sword hand and the other, smoothed the front of the duster down his chest. “Everything you’ll let me give you. The Slayer loves the Master Vampire of Sunnydale in all his peroxided glory. Buffy loves Spike. We don’t always agree about everything, but whatever. Some way, we’ll make this work for us.”

For a little while, Spike allowed himself to hope and almost believe that. In this moment, at least, it was true.
Friday afternoon, Dawn spotted Spike where they’d agreed to meet: by the Pizza by the Slice concession. Dawn hung back by a freestanding booth (coincidentally selling watches) to observe him for a few minutes.

It was so unusual to see him in a good counterfeit of daylight with people all around, just like a regular person. Almost. Because he stood out like a panther in a snowdrift.

First, of course, there was the duster. With the duster unbuttoned--she’d never seen him button it because it was all about the style, after all, and nothing to do with warmth--and therefore flapped wide, he took up three people’s space on the bench. Sitting with his right leg crossed over the other knee, left hand loosely gripping the ankle, foot bouncing idly as he looked around, watching the people: most of the time in blank boredom but sometimes focusing on someone as they passed, his head turning to follow them out of sight, eyes alert then and speculative. Hunting. She figured it was automatic, but it was fun to watch him doing it, knowing what it was, when the passers-by didn’t have a clue they were being sized up as potential snacks by a daylight vampire.

She noted what caught his eye. Highschool kids doing the mall hang-out thing, like she was--male or female, singly or in groups, though if the number was over three, he lost interest quickly. Otherwise, pretty equal opportunity. Women alone, naturally. Young stud-muffins all full of themselves, preening at their reflections in shop windows, especially those who affected semi-grunge. They amused him immensely. No interest in the droopy-pantsed teens or twenty-somethings: he dismissed them at once or scanned right past them. Obviously too unfashionable to consider eating when there were better pickings around.

He watched a couple of young guys who looked like migrant workers, leaning back against a store-front, for quite a long while, eyes gone cold and face expressionless. Dawn suddenly realized they were vamps too when they noticed Spike, apparently met his evaluating gaze, and skittered off rapidly, dodging in and out among people, losing themselves as fast as they could. Spike thought for a while before he’d processed their presence and resumed the scan.

Then his face changed. Not vamping out or anything, just…different. Brighter. He was watching a tall, long-legged girl talking animatedly with a friend as they moved slowly along, clogging traffic and oblivious to those passing around them. Blue and white striped tights, wide bands; blue jumper over a white mock turtleneck; flats; braces; long straight mouse-colored hair to the middle of her back. Not very like, he’d have been in doubt no longer than a second, but he kept watching until the girl and her friend entered a store, still talking.

That was almost sweet, Dawn thought. If anybody had bothered the Not-Quite-Dawn girl, she was certain they’d have had Spike in their face in less than a heartbeat. The look had been affectionate, protective. Not at all the way he looked at food.

When he got out a cigarette and started fiddling with it (the mall didn’t allow smoking except in two deliberately unpleasant designated areas, assuming patrons with the filthy habit were quite capable of stepping outside…into the sunlight…to indulge it), Dawn made a deliberately abrupt gesture, hiking up her backpack. His eyes found her immediately.

He bounced up and joined her in quick, long strides, inserting the unlit cigarette back in the pack.
Gesturing, Dawn mentioned, “Here’s watches…?”

“You see anything that looks good?”

Dawn gave the display a favorless scan. “Nope. This is the cheap stuff.”

“Well, what’s first: pizza, or that top you had your eye on?”

“They won’t take plastic for pizza.”

Spike dug in the duster pocket, glanced to either side, then flashed the top edges of green bills for just a second. “Figured how to use the machine. Without breaking into it, even.”

“Remarkable. The top, then. So no one else gets it.”

“Right you are. Lead on.”

Dawn kept her choices at Gap Teen moderate. The coveted yellow top with appliqué flowers around the neck, two pairs of Anne Klein tights in candy pastels, and another top in Spike’s-eyes-blue, very plain otherwise, but she just liked it. She stuffed the backpack into the bag and handed it into his custody after he’d paid. Then they traipsed off to look at watches. He glowered at the prices but seemed to like the notion of never having to wind or otherwise tend them, considering everything now ran on batteries: he’d never bothered to notice.

The first store had nothing acceptable. Everything too beige and respectable. Roman numerals were apparently beneath contempt. The second store, y-clept Jentz, was more trendy. They agreed on a digital: no hands at all but a big display, pulsing silver on matte black, that included the date and the day of the week. It had alarm functions she doubted he’d ever use, and could be backlit with a button for nighttime. But Dawn thought what Spike mainly liked was the band: three-inch-wide black leather dotted with steel studs. The square wafer-thin watch was set into it with broad flat loops and hidden cross-pins at top and bottom: slightly recessed into the leather, nearly flush with its surface.

Pushing the duster sleeve back, Spike fastened the watch to his right wrist and tried it out, banging it against the display case to test it against impact and rough handling. To the relief of the salesgirl, it survived, as did the display case.

Spike held his arm up, turning the wrist at different angles to inspect the adornment. “Catch the light,” he remarked dubiously.

“This from the guy with the shocking platinum hair conspicuous from a block away at midnight,” Dawn pointed out.

“There’s that,” Spike admitted, briefly returning the salesgirl’s nervous smile. Playing to the audience. He asked the girl, “What d’you think, love: does it suit me?”

“Oh, yes!”

He liked that, flashing a glance to Dawn. “You think it’s OK, Bit? Looks right an’ all?”

“Definitely Big Bad but not so punk as to be retro. Kind of Early Industrial or Depression Chic. Hint of Art Deco. And it even tells time!”
“Hush yourself. You want to make fun, you wait till the next place. This is just the warm-up. Have to put on something of a show, Saturday.”

He stopped that explanation abruptly, eyes going shuttered and evasive. Because of Michael: she knew. She said nothing. Didn’t want to bring everything down getting into that.

From *Jentz*, Spike led her off to a leather shoppe (so designated) y-clept skins (all lower case, in neon) where she acted as his mirror for a pair of skin-tight black kidskin pants, just slightly boot-flared at the ankle (“None of that hippie crap.”), and assured him numberless times that they weren’t (1) “poofy” or (2) anything in the least slightest bit whatever at all like anything Angel might conceivably wear/have worn in this life or any other. Leather was practical, Spike informed her: wouldn’t curl, fold, or show small blood stains and was much better protection than denim, which was why it was so popular with bikers and other such non-poofy folk. Dawn nodded and agreed just as attentively as if she didn’t know it was a lot of hooey, he just liked the look and wanted a compliant audience while he talked himself into it. The price was not discussed or even mentioned, probably from embarrassment. The store fortunately did take plastic.

They chose a studded belt to (subtly--hah!) echo the watch band, and accessorizing put them over the line into to ensembles, everything matching. They debated but ultimately decided against a vest: leather overkill, given the duster and all. The salesboy duly admired the duster, good workmanship on the seams, coat like that would never wear out, and gamely swallowed his disappointment about the vest.

The jeans went into the shopping bag. Spike wore the new pants and new belt and looked around surreptitiously to catch the effect, see if people noticed. Finding that they did, he walked with fresh bounce in his step, pulled-back shoulder strut, returning to the pizza-by-the-slice place.

It was always fun, shopping with Spike. He took it all so seriously. Sometimes Dawn thought he was the vainest creature alive (or whatever). And now, she didn’t have to worry about either of them being caught taking the patented Spike five-finger discount.

“Have to do the hair now,” Dawn decreed, gesturing with her slice, and then was in haste to capture the sagging string of cheese suspended between slice and mouth. “Haircut, first. The place next to the Beanery is walk-in. Gimme ten dollars and I’ll collect you in half an hour.”

That brought the reflex action of shoving both spread hands through the hair. No orange tomato-streaks: he was a neat eater. Excessive early training, probably. Victorian, and all. “Looks bad, does it?”

“No getting away from it, Spike--bad. And not good bad: bad bad.”

They synchronized watches, which Spike seemed to enjoy, insisting she adjust hers to match his, then agreeing what constituted half an hour. Then he forked over the ten without argument and went off to see to the shearing. Dawn finished her slice and the remainder of his, once she’d picked off all the cracked red pepper bits. Disposing of plates, most of the napkins, and her cup still sloshy with ice, Dawn wandered off to the chain pharmacy and selected black and indigo nailpolish (she preferred the indigo, but probably wouldn’t be able to talk him into it, traditionalist that he was) and a new haircolor from L’Oreal that promised highlights. How you got highlights on bone blond she couldn’t quite envision, but anything should be better than helmet-head. She disdained getting gel. She had *some* standards.

She still had ten minutes to kill. A small display of twisty blown glass figurines reminded her of *The
Glass Menagerie, which she’d recently read in school. And sure enough, there was a unicorn. Unicorns were uber-kitch, but still. Literary and everything. Lips pursed, she looked at the glittering fancies, brightly lit on their mirrored shelves, and pushed the button that made the display revolve.

Unicorns, she decided, were depressing. But not as depressing as the dragon on a lower shelf she’d bent to inspect. That made her stomach knot up.

She paid and dragged out to collect Spike at the K?ffewer.

Spike said at once, “What is it?”

“Did the guy freak when he couldn’t see a reflection?”

"They do vamps in back. Fitted out special," Spike replied shortly, undistracted. "What's wrong?"

“Don’t want to talk about it. C’mon, what’s next?”

He took her arm and made her sit on the nearest bench, squatting on his heels before her. He just looked up at her, waiting.

Words, she could have batted back. The waiting undid her. To her utter disgust, she burst into tears.

Somebody banged into Spike with a stroller. He shot upright, glaring, then dismissed the incident, drawing Dawn to her feet again and steering her to the nearest "alleyway" that led to a door marked "Employees Only." From the trashcan-sized object on wheels and the mop tipped against it, standing outside, the door would be a closet with janitorial supplies. Likely a favored place for dumping drained prey. The left wall was lined with lockers.

The side of Spike’s duster was a concealing wing she could hide within and bleat against his chest while he patted her head and made soothing noises.

Wiping her eyes and then blowing her nose on a wad of leftover napkins, she shook her head.

“Didn’t mean to do this. It’s so dumb. And so useless.”

“What is, love?”

But from his flat, restrained tone of voice, she figured he’d guessed. There was a lot of that going around.

“Michael,” she admitted, flinging out a napkin-clutching fist. “A couple of hours after you called, the other night, he called. I thought it was you again and had super put-downs all ready, that time of night…. But it was Mike. And he was all wound up, ranting and raving about this terrible cock and bull tale you’d tried to sell him…. And through what he said, I could hear what you’d said. Hear your voice even. You’d told him. I didn’t say you could tell him. But never mind, that doesn’t matter. Anyway, then I told him. That it was true, that you’d said what was true and had to have trusted him to tell him something like that. I think he was drunk. He wouldn’t believe me, to start with. But eventually I made him. And then there were….other things. And I told him I didn’t want to see him anymore. Which he then admitted was the marching orders you’d given him, so he wasn’t supposed to be even talking to me in the first place. And then I hung up on him.” She swallowed hard and scraped her eyes again with the napkins.

“What other things.”
“Just…things. Oh hell, you know it, there’s no point in my trying to be all coy about it. I told him I knew, all right? About him being the damn sniper.” She pulled away to stare him in the face, finding him all reserved and watchful. “It wasn’t that hard to figure. All I had to do was wonder why you’d never once tried to go after the idiot. Never once speculated who it might be. Never once took it seriously or even were very mad about it. It was because you knew. You knew…and still put up with it. And then all I had to do was think about who you’d know who was a specially good marksman. Somebody warped enough to think that peppering you with lightweight .22 bullets every few days was some sort of prank. Which was how you treated it. Not a long list, Spike. Had be a vamp. Had to be Mike, the ex-mercenary. When did you know?”

He leaned against the lockers. “I kind of thought it might be,” he said quietly. “Wasn’t sure till we got back from Oregon and I asked about borrowing the bike. I looked at the mileage. I knew what it’d been before. Saw what it was then. About right for the trip up and back. So I knew.”

“Why didn’t you tell me!”

“Didn’t think it was important. Just a stupid damn prank, like you said. Getting his own back, being annoying, for what I’d been doing. Blowin’ up at him, like I did, on that patrol. Things since.” He spread his hands in a vague gesture. “Keeping track of what you two got up to, together. Holding him down other ways when I thought he needed it. Just the usual.”

"You wanted to protect him. And me."

He shrugged, looking aside. "Wasn't no big thing."

“Well, you’re a bloody idiot, Spike. Something like that, that he was goddam shooting you and then running off laughing…! That’s something I think I had a right to know! Do you understand? Nobody hurts you and gets a free pass from me! That’s not a prank, Spike: not to me! You never, ever keep something like that from me again. Not now, not in a hundred years, you hear me?"

She was shaking with fury but let him gather her in. No more pats, though; no more soothing noises.

“It’s just vampire games, love. Nothing for you to take all serious. No great harm done.”

“I say it’s serious and I don’t play by vamp rules. Think how you’d feel if the target had been Buffy.” He didn’t say anything, so she pursued, “Would it still have been games then?”

“What I’m hearing,” he said, “is you’ve pretty well decided. Is that so?”

“Yeah. It’s not worth it, Spike, feeling this way. All torn up inside. It’s too hard. I’m never gonna speak to him again, so it’s so dumb to miss him! I will never, never forgive him, and still miss him! It’s so dumb!”

“Yeah. Sometimes, it seems that way. Come on, now: cry into some ice-cream. Your sis swears by it, and she should know. And you been known to indulge a time or two. I been reliably informed that chocolate cures damn near anything. What d’you say?”

She’d been determined not to be dumb about this. She was still determined. She inspected and approved his haircut and showed him the color she’d chosen. Dry-eyed, she oversaw and pronounced on the selection of a silver ankle chain for Buffy, who wouldn’t wear rings because they interfered with her grip on a sword and might catch in things, fighting. The chain had a tiny death’s
head on it, with ruby eyes. And it was completely practical since silver was a soft metal that would break with a strong tug and therefore couldn't hang up on anything or hobble her. When that trinket was bought and safely stowed, Dawn consented to go for ice-cream.

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Vamps didn’t get ulcers. The doings didn’t work that way. But Spike had good reason to know vamps got headaches. Migraines, even. All that thinking, that’s what it was. Going over things, and then over them again, rubbed something raw, like a blister, or wore it out with overstrain. And because the rubbing and the strain were intangible, they didn’t seal up and heal right off, like a knife wound, say. Only stood to reason.

Bloody unnatural, that much thinking. Stood to reason there’d be a price.

Not being able to sleep for being beleaguered by the fucking dreams, Pallas Athena in full kit nattering on about turning it all loose now, letting it go smash, probably was in there someplace, too.

Heading back to the factory through the pipes, toting the bundle of goods left after surrendering the shopping bag to Bit for her spoils, Spike fought back the impulse to phone the witch and have her come do the warm whoosh thing with her hand. But she wasn’t his on a string, to yank around anytime he wanted for just his own convenience. Didn’t have to have the soul to lay down a set of ground rules for himself on how to treat people who deserved well of him and then keep to it. Could figure it out perfectly well himself. Over and over and over…. Fucking hard, was what it was. Even had to remind himself he had a goddam watch now, to think to look at it. Six eighteen. Who the hell needed to know it was eighteen, or thirty, or forty-one? Nuisance, that’s what it was, for all it looked decent, and it did: Bit had said so. Little bint behind the counter, too. Must be so, then. He had witnesses.

Also had the second worst headache ever, cranking away behind his eyes.

In lieu of Willow’s hand, Spike broke into the back of a convenient pharmacy and selected a bottle of what he used to steal to beat back the chip-induced head-bangers and dry-swallowed four. Left ten dollars as soul-duty, leavegeld for the conscience he’d set aside, so that was all right.

He reviewed the agenda. The mall with Bit, that was done. Spend a couple hours on the fresh document, something easy in proto-Farsi by a nit setting out what he claimed was a spell to produce the Universal Solvent. Have to ask Red for a site that had a dictionary, check up on all the bloody chemical names so he could get the equivalents right, or maybe he could Google it for himself, he’d learned that. Anyway, one of the easier ones, not up to much more just now. Too much on his mind. After that, meet the Slayer for patrol, over in District 4, give those cousins a fright and a flash of his new kit. Which he likely should change out of, in case it got damaged and wasn’t fit to wear tomorrow. At those prices, wasn’t like he could just go out and knick a replacement, like you could with jeans.

The cell phone in the duster pocket buzzed.

Bloody hell.

He pulled the phone out and took a seat on the walkway. “Yeah.”

“Spike, I just thought I should warn you. I know about the soul.”
Spike set down the bundle and rubbed his eyes. “What about it, pet?”

“You’re right to be cautious, I don’t blame you a bit. I don’t believe this line is even secure.”

Spike shut his eyes. Either it would go smash, or it wouldn’t. The important thing was to keep going as best he could, as long as he could. “Don’t believe all that many vamps go in for spy gear, love. A good number severely challenged by radios. Light switches. What d’you want?”

“Why, to warn you. Like I said. To another demon, at least one inclined to notice, it’s perfectly plain. Except that it’s so normal. For a vampire, at least. It’s the norm, not to have the vibrating soul-signature. So likely no other demon would notice or remark on it. But you remember, I noticed right away, that you’d gotten it.”

“Certainly do. Punched you a good one in the nose for it, too.”

“Oh, I understand completely. You weren’t ready to have Buffy know that yet, so you hit me as a diversion. I don’t forgive you, but I understand. I was surprised, and when I’m surprised, I can forget all about tact and just blurt. Xander’s criticized me for it. Many times. Many, many, many--”

“Anya, I’m a bit caught up in things just now. S’pose you could get on with it? Make your point?”

“The point is not that I know: the point is that I’m being rudely pressured to tell Buffy about it. I assume she doesn’t know, or why the pressure? I’ve taken precautions, of course. I don’t like being interfered with. And I’m not surprised, so there’s no blurring issue. I’ve known for some time, after all. But I have to assume that if I’m being pressured, others are, too. And I thought you’d appreciate being put on your guard about that.”

All Spike could find to say was, helplessly, “Yeah.”

“What have you done to annoy the Powers this time, Spike?”

“What they told me. No quicker way to piss somebody off than to do exactly what they say. Could be, they figure I might stop being so cooperative here, all biddable, an’ figure I’d be the better if they hung a sword over my head, rattled it a little.”

“I assure you, I’m under no influence now. As I said, I’ve taken precautions. And by the way, Willow expressed herself pleased at the ingredients and spell components I’ve provided her. For your smell, that is. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to get fresh civet, this time of year?”

“Nope. No idea whatever. Well, I guess it’s good of you to warn me, here. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“I gave the usual professional discount. I’m sure you wouldn’t expect special treatment, just because we’re friends.”

*Leave off, shut your yap, you clattering bitch.* “Never expect that, no.”

“That you’re incorporated now only means I have to provide proper invoices in duplicate, and I’m used to that: I’ve been incorporated for years.”

“Super for you, that.”
“Well, I have to go now. There are several important things I’m neglecting, talking to you.”

She rung off.

Spike put the phone away and waited for the pills to kick in.

His chances of continued existence, hanging on Anyanka’s tact.

Dawn on the outs with Michael, in a way the lad was bound to blame on Spike. When everything hung on Michael. On his being anything slightly more evolved than a total fuck-up and drama queen asshole. Was that a lot to expect? That the people around you be minimally sane and not screw the bloody pooch, against their own interests, every time they got the chance? Had to put a serious talk with Mike on the agenda. Midnight, maybe. Should see to it Mike got a phone. But likely he’d be at Willy’s, drunk off his ass and feeling sorry for himself, running off his mouth about it like he did. And Willy’s had a phone. So that was all right, then.

Shoving to his feet, Spike wondered what would be next to go pear-shaped, sidewise, and out of true.

Avoiding the array of bear traps that had already startled several vamps intending unauthorized entry, and the tripwire that would dump about a hundred gallons of diluted holy water down the pipe, Spike shoved himself out on the factory floor.

Turning on a light and the computer--screen bothered his eyes with no other light about: he could detect the flicker--he was still on the agenda, running only something like fifteen minutes behind. And the pills were doing their work: the headache had backed off. Traded that for swimmy and faintly nauseated, but that was a decent trade.

Fuck. He’d forgot Rona.

Unable to reach Rona direct, he was talking to the lab machine, naming here as the mark for the evening delivery, when Benny came and stood, waiting to tell him something.

“What?”

“Couple guys in a truck. They smell right.”

No what?

The guys proved to be Dogboy and that Harris, lounging by Harris’ truck. Waiting awhile, by the look. In the back of the truck were a Morris chair with intact cushions, that Spike remembered from Harris’ parents’ basement, an old Zenith console color TV, and a satellite dish. As Oz popped a beer and handed it to Spike, Harris said, “This is apology, deadboy. You won’t see it often, so appreciate it now. I heard what happened after I…dropped you off, the other night. Willow says I have seriously impacted my karmic debt to the universe at large. Which was not at all what I intended. Frankly, I don’t know what got into me that night. This place, maybe. All the happy memories. As in, not.” Xander surveyed the factory grimly. He finished his beer and crushed the can. Looked around for a garbage container, shrugged, and pitched it off, overhand, into the weeds. “So where do you want it and why is that little creep staring at my neck?”

“’Cause you smell so nice. And he can’t have any. In the back, I guess.”
Spike drank beer and blankly watched Harris and Oz go back and forth, emptying the truck. Couldn’t suss it out at all, why Harris would do such a thing of his own free will. Unless it wasn’t.

Pulling out the phone, he punched a speed dial. After a dozen or so rings, got Bit on the weapons chest phone. He was interrupting supper, which grieved him no end. He asked for Red and presently got her.

“Red, got Harris here--”

“You like the smell? Is it working? That’s test batch #6, and the only problem so far is that it wears off too fast. I’m gonna try--”

“Red, you set a geas on him or something? He’s civil, and that can’t be right. He’s brought me a fucking Morris chair.”

“So he raided the parental units. He said he would. Lightning raid, avoid contact at all costs. Good.”

“Explain it to me. Slowly. In a fragile state of mind here.”

“Naturally: post-mall. We have our ways of finding out these things,” responded Willow, with cheerful menace. “Xander wasn’t himself. Well, he was, but…not *himself* himself, you see? And after the fact, it was pretty clear that our valued associates whose names begin with P had been, not to get too disgustingly graphic, messing with him. I’ve put a stop to that. I do *not* like my friends being messed with! I’m thinking Buffy might benefit--”

“No. You leave her be. She has her own deal with them, and it’s not to be interfered with.”

“Are you certain?” He could practically hear her eyebrows wrinkling.

“Real certain. Limits, Red. Got to remember limits.”

“Yeah. Well. I guess. I have a problem with that sometimes. So I’m told. Say--when do I get to see the pants? Purely academic interest here, you understand.”

“Can’t deal with that now, Red, sorry. Gonna have to blow off the translation as it is. Find some way to get to it tomorrow…. Tell Buffy…. Never mind. See her soon enough for myself. Patrolling.”

“All right. Anything else? Because my parsley pasta is getting cold.”

“Go get your parsley pasta.” Spike saw headlights turning in at the drive and cautiously approaching among the potholes, bobbing up and down. “Here’s my dinner, too. Thanks. About Harris. He’s always been like that…but not so much lately.”

“He was my friend first, you can’t have him. And neither can *they*. Nobody likes being played. Running now!”

“Right.”

The truck was empty now except for the satellite dish and a clump of rope. Harris came back and collected those.
Spike asked, “You going up on the roof with that?”

“Yep.”

“Gonna climb a metal roof…with rope.”

“Watch the master at work. Watch and learn. Or not, as you please.” Shoudering the dish, with an armload of rope, Harris tramped away toward the uphill end of the building.

Rona pulled up in the lab truck and cussed Spike out for not telling her the delivery mark in a timely manner. Again. “I got a life, too, you know! And I warn you, if I ever find you under my bed again, you’re getting a faceful of something you won’t like even a little, Spike. I got me a taser, too. You’re getting real creepy, you know that?”

Spike said nothing, just accepted the cool box, set down the beer, removed the bags, and passed the box back to her. She got in the truck and drove off.

As Spike shifted enough to bite through the first bag, Oz wandered up, looking after the lab truck’s bouncing brake lights. Waiting until Spike had drained the bag, Oz remarked, “She works for you.”

“Works for the Wankers’ Council, actually. It’s complicated.”

“Yeah. I guess.” Oz faced around toward him. “Leaving tonight. Stayed to lend Xander a hand, but….”

“Assignment?”

“Gig in Sausalito, but not for another week. It’s…just time to move on. Good to see everybody again.” A sharper glance, and then away. “Glad you got the chip out.”

“Yeah.” Spike bit open the second bag.

“Couldn’t live like that, myself. Helped me get out of the Initiative cage, too. Never thanked you.”

“No need. Wasn’t all that much help, really. Figured to double-cross you Scoobies once I was inside, but that didn’t quite work out. All for the best, I expect.”

“Yeah.” Oz smiled his sweet, thoughtful smile. “Scoobies. Yeah.” He wandered off.

Spike checked the watch: almost seven thirty. He wondered if he’d be really stupid to ask Harris for a lift to District 4.

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They’d run across a trio of Smanthar demons—like Fyarl, but less slime—among the tombstones. Buffy had done for one and Spike was dancing with the another, keeping his distance a bit because, well, slime, and he hadn’t changed out of the new pants after all, not before Buffy had seen him, and it came down on him suddenly how hopeless this all was. What a stupid thing it was to think he could stand against the Powers and accomplish anything worth the having. Nothing made sense because there was no sense to make. Like the worst parts of the Never dream. Just cored him out, left him empty of everything but despair.
He let the axe go and stood there. The Smanth, not believing his good fortune, lost no time in ramming a wrist-spar into Spike’s chest. Spike continued to stand there. Didn’t hurt much actually, not compared to everything else. Didn’t matter. A Smanth spar was organic, but it wasn’t wood. But maybe with a few more tries, the Smanth would do enough damage that it wouldn’t matter. Spike looked down and poked at the hole incuriously.

“Spike! What are you-- Spike!”

Leaving her opponent, Buffy slammed into the other Smanth as it was bringing both wrists up into Spike’s belly. So the combined tear was pretty superficial. Lot of blood, though. But that wasn’t gonna get the job done either. Axe was an awkward weapon to off oneself with. Stake, now--exactly the thing. Wavering, Spike tried to pull the stake out of the back of his pants, but that just twisted him around. He fell on his side.

Buffy was pulling at him, trying to get him to sit up. Must have done for both the Smanthars, then. Good. He wouldn’t have wanted her to get hurt, just because he was a waste of the space.

“Spike, what’s wrong with you?” Buffy demanded frantically, stripping off his shirt. Wadding it, she tried to stop the bleeding at his belly, which really didn’t signify. It was the hole in the heart that was the bad one, he thought distantly.

“Can’t get at the stake,” he explained, but she made no move to help him with it. Noticing the one Buffy had stowed, the same as he did, he reached for that instead. But she slapped his hand away before he could get the stake loose. Didn’t want him to use her stakes. Well, she was the Slayer, after all. He had no right to pinch her weapons. Or even touch her, if it came down to that. He pushed her away. Not all that hard, wouldn’t want to hurt her, but had to make her know he shouldn’t be let alone. Unworthy. Disgusting. Undead soulless thing.

Spike got to his feet, stumbled a few steps, then pitched over again. Head slammed into a tombstone and he was gone awhile.

Heard her talking, but nobody to answer that he could make out. Breathing hurt, so he quit, wondering what had got him started. Didn’t need to breathe. Didn’t need anything, except to be gone, finished. Tried, but still couldn’t pull his stake free: damn tight pants. Should have known better than buy them, no matter what Bit said. Just playing him, playing along….

Bit. If he went, she was likely gone, too. So he shouldn’t….

Puzzled, vaguely alarmed, he got an elbow under him and pushed up. Toppled crooked against the tombstone. Head hurt like fury. Thought he’d taken pills for that. Well, it seemed to be back, any road. What was it he’d been thinking about Bit? He tried to call up the agenda, but that only made him dizzy, made his head hurt worse.

Right. Just be gone, that was what he was supposed to do. Maybe something on the agenda. Couldn’t bring it to mind just now. Only knew it. Deep. Strong.

Holding the belly wound, that was already sealing, not losing blood quite so fast now, he pushed to his feet and then slowly straightened. Could do that, it seemed. And he’d rather go standing up, facing into it.

And he’d sooner it was the Slayer anyway. What she was for, wasn’t it?
She turned and looked at him, made a face like he’d scared her somehow, and came running back to
grab him, steady him. Made it easier.

He patted his chest. “Put it there, Slayer. Hole already started for you.”

“Ohgod. Ohgod. Spike, don’t do that! Lie down, here. Where’s all the blood coming fr-- Oh!”

His head went floaty and he was no longer certain he was standing. But that was no excuse. Well, he
knew what would do. Not wait, not let it come to her from outside--serve it up himself. He’d be glad
to be rid of it. Never was worth shit at keeping secrets. Such an effort, holding them in….

“Lost the soul, Slayer. Or set it aside, like. Same difference anyways. No better now than when you
first laid eyes on me. And somewhat the worse for wear, besides. Now you go ahead, do what you
should.” He reached, tried to find her stake, to set it in her hand, but she wouldn’t let him. No telling
why. Women were unaccountable.

“Shut up, Spike. Just shut up. Willow’s coming, just wait until Willow comes, all right? Hold onto
my hand. Hold onto my hand, Spike.”

But that would have meant touching her again, and he wasn’t to do that, for all he wanted to. Let go
one inch and he’d be at her throat, mustn’t do that no more: he’d decided. But the strange thing was
how she wouldn’t touch him. Hold his hand, yeah, but not take the stake and do what she should,
even though he’d told her. Must not have said it clear enough, though he’d thought….

Lost some time there, he supposed. Everything all thick and heavy and dim. Had a watch now,
didn’t he? But couldn’t get turned around to check it, see where the time had gone.

Some way Bit was there, pulling on him. That was all right, then: she could tell Buffy about the soul.
He thought he’d said it to her, but she seemed to take no notice, saying, “Spike, you’re being played.
Don’t let it. Don’t let them.” Which made no sense at all.

And Buffy saying, “Order of Taraka, Spike!” Which made even less. If there could be less than no
sense. That was hard to figure. But she was crying, the Slayer, and that couldn’t be right. He reached
up and touched her eyes, concerned. Which some way made her cry worse. He couldn’t see why she
wouldn’t just get on with it, get it over.

“No vamps in Sunnydale,” he explained. “Zero count. Everybody content with that.”

She’d remarked on how dead Restfield was, making a joke of it, watching to see if he was gonna
make objections to her patrolling through his territory. Complaining how he’d made her life all
boring, nothing around to fight. That had been before the Smanthars, of course. And he’d explained
how it was all proceeding well, vamps doing each other at a great rate, each group turned in against
itself in smaller and smaller factions, sorting for mastery, they way they did, but seldom on such a
scale, citywide. Fledges gone soonest, like dandelion puffs. Gingham Dog and Calico Cat, would
just slaughter each other down to hardly nothing if let be at this stage, just a few remnants left…
remnants; revenants…something or other like that, anyways, that she could dispose of in a few
serious sweeps. And then there’d be none and the Powers all pleased and all, just like they wanted.
Like she wanted.

But she wouldn’t do him, and he couldn’t understand why.

Lost some more time, and Willow was there, maybe had been before but he hadn’t noticed, anyways
here now and chanting in a loud voice, strange smells around, aside from the lily of course, deathsmell, always the lilies left after the funerals and the sleeping in the ground.

“The hell with this,” Willow spat, “I can’t track it. Can’t block it. Here.”

Willow did something, and the suicidal anguish flicked out, just like that. Breathing wasn’t so bad now. The holes were sealing. Spike blinked and breathed, held between his two darlings, trying to make out what’d happened.

“Spike?” Dawn asked in a tiny small voice, reaching out and patting his face with her slim, soft girly fingers.

“Can’t make it out,” he explained.

Willow’s face came into his view, all anxious and angry. “You’ve been cursed, Spike. Somebody’s set a curse on you. Who’d have something of yours, something personal it would have to be? Spike?”

“Thinking. Yeah. Boots. Lost m’boots. Set ‘em out, had to have my hands free, see? Couldn’t carry ‘em too. But when I sent to look, they were gone.”

Buffy leaned in, eclipsing Willow, frowning thunderously. She pushed her hair aside, baring the mark, leaning in until she was all he could see. “C’mon, now. Not gonna have any argument about this. C’mon, Spike!”

She pulled at him but he held himself from it. Had promised himself not to feed from her without the soul. Would be a terrible thing, to do that. Not exactly sure why anymore, but knew it was, just the same. Could be she wouldn’t know, but he would. And must not do that. No.

And all the while, his demon frantic to get at her. Get at the blood. Frantic to change and take her. An accustomed, expected thing.

No.

He turned his head away, and yet it was there, right against his mouth. Couldn’t escape it. In his mouth and his throat, so strong and good, hot from the source, and he hadn’t the strength to not take it. The change ran through him and he bit down. Round, soft arm. Not pulling away. Hand patting at his face, telling him it was all right, that’s what she was for, to do for him and be with him always and it was Dawn, that he’d sworn he’d never do that way, must never mark her, not right that she should be just for him, should be for herself, whatever she wanted--

“This is what I want,” Dawn told him, steadily patting, untroubled and unafraid. “Told you: I decided. Always be here for you. So this is all right, now, Spike. It’s all right.”

But it wasn’t. Could never be right between them again. Feeding, he wept.

**********

Vampires were wonderfully resilient, Dawn thought. Here was Spike, practically eviscerated, a hole in his chest you could put your fist into, blood everywhere from the collarbone on down, barely able to lift his head or focus his eyes; and fifteen minutes later, he was on his feet and Shrugging into the duster, telling Buffy he was fit to finish the patrol now, if she wanted.
Looking up from overseeing Willow bandaging Dawn’s arm, Buffy made a noise like a laugh—
surprised into it. “I think we’re all patrolled out.”

“All right.” Spike turned and started away.

“Spike?” Buffy called after him. “Come home. Just for tonight. At least get cleaned up. Spike?
Where are you going?”

He didn’t look around or answer.

“Tie it,” Dawn told Willow, and trotted after Spike the second it was done.

Buffy in a fight was hell on wheels. But when it came to guys and emotional stuff, Buffy wilted,
backed off, hid, and moped at the first harsh word. Caved, basically. Not Dawn. Dawn prided
herself on being relentless. What she couldn’t outrun or outfight, she could outlast. She was the
unquestioned possessor of the Summers family title for stubborn.

She wouldn’t have cared if Spike were crazy, heartbroken, and bleeding from the eyes: he wasn’t
going out of her sight.

He was hard to spot: the duster was good camouflage, dammit. Then he passed in front of a pillar
with an angel perched on top. Dawn had him then, and soon caught up, even if at arthritic antelope
pace, chugging along. Spike was even slower.

“Go home,” he said without looking at her.

“Got my taser!”

“Go home.”

“Make me.”

He did look around then, and she was surprised to find him game-faced, although she shouldn’t have
been: he obviously needed the extra oomph, the extra acuity, to stay on his feet and keep going. He
glanced at a tree as if he was thinking about what he could use to tie her to it. And she’d resist,
prevent that, by tasering him. Only he’d take the taser away from her first, or try to. She already had
her hand on it and could hit him right through the cloth of her pocket. Move and countermove: she
figured they were both playing it out in their heads like reverse checkers. And either in his scenario,
he lost, or he just gave up on it as too much work, because he left the tree in peace and continued on
without further objection to her trailing along.

A few minutes later, Dawn realized why: reaching the wall, that he went up and over, even though
he had to take a running start, and that she couldn’t have climbed without a ladder and a boost on her
best day.

Oh.

She called plaintively, “At least tell me where you’re going!”

No answer, as she expected. Decisively out-maneuvered. And in a bad mood, as now, Spike was
frustratingly impervious to wheedle.
Instead of racing back and maybe finding the SUV gone and herself stranded, Dawn sensibly got out her cellphone and called Buffy. “He got away from me,” she reported. “Over the wall.”

“I don’t think he wants company,” Buffy responded hesitantly.

“The hell with what he wants,” Dawn shot back, momentarily forgetting the sisterly protocol about strong language. “He absolutely positively shouldn’t be alone. His enemies already had one crack at him tonight. Want to give them another? The deathwish curse is still active: Willow’s locket is only deflecting it. What if something happens to the locket? And he’s majorly freaked: do you trust him to do anything whatever sensible for the rest of the night? Because I know I don’t! And what if--”

“All right, all right. Point made. Come on back.”

It took longer than Dawn liked to locate him, because although they had focus material galore in the shirt completely sodden with his blood, Willow didn’t have with her a map or the magicked powder needed to do the spell. They had to return home for that. When Willow set the map, with its glowing red dot, on the now-empty den table, Dawn lifted her head triumphantly because it confirmed what she’d said all along--Willy’s.

Spike was having himself a sulk and a drunk. Celebrating his failure to be as dead as he’d wanted and being bullied into feeding from insistent underage Dawns with blood powerful enough to get him on his feet, enabling him to get to Willy’s so he could drink himself off them again. About par for perverse, Dawn figured, when one was dealing with vamps.

She worried about him sometimes. More, lately. He definitely needed looking after and adequate supervision.

Willow opted to stay behind to research what she’d need to counterspell the deathwish. Revived by nearly a whole bottle of orange juice, Dawn was going even if it meant she had to call a cab and pay for it out of her allowance. But she didn’t have to: Buffy gave in fairly easily. Still shaken by Spike’s just giving up like that, Dawn thought, punching phone buttons as Buffy started the SUV with the usual grinding of gears. And probably by what Spike had said.

After eighteen rings, Dawn reported vexedly, “He’s not answering.”

“Why am I not surprised.”

“Worth a try. Go downtown.”

“What?”

“Go downtown. By the movie house would be good. Collect some of his vamps.”

“Oh.” Buffy turned left at the next corner.

Dawn tried phoning again. This time, she got the message that his cell had been turned off. One surprise right after another.

“He just said that,” Dawn offered cautiously. “To get you to stake him. About the soul. Provocation.”
Staring anxiously at the road, Buffy didn’t say anything. Rather than make things worse by protesting too much, Dawn shut up about it.

They hit downtown at a good time: the theater had just let out, and that was the dinner bell for vamps. Dawn rolled down her window and stared hard, directing, “Go slow. Go slow. Slower!” until she spotted faces she knew. “Stop!”

Mary and Dora lounging by a street light, looking like a pair of hookers. But sex wasn’t what they were trolling for, with their chalk-white faces and their glittering eyes.

Dawn jumped out, clutching her taser in her pocket because she didn’t have her smell on, forgot, couldn’t think of everything, and ran right up to them, blurting. “Spike’s hurt. At Willy’s with no backup. Get whoever you can. If they get him, they’ll come after you next, so don’t mess around!”

They both considered her curiously for a second, as if she’d just arrived from Mars...or they had. Then Dora put her head back and let out an ultrasonic screech that made Dawn clap both hands over her ears. Both hands showing, and empty. Mary vamped, smiling because they could have had her then, and they all knew it, and maybe next time they would, and Dawn didn’t think she’d ever forget that cold-eyed fanged smile, but this time they let her escape back to the SUV and slam the door. As Buffy pulled out, Dawn held onto the door armrest with both hands. That way, they didn’t shake as much.

“Vamps are creepy. Sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Buffy agreed.

Because she was looking for it, Dawn spotted Mike’s motorcycle in Willy’s parking area (she refused to give it the distinction of calling it a parking lot, since it wasn’t paved). Lateish on a Friday night, it was pretty parked up: Buffy pulled around in the back where there was less chance of the SUV being run into by some drunk demon pulling out, but a whole lot better chance of running into assorted nasties on the hunt, drunk or otherwise. Buffy opened the rear door and leaned in to collect her sword and, after locking up, stood a minute, checking out the immediate area, before she was ready to move. Dawn didn’t nag and stayed close, knowing a fight could break out any minute, out here or inside, and if one did, she was only a liability and her smartest action would be to get under cover fast. Second smartest action would be to run like hell and hope whatever was chasing was too drunk to catch up.

Inside, there were no fights currently in progress and the noise level was down enough to permit actual conversation if you shouted, even with the sound system banging away. If the rectangular room had been a boat, it would have listed heavily to port because the crowd was pretty much elbow-to-elbow on the right, in front of the bar, whereas the more open area to the left, where most of the tables were, seemed to be a place nobody much wanted to be.

Spike was there—William the Bloody in literal fact. He’d made no attempt to clean up. Was in fact making a point of showing off his ensanguined torso, having pushed the duster off onto the back of the chair. He therefore looked like he’d come straight from a slaughter...one he’d done, not one attempted against him. Showing, Dawn realized, that he was still there. Presenting the fact of himself, of his survival, to anybody who cared to come and look. Putting himself on display.

It would have seemed a further instance of suicidal foolhardiness except for the two Lorchine demon carcasses in a heap on the floor to the left of that table. The adjoining table had been reduced to kindling, along with several chairs. Presumably from that kindling, Spike had several pieces of wood
fit to do duty as stakes lined up on the table before him, ready for the next go-round. His garrote lay in a neat coil. Also on the table was a fair-sized knife Dawn was pretty sure she'd never seen before: likely collected from the Lorchines. So there’d already been some action. But she and Buffy seemed to have arrived between challenges, assassination attempts, or whatever: two vamps had pulled up chairs not quite to Spike’s table--just out of easy reach--and were talking, arguing. Spike, vamp-faced and drinking from a bottle, didn’t seem to be paying any attention.

Behind Spike’s table, back in the corner, Mike was playing solitaire. His head lifted, golden eyes taking in Buffy and Dawn standing against the wall just inside the door. Then he attended to the cards again, shifting the stacks around, giving no sign of interest in anything else. Dawn didn’t know if he was potential backup, potential assassin, or potential audience placed conveniently to have the best view of whatever violent eruption came next in Spike’s vicinity. She thought it quite possible he hadn’t decided either.

Dawn didn't find it hard to suppress the twinge she felt, seeing him. He'd shot Spike for fun and she didn't tolerate that sort of thing. Not even a little.

Mike also had a bottle but wasn’t nearly keeping pace with Spike in the drinking department. Then again, he might have started sooner.

Each of the two front tables nearest the door was occupied by vamps. Three at one table, four at the other. Mostly they were glaring at their table-mates and talking loudly.

A fight broke out at Spike’s table between the two vamps there. They both came out of their chairs, snarling and slashing. One got hold of one of the convenient stakes and stabbed the other deep enough that the stake was consumed in the dusting. Straightening, the survivor said something to Spike, who nodded indifferently and replied, “All right.” Dawn couldn’t hear it, but saw him saying it plainly enough.

It seemed that the front tables were a sort of waiting area. As the survivor left, the three at the table farthest from the door got up, righting or bringing chairs as needed to range themselves around Spike’s table. Two started putting their case while the third sat sullenly silent.

It seemed a kind of court where any of the participants might suddenly do execution on any of the others. Vintage vampire, Dawn thought.

Since things seemed momentarily quiet, she took the opportunity to slide past the empty table, along the wall, and back to where Mike was finding solitaire such a fascinating occupation.

Dawn said, “Do you know what happened tonight?”

“Thought you weren’t talking to me.”

Dawn gave him a You Idiot look. “I’m not. This is for Spike. Somebody set a deathwish on him and he tried to get Buffy to stake him.”

Mike looked up briefly. “Looks like she didn’t.”

Dawn’s look escalated to You Stupid Idiot. “You’re not gonna get to fight him tomorrow if he gets himself dusted tonight. And at the rate he’s going, very shortly, he’s gonna be passing-out drunk. So I’d look after him, if I was you, or you won’t get much by way of a fight tomorrow.”
“You’re not me,” said Mike. “You say you’re not talking to me, but you are. Don’t make no sense. You were all mad at me, and I don’t know why. Ain’t done nothing to you, that you should be mad at me. Been good to you, every way I know how. I don’t understand none of it. You or him, either one. Both treating me like crap. Now you been letting him feed off you.” He gestured at the bandage on her arm. “Setting his mark over mine. Can smell him on you. That ain’t right. You leave me alone. I’m not friends with you anymore.”

“Well, that about sums it up,” Dawn decided, and left him to his dumb solitaire.

She was annoyed and upset enough that she forgot to walk wide, along the wall, but cut straight across toward where Buffy was standing, watchful and still. Spike caught her elbow—just above the bandage. “You get out. Got no business here.”

As coldly, she told him, “I told Mary and Dora. They’ll be coming. In fact, they’re here,” she added, seeing five vamps saunter in and take stock of the unbalanced room. The two vamp women plus three male vamps, two with crossbows. All wore some combination of red and black—almost livery. Team colors, anyway. Gang colors. They certainly stood out. Not as much as Spike did, of course.

Spike said, “What happens here is nothing to the Slayer. Nor to you. Unless I get dusted, which I don’t intend to do. So tell the Slayer, she should get on. Go home. And take you with her.” He pushed her away, releasing her arm.

He was semi-drunk and being tiresome. It didn’t do to take any notice of him when he was either of those things.

Returning to Buffy, Dawn reported, “Spike wants us gone.”

Buffy was watching the five vamps, who were settling around the empty front left table. “Are they the ones you talked to?”

Dawn nodded, thinking it odd Buffy had to ask. Dawn added, “I don’t know the guys by name. The women are Isadora and—”

“I didn’t ask about their names,” Buffy cut in harshly. “Are they on Spike’s side?”

“Team Spike. Yup. And possibly Mike, back in the corner.”

“Oh. Right. I know you won’t like it, but I don’t want you seeing him anymore. It’s just not right. You have to realize—”

“Oh, that’s so terrible,” Dawn intoned. “I couldn’t possibly consider it unless my allowance was increased to twenty dollars a week. I’m almost seventeen, after all.”

They traded almost identical impassive stares.

Buffy deduced, “You’ve already broken up with him.”

“Oh, how could you possibly think such a thing? Eighteen.”

“Fifteen, and that’s my final offer.”

“Seventeen.”
Turning toward the door, Buffy countered, “Twelve, and ask Spike to give you an allowance. He’s the one with the money around here.”

“You’re getting half, and he has staff to support. Sixteen.”

“Done,” said Buffy.

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Spike could still feel the deathwish leaning and bumping at the edges of things. Trying to get in, get at him again. He was so thoroughly sick of himself, he was almost inclined to let it. But not yet. Not until he had things sorted.

Almost all the districts had checked in. Only two remained contested, without a clear leader emerging. And maybe those two would be set by morning. Then things could proceed, past the Saturday night/Sunday morning deadline. Then his crew, in their distinctive kit, could start sweeping downtown and the mall area and take out any rebellious, unwary, or simply stupid survivors of the present culling. Start mass distribution the stink vamps would learn to leave alone or else get dusted. Get on with it.

A bit like a human election, he thought. Except he’d appointed himself dictator, and districts slaughtered the internal opposition instead of trying to buy their votes.

Get that in place. Then he could back off a bit himself. Tend to the translations and getting Casa Summers fixed up better than new instead of having to deal with tries at assassination a dozen times of an evening.

At least that was what he'd thought. Until he'd fucked it all up by marking Dawn.

Sitting isolated and paralytically drunk at the table at Willy’s, Spike hadn’t yet been able to shut his mind down. It all went around and around.

He was so sad about Bit, what he’d done to her. Maybe even with her, since she’d been far from objecting or shrinking away. But she didn’t know, didn’t appreciate the emotional significance to a vamp of setting a mark on a person. Hadn’t with Michael, either. To her, it was just a scar, tidy and inconspicuous. To a vamp it was ownership, identification, protectiveness…and sex. Feeding rights, of course, were at the bottom of it. But all the feelings were tied together, keyed into the awareness of that proprietary mark.

Could mark a dozen people, own them all, no problem. Had marked Buffy, and that connection was a joy to him. But he’d kept Bit apart from that. Tolerated Mike’s mark on her because it was a fact, even though she didn’t take seriously enough how that set Mike into orbit around her, spiraling smaller and smaller circles till he’d either take her or they’d come to some stable arrangement, like Spike had with Buffy. Or used to have.

Because he’d told her about the soul. Not having it. Setting it aside. She hadn’t taken much notice yet. But alerted, puzzled, she would. She’d notice the things he did that a soul would have barred him from, or at least made horribly difficult. Notice the things he didn’t do or overlooked, missed entirely, that the soul would have made plain and obliged him to do. Then she’d know.

He didn’t think he’d have fed off Dawn if the soul had been in place. Didn’t know what he would
have done instead, but something else.

The only way he’d been able to maintain his connections to Buffy and Dawn was by keeping them absolutely separate. It was OK to turn loose with Buffy--pound her black and blue, or fuck her up against a wall and howl with his release. She could take it. Could take him, if so inclined of an evening, exactly the same way. He could feed from her, within limits and with care, and know it as profound communion between them, not merely food. Because she was the Slayer.

Dawn was not.

She’d break. What Bit was so blithe to give, he’d take. He’d take it all. The mark gave his demon leave to come out and play with her as it chose. Any way it chose. Fucking and feeding inseparably interconnected. Humans could not finally endure vampire play.

Which was why Buffy wanted vamps dead. In her heart, there were no exceptions. She wanted all of them gone. Zero count. Yet she’d set him apart, exempted him from the mandate of extermination that was the Slayer’s mission--largely on account of the soul. If he broke Dawn, if the Slayer saw and felt he was no different from the rest, just another evil soulless thing, that exemption would be gone. She’d come after him. And he’d let her. Just stand there and accept the stake--as he’d tried to tonight. And that would be an end.

Besides, only a fledge would think he could fuck and feed from a pair of sisters--rank stupidity not to know it would all go smash. Vamps were indiscriminate about such things; humans were not. The balance he’d kept and held between them, the distinction he’d maintained in his feelings toward each of them, had been lost. For a sup of blood he’d been unable to refuse. The price of that was not being able to see her, smell her, be aware of her close presence without imagining her naked and getting hard. Wanting to sheathe himself in her. All of that in the taste of her blood. All implicit in the mark.

No. Didn't want to feel that, be that to her. Wanted it to be how it'd been, the egg unbroken.

Even without the curse getting at him, Spike seriously wished he was dead. Not facing impossible choices and the death of love. Its murder, even.

But against the Powers, against the Slayer, he’d set himself to this: establishing vamps in Sunnydale not as a plague but as a valid constituency. A part of the whole with a right to be there. Demons had owned the world before humans ever were. From the first, Sunnydale had been established to be their feeding ground. They had a right to exist here regardless of the Slayer’s views. Without the Hellmouth fueling the craziness and flooding the place with transients answerable to no one, it should work.

Limit vamp numbers, then let ‘em cull out the stupid, the incompetent, and the spectacularly unlucky among the human population: as the Slayer did with vamps. An even and stable balance, neither overtaxing the other, predators and prey. If a vamp ate some frat boy too dumb to take warning or notice that people with the right smell, easily available, didn’t disappear with the same frequency as those without, by Buffy it was murder. By Spike, it was getting the bloody idiot out of the gene pool and good riddance. At least as food, the git would serve some useful purpose. A thing on which he knew he and the Slayer would never agree.

But what wasn’t shoved in her face, she was real good at ignoring. As long as she had sufficient fledges to dust on patrol, alternate nights, she was content she was doing her duty, performing her goddam sacred mission from the Powers. There was an achievable balance, Spike had hoped and believed.
And still hoped, still believed. Except he wouldn’t be part of it very much longer. She’d come after him. Because of Dawn. Because of the soul. And Dawn's existence tied to his own. So even surrendering to his own death had unacceptable consequences. He couldn't resolve it, get his mind around it. Could come to no acceptable resolution that would put things right.

And no way was Michael ready to receive it all from his hands, hold it in shape and together.

Fuck. The bottle was empty.
Challenge and Reply

The watch said 3:37 a.m. Late or early, the way people counted the time. Past midnight, supposed to let them be: in the dark time, when they were all busy sleeping like they did. Hell with it. Spike hit the speed dial anyway.

Made it to four rings. Then Bit’s voice saying angrily, “Whoever this is, it better be--!”

“Bit.”

“Yeah, Spike. What’s wrong? Or are you just drunk?”

“Bit, you got to get yourself a different anchor some way. Not be tied to me. That won’t do.”

“But I don’t want a different anchor,” she said, all calm and gentle, like she could be sometimes when you got past all that other, that she defended herself with and hid behind. When it was just true talking between them, as if soul to soul. “It’s what I’m for. Why I came back.”

“No. Won’t do. ‘Cause I’m not gonna last here, Bit. An’ I can’t…. I dunno how to do, if that takes you with me.”

“Then you have to last.”

“Can’t promise that, Bit. It’s all gonna go smash, and if that’s just me, that’s one thing. Just as well, maybe. But you got to get yourself tied to something else, instead of me.”

“Spike, that’s just the curse affecting you, and tomorrow, Willow will get--”

“Tisn’t just the curse, Bit. It's me. I’m wrong. You shouldn’t be tied to such a thing as me. Always wanted you to be your own. And that can’t be now, with what’s happened. Now I’ve set a mark on you.”

“Oh.” Long silence.

“Didn’t mean for that to happen. Didn’t want that.”

“But it was my fault! It was me--!”

“Doesn’t change it, Bit. I’m as sorry as can be.”

Dawn asked in her very smallest voice, “Have I spoiled it all, then?”

“Not your fault. You don’t know how these things are. Tried to tell you, about Michael, what it meant, but…”

“I wouldn’t take it seriously. Yeah. Spike…come home. We’ll talk this out when we’re both thinking a little clearer, and--”

“Can’t do that, Bit. Can never come back. Can’t talk to you except like this. Wouldn’t be the same, if I was there. Bet you never thought you’d hear me say nothing good about the cell phone.”
“Spike—”

“Hush, now I’ve upset you, an’ I didn’t mean to do that. Didn’t mean none of this. Love you, sweetheart, but can’t be safe for you no more. On account of the mark. So like I said, you got to find some way to be your own an’ not tied to me no more. You ask the witch, ask Willow. Maybe she can think up some way. Will you do that, love?”

“You come home, Spike,” Dawn insisted. “I promise I won’t bother you. You won’t even see me. But you need them. Need us. You do. You get all crazy on your own, you know you do. You freak, and then do something uber-dumb…. You’re freaking now: I can tell. Come home. You have to get the curse lifted, for one thing. You have to come back for the you-know-what, that I hid for you.”

“Not gonna do that, Bit. Best it stays wherever it is. With what’s happened, it would never give me no peace. Worse than before. Can’t do that again. Even without it, I-- You just think on what I said. About getting yourself free of me. You ask the witch: maybe she’ll know. Even ask Lady Gates, instead of that other--to get you something stronger to fix yourself to.”

“Spike, you knew it might happen. You warned me. You said you’d go ahead anyway.”

“Feel different about it now. Didn’t realize what a total waste of the space I was then. You do like I say.”

On her voice again desperately calling his name, he pushed the button to close the connection. When it buzzed, the next second, he turned it off.

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At 3:58 a.m. by Spike’s watch, Huey came from behind the bar to shut off the jukebox, then undertook the delicate job of getting Spike to leave, even though the bar didn’t close until 4:30. Spike could tell Huey intended to be persistent, if he planned to spend a whole half hour on that job if he had to.

Spike was about the only patron left. As the bar had emptied, Spike had sent his crew of bodyguards off to take care of their nighttime business. Nothing left to stay for. Since Huey had tactfully not brought up the cost of the breakage, Spike didn’t give him much of a hard time about chucking him out. Got himself upright, resumed the duster, and paused only to light a smoke on the way out.

Problem was, there was noplace Spike wanted to be.

Plenty of time, though, before first light to decide where to lair up. If nothing else appealed, he could open the nearest sewer cover and tuck up in some alcove until he’d slept himself sober and as ready as he was apt to get to face the new day.

He turned left and started walking slowly in the direction of the school. As good a way as any.

He’d gotten as far as the dock area of Willy’s when Mike complained from behind him, “I don’t understand.”

Spike stopped and carefully wheeled around.

Arms folded, the neck of a bottle in one fist, hair flopped over his forehead in an untidy dark wing,
Mike was scowling at the ground. “I mean, you none of you make sense. I take a few piddley potshots at you, and you ain’t mad at me but Dawn is, that I never done nothing to except what she wanted. Where’s the sense in that? You set your mark on the girl, over mine, then tell her you ain’t coming near her again. Why’d you do such a thing if you don’t want her? Why not leave her to me, that did? You blow hot and cold, approve me one minute, hammer me into the ground the next. Half the time, for the same damn thing! You tell me not to see her, and give as a reason she’s some Power and older than electricity, that’s such foolishness nobody would believe. And then she tells me it’s so, and a big secret. Says she’s not talking to me. While she’s talking to me! Can’t make it out. Doesn’t make no sense whatever.”

“Never will, neither.” Because it was easier, Spike dropped down to sitting, the duster puddled into folds roundabout. “On account of they think different. Hit A and it’s B that yells ouch. Got connections and disconnections all mixed up--can’t even guess at ‘em. It all blends, blurs. Never anything simple. Can’t help but hurt ‘em. Try an’ wait and listen, hold off, wait for a sign, and it’s still like a rock trying to cozy up to an egg. T’isn’t the rock that’s gonna break.” He whacked himself in the chest: where the healed hole was, that hurt so bad, all twisted up and aching. “They’re so damn. Fucking. Fragile. An’ still they wear you down to nothing. Between ‘em, grind you right down to powder.”

Mike came a couple of steps forward and sank to one knee. “Then why bother about them? Already got all we need. Can’t never be like them, that’s gone. Why even try? This is better. Complete. Fuck ‘em all.”

“’S’not like I didn’t try. Never get it right or how they want. Never figure out how to do ‘cause what they want the one day, that’s wrong the next. What one likes, other won’t have at any price. No two the same. All different. Can’t suss it out. Have to bloody know. And I don’t. Never will. Soul or not, no difference--wrong regardless.”

“Ain’t worth it, trying to be friends with the food. Want everything, don’t give nothing back but grudged little sips. Fuck ‘em all.”

Mike offered the bottle and it seemed like a good idea. Spike took it and put some down. Wishing for some other place to be, no matter, so long as it wasn’t here and was empty for miles and miles around. Nothing to touch or to touch him. All dark, all quiet, no wind stirring. Night unchanging.

He vaguely noticed something coming in from behind. Vamp, or a couple. Both hands conveniently free, Mike picked the attacker out of the air, flung him down, stomped him. Attended to the other, acquiring in the process a baseball bat that came in handy for dusting the first one. Spike didn’t take much notice. Nothing to do with him, and the boy seemed to be managing all right. Used to get off on that too: getting angry, busting things up. Didn’t care enough to bother anymore. Let the lad enjoy himself.

The interruption dealt with, Mike held out a hand. Spike absently passed the bottle back.

“Light’s coming,” Mike said after awhile. “Best get in.”

“Yeah.”

“You picked someplace?”

That was the boy’s good manners again: you never asked another vamp where he laired up. Unless he volunteered that information.
“Could break into Willy’s, use the cool locker,” Spike responded eventually. Subject didn’t interest him. “Might do that.”

“Could come back with me. There’s space enough.”

“Feel like being on my own. Another time, maybe.”

“All right. See you tonight, then.” Mike dropped the bat, carefully placed the bottle on the ground, and went off.

Birds waking roundabout, starting their noise. Nothing to do with him, birds. He collected the bottle and there was still some left. Likely enough to last. He was in no hurry and didn’t feel like moving.

Noise of wheels, an engine. Then quiet again. Except for footsteps crunching on gravel. Wandering about, then quieter on dirt, weeds.

Spike didn’t bother looking up. No need: he could smell her plain enough. Only the Slayer, and he didn’t want to know more about that.

“You turned your phone off,” she accused.

It was always something.

She said, “Dawn says you freaked. About feeding from her. She says it’s something bad.”

“No matter. Done is done.”

“How are we supposed to know these things if you never tell us?”

Spike shook his head. No point trying to explain because that was the point. No way to convey the differences because it was all difference. No way to translate. No way to understand or be understood. He got that now.

He finished the bottle and pitched it away.

She came and knelt down by him. Reached out and touched his arm. Duster was protection: he didn’t have to feel the touch. All the same, he pulled the arm away. Wrapped both arms tight around himself to hold everything back, hold it in.


“No.”

“No.” Finally he lifted his head, looked at her. She had colors, and that offended him. Wasn’t of the dark, had never been of the dark, didn’t belong anywhere he was, where it was monochrome and still, unchanging. Always simple and what it was. “’M not some damn dog you’re trying to coax inside. Let be.”
“No, you’re an insane drunk vampire without the goddam sense to get out of the daylight and I’m not gonna let that happen! Get in the van. We’re going home.”

She was angry at him. Normal. He knew how to do that. He unwound and slugged her. She went away. Wasn’t good, but better. Didn’t like her colors. Didn’t like her eyes, that wanted something from him and saw deep and didn’t see at all. Better dark. He shut his eyes to make it all go away. Couldn’t do nothing about the birds, though.

“You still have the locket,” her voice said from a little way off. “I can see it. So this isn’t the curse: this is you.”

He pulled his knees up and bent his head onto them, arms wrapped around to shut her words out. If he listened, if he heard, it would all start again: wanting things. No use to that.

Closer, her voice said, “I took Dawn to Janice’s. She’ll stay there today until we get this figured out. Anya’s opened the Magic Box early so Willow can get what she needs for the counterspell. There’s nobody there, Spike. Just us. It’s all protected. All safe.”

He held onto himself harder but couldn’t keep her voice out. Never had been able to do that. And she smelled just like herself, as she always had. Didn’t want to want her even though that was allowed. Not like Bit. It was all one and he didn’t belong to it. Was something else. Always had been, always would be. “Don’t have the soul,” he threw at her, because that was what would do it. It was easier the second time.

“I know. You said that. But that won’t do it, Spike. I love you back before that.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes I do. I love you back before Harmony and back before Drusilla. All the way back. All the times you couldn’t see any way ahead, and went ahead anyway, that was me, loving you.”

“No.” He shook his head. That was impossible. Made no sense whatever.

“All right, I wasn’t very good at it, at first. Had to practice. But once you start, it goes all the way back. I love all the you there is. From now, backward. From now, forward. Never a you without me loving you.”

He shook his head again. “Don’t understand.”

“Can’t understand. Just how it is. Don’t have to understand it. Only believe it. Three impossible things before breakfast, right? And what’s more impossible than us?” She waited but it was too hard to think of answers, arguments. “Spike, your hands are smoking. We have to go. Now.”

Couldn’t take it in. Couldn’t open up to it or allow it to get through or everything would shake to pieces, burst apart.

For a moment, she hugged him tight and said in his ear, “If you go, Dawn goes. She told me. You’re not just you. You’re us. Now deal.”

Then she flung him into the shadow of the building and stomped off to bring up the SUV.

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Leaning in Willow’s doorway, Buffy remarked, “If somebody told me a year ago that I’d be frustrated because a vamp wouldn’t bite me, I would have known they shopped at Walgreen’s for the bargains.”

Willow glanced up from drawing a design on the floor of her room in different colored chalks, checking it about every two seconds against a picture in a large book open on the floor. “It really doesn’t hurt?”

Buffy scuffed one foot back and forth on the pulled-aside throw rug. “Not enough to…make me give it a pass.”

“Really sexy?”

“Are you channeling Vamp Willow?”

“No, because then I’d know, wouldn’t I?” Willow countered, checking the book again, then changed chalks to fill in the present section with rounded green symbols. Everything curved and connected. “There,” said Willow, sitting back.

“Should I…?” Buffy asked, leaning farther toward the hall side and looking toward the shut door of her own room.

Willow shook her head briskly enough to make her auburn hair fly. “I have the outer ring yet to go, and the candles to place…. Another half hour or so. Time enough to order lattes,” she hinted. “Order out, like the big people do. Only we are the big people now, aren’t we? That’s scary….”

“Yeah. He’s gonna need coffee. *Lots* of coffee.”

Inscribing runes with yellow chalk, Willow said, “Double espresso, extra sugar. At least two.”

“Since when do you like espresso?”

“Not for me: for him!”

Buffy looked at her. “How come you know that and I don’t?”

“Well, you haven’t had the tour of the new and improved factory, have you? Where he orders out for certain favored guests. The barracks, as I now think of it. Xander’s holding out for the Fortress of Solitude. But I prefer barracks. Because there’s a whole lot going on up there other than solitude, if you see what I mean.”

“With Spike?”

“Well, no-- At least not from what Ken said. For one thing, he’s the boss. For another, he’s been run off his feet pretty much since we got back from Oregon. No time for hankying or pankying, even if he were so inclined. And I have Spike pegged as preferring quality over quantity. And if we’re gonna get that espresso…..”

“Right you are. I’m on it.”

Buffy opened her bedroom door very cautiously and quietly. Though it was past noon, drawn
curtains and towels hung from the rods preserved an early morning dimness. Spike was still asleep and had barely moved: hadn’t thrown the covers off yet. On his back, your basic Crusader on a tomb position rather than his usual facedown starfish sprawl. Arms still wrapped around himself although the wounds were all sealed--on the surface, anyway. Still hurt, though, she thought.

She should send out for extra blood, too. He’d had only the ordinary evening tribute ration yesterday, and even that was an assumption. He’d lost so much. The maybe two minutes he’d fed from Dawn before yanking himself away wouldn’t have been anything like enough to replace it, to say nothing of the healing. And it was a mystery known only to Rona where today’s morning ration had gone…. When Buffy had pulled into Casa Summers’ graveled parking area, he’d been passed out under the Official Designated Tatty Emergency Blanket. Only nominally awake, he hadn’t even tried to get anything started with her in the shower: kept drifting off, sagging against the tiles. She’d had to shake him to keep him upright long enough to sluice off the worst of the streaked, dried bloody mess. He probably would have curled up and slept in the shower, if she’d let him. Definitely not running at anything like full capacity.

He’d been asleep about seven hours. Five was generally enough. After that, he got antsy, wanted to play or at least be up and doing. Not now, though. Just unmoving Crusader imitations.

She regarded Spike fondly but also thoughtfully. No soul there. She’d have to think about that. Think it through.

She tiptoed to the dressing table, collected her cell from its charger stand, and backed out again, pulling slowly on the door until the latch caught.

The Espresso Pump was one of her speed dials. Strolling back down the hall, she placed the order, knowing what Willow liked. Also two double espressos with triple sugar. So who knew? Then she hit another speed dial and left voicemail on the lab machine about the extra blood. She specified ASAP, but since she didn’t know how often Rona checked the messages, that could be anytime up to sundown….

She returned to watching Willow, who was now working on the outer ring. The symbols there were in white chalk and forked outward. What looked like pointy V’s and W’s, all attached. The outer ring didn’t look friendly.

“So how’s Kennedy these days?” Buffy asked presently, continuing the previous conversation.

Willow flashed up a quick, rather wry glance before comparing her design to the book again. “All right, I guess. She has a new interest in life: Spike’s made her his bookkeeper.”

“His what?”

“Shhhh. Bookkeeper. Clerk. Something like that. Power!” Willow flexed biceps over her head. “You remember Giles used to say vamps were a whole big sucking thing?”

“Wasn’t Giles, it was me, but yeah.”

“Well, apparently that’s not the half of it. Shall I go on?”

“Do I want to hear this?”

“Part of a well-rounded education. So, yeah. You do. It seems Ken has found there’s life beyond
tongue-studs. Shall I go on?"

“What’s her name?”

“Isadora, and she’s about a million years old, bangs, brunette, maybe ninety pounds soaking wet, like an evil Barbie with these enormous dark eyes.” Willow made an eyeglass circle with thumb and finger, showing how large. “So ultra-vamp, it’s camp. Camp vamp. And she has (and I quote) ‘A tongue like flame’ (unquote).”

“Ick does not begin-- Aren’t you worried? For her, I mean?”

Willow glanced up again. “After Kim? She couldn’t be safer at Nieman-Marcus in the maternity aisle. ‘No turning without authorization.’ Also quoting. No vamp under a reasonably credible hundred is allowed. Identified violators of same to be reserved for the legitimate fledges’ torture practice. Which sounds real shiver-inducing to me. So I don’t think Ken is in any danger whatsoever of getting fangy anytime soon, no.”

“But if Isadora is like, a million, that’s more than a hundred, right?”

Willow quirked a smile. “Well, I exaggerated a little. Maybe closer to eighty-something. And Spike’s assured me Dora will not be authorized. As long as Ken’s there, anyway. Sets a bad precedent for the SITs, don’t’cha know. It would freak Amanda out of her sweet little mediocrity-loving mind, for one. So we do not turn the SITs, that’s a major no-no. All serene and copasetic in that department.”

“Again, how come you know this and I don’t?”

“Buffy, really. Have you asked? Have you watched Spike trying to think out the districts, how many vamps each can reasonably support? That’s the red notebook. Have you watched him surf for sources of fresh whole blood, like the tribute blood, trying to compare prices, volume discounts, and what would be lost in spoilage during transport? He wants to have his whole crew, as he calls them, independent in under a month. They’ll get enough fighting to keep ’em happy enforcing the new rules. Won’t have much time for hunting anyway. So their rations will be provided. Courtesy of the Council, though the Council won’t know that. Out of Spike’s pay. Won’t be 100% hunt-free. But a fraction of what it is now. Take a lot of the pressure off. ‘Cause, after all, vamps like to hunt. And they’ll only switch to pigs’ blood and such if you shut ’em in cages. Or the equivalent. That’s the green notebook and a couple of computer files. He still prefers writing by hand. He’ll get over it.”

“Will.”

“Yeah?”

“How come you know this stuff and I don’t?”

“Because you’re the Slayer, I guess. Not his de facto partner in Spells & Smells.”

“Spells-- You’re kidding!”

“Nope. Name’s mine, but the operation is real. I’ll have production set up in maybe another week. Vamp repellent. By fiat, not fact. But it should work.”

“The little sample bottles. Lily-of-the-valley.”
“The very same. Or not the very same: I’ve come up with a different formula. A lot less lily, a lot more valley, so to speak. Never had any idea before how hard it is to come up with civet, this time of year.”

Buffy wrinkled her nose. “Civet: isn’t that like skunk?”

“Sort of, for strength. But when you add it to other things, it’s sort of like the bass line, in music. The steady bottom notes that carry the rest along. What Oz, wearing his RenFaire hat, would call a ‘ground.’” She paused a moment with a private, wistful smile. "Hence, valley. And there are things I can do to it to make it pretty darn hot, if you know what I mean.” She waggled her non-chalk-holding hand, hanging from her wrist, expressively. “Might have to support the unplanned pregnancy clinic instead of the Y, but it’s an acceptable tradeoff. More life, not less. It’s always something.” Again, she sat back, surveying her handiwork. She leaned and smudged one line, then thickened another. Unfolding herself, she walked all the way around the circle, inspecting it intently.

“Good?” Buffy inquired.

“Good. I think. I had to adapt it because it’s basically for repelling demons. Not for repelling spellcasting from a demon. And done by a demon. Amazing that deathwish worked at all,” Willow remarked meditatively. “Must have had to chant a whole day and a night before letting it loose. And probably kick in a blood sacrifice to power it. Vamps and magic, pretty non-mixy. No natural aptitude, but no natural susceptibility, either.” She skidded one hand against the other. “Mostly slide right off.”

“You know who did it?”

Her face pursed and judicious, Willow shrugged. “I know who bought the ingredients. Not a big demand in Sunnydale for malintente blossoms. Anya keeps a log of the more…outré purchases. Of course she wouldn’t show it to me. But something was making a racket out in the back alley, and it conveniently took her quite a long time to investigate it.” She bent to thicken a blue dot with precise strokes. “The curse had to be custom, to be cast against a vamp. Off the shelf would be no good. My guess is Amy. She does that kind of thing now…. But she didn’t cast it. A vamp did. At least one human involved. Bought the ingredients from a list, didn’t know how to pronounce half of ‘em. No mage there.” She tweaked another curlicue. “Give me another day, I’ll have a name, a description, or an image. But first things first here.”

The doorbell rang, and Buffy dashed downstairs to take care of the delivery. Yay, plastic. In the kitchen, she set the tall styrofoam cups on a tray for stability, then carried them back upstairs.

Willow accepted hers, still studying her design. “Wicked thing,” she remarked absently, “that deathwish. Lucky Spike’s paranoid. Or I wouldn’t have had a disc on me.”

“The locket,” Buffy deduced, uncapping her cup because she liked hers all mixed together, not layered. “That was Spike’s idea?”

Willow nodded. “To avoid having little tête à têtes with the Powers every time he took a nap. Kind of an all-purpose influence repellent. Can’t really block a full-blown spell, but it at least gave us some breathing space to get something more heavy-duty industrial strength ready.”

“But he didn’t have the locket—you did.”

Willow removed the straw from her pucker long enough to say neutrally, “It seemed prudent.”
“Who else has lockets?” Buffy’s tone made plain it was not a casual question.

“Well, it’s not the locket--it’s the contents.”

Buffy knew she was being finessed, which meant she had to know. She demanded, “Who, Will?” with Slayer severity.

“Well, I have one. Probably I’ll add it to my medicine bag, just on general principles.”

“And who else?”

“Well, Dawn of course. The poor girl deserves some privacy, after all.”

Buffy noted that for later pursuit. “And who else?”

“Well, Spike wanted Mike to have one.”

“In a locket?”

“In a watch. Pocket watch, to be precise. Spike contributed it.” Willow was watching her over the top rim of her cup.

And Buffy knew why. She’d seen that watch. In Spike’s treasure box. She’d even read the inscription. And he’d given it to Mike. She had an oooh moment that Willow had plainly been watching for--to see if any penny dropped, and if it made a significant noise when it did.

“I understand things,” Buffy declared belligerently. “I can understand things! When anybody bothers to tell me, that is!”

“I just work here,” said Willow. “Not my fault if certain people have communication issues.”

“Any more?”

“No, that’s about it.”

“You mean Xander didn’t get one?” Buffy asked, mock incredulous.

“Well, wait, yes he did. But that was later. After he did the equivalent of dumping the lead Shark in the middle of Jets territory. I realized he needed a little buffering after that.”

“Everybody but me, in other words.”

“Yes, Buffy. Everybody but you. Correction: not Oz. Oz...was only visiting.”

Buffy pouted. “Why didn’t I get one? How come I got left out? Don’t I need buffering?”

“Because Spike forbade it, that’s why.”

“Forbade’: that’s strong.”

“Yeah, pretty strong, I’d say: I could hear the fangs over the phone line. On the grounds that you
have your own arrangement with the Powers and this was not to be interfered with. He reminded me, rather sternly too, I might add, that your limits were to be respected.”

“I have limits?”

“Only in the best sense. Like personal space.”

“Huh. And this was Spike.”

“Or the best impersonation I’ve ever heard. The espressos are getting cold,” Willow mentioned.

Before going to wake Spike, Buffy had one last question: “What’s a Power?”

*********

Where your Slayer dreams come from. Huh.

Buffy had never thought dreams “came” from anyplace. They just were. But apparently not. They came, were sent, by these Power thingamajobbies. She was in communication with Powers…that wanted Sunnydale 100% vamp free. They’d been cool with the disruption Spike had set going by claiming the mantle of being the Master’s successor; but they were trying to block what Spike was doing now to settle things down again.

And Dawn was a part of them and also the possessor of a piece of Spike’s set-aside soul. So their unlives/lives were locked together—hers dependent on his. Buffy had known they were close, but not that close.

Very strange. Powers.

She pushed at Spike’s shoulders. “It’s time. Wakey wakey.”

His eyes blinked open. Blank. Orientation phase: figuring out where he was and why. That normally didn’t take long because their bed, their room, was the norm. Today, it took longer. Then everything just sagged. He showed no reaction to her being stripped from the waist up or to her neck decoratively bleeding. Nothing gross, just a little cut at the mark by way of encouragement.

Buffy ruffled his hair, which almost always made him scowl and flatten it down again. No reaction to that either. “You remember this morning?”

Slow thinking. “Yeah.”

“The curse is still getting at you,” Buffy told him. “The locket isn’t enough to deflect all of it. That’s why it feels like this. If I’d known that, I would never have let you go off by yourself last night. So it’s not you, Spike. It was the spell that had you sitting there, waiting for the sunrise.”

“Oh.” Finally, a little more animation: rubbing both palms down his face. And then jerk and still, yellow-eyed, as a very hungry vampire noticed the blood. He rolled onto his side, turning his face away into the pillow—likely wanting to conceal the full change.

From Buffy’s perspective, he’d presented his back to be rubbed. So cool and smooth, and the strong muscles under the skin. “This isn’t about souls,” she said. “This is about hurt, and healing, and us. About bodies, not souls. I know, no soul at the moment. It’s still OK.”
He muttered something into the pillow. Buffy thought it was, “Don’t want it to be about bodies.”

“But it is. That’s part of it. Sort of like sex. It’s what we make it. Each time. Love, or a roundhouse free-for-all. Or anything in between. It’s what we live on, what keeps us going. Keeps us together. It’s only life, Spike. And you’re letting it go to waste here.”

He rolled fast the other way. Face pressed against her belly, arms tight around the small of her back. Still hiding what he felt she couldn’t accept. She stroked fingers through his hair--crisp and freshly cut, although still two-toned.

“Want to see your demon.” Buffy let her weight descend, gradually dropping onto her knees at the side of the bed. His altered face slid up against her until it was pressed into the hollow between her breasts. “It’s OK: we have an ‘arrangement.’ Which sounds sooo dirty! Let it out. Let it come. I--”

In a flash he was higher, at her neck, biting down. Words, or the impulse to say them, went away. It felt so great, his feeding from her. Strongly pulling from her what he needed, what she had in endless abundance. The near-desperate hunger in how he held her in position, thumbs pressed hard into her upper arms. Not letting her move or pull away until he was done--like the penultimate stage of sex, when you were on the edge and absolutely positively had to finish now. And he was aroused, they both were. Panting between gulps, not letting go but having to breathe, interrupting the rhythmic suction. The urges becoming confused, the rhythm changing. Then he jerked his head away and down as suddenly as he’d claimed her: again butting at her chest, holding himself there, breathing hard.

She didn’t argue, just kept steadily petting the back of his neck and stroking down his spine as far as she could reach. He needed more, but that was all he was gonna allow himself to take. He knew where his limits were and Buffy accepted that. She could give herself up to it utterly because she trusted him to know. And he did: even without the soul.

“It’s freefall,” Buffy told him softly. “Like I could jump off anything, the highest tree, off a mountain, fly and float, and it’s never falling because you’ll always catch me. You let me fly with it. That’s so good. Out of the sky, even.”

He hadn’t come back to words yet. Sometimes it took him the longest time to settle. She’d tried to imagine what it was like, feeling what to you was the hot essence and perfection of life working in you everywhere. Maybe like being born. But she didn’t know. He wouldn’t even try to put it into words for her.

“Willow’s ready,” she said after awhile, after she’d felt some of his locked tension ease. “There’s coffee.” She patted his back twice, briskly. "Get some pants on.”

“Yeah.” He released her and swung his legs around, sitting on the edge of the bed. Still slumped, head bent. Still muzzy and slow and probably still depressed as hell underneath it all. But one of the perks of being a vamp was being able to put down an amazing amount of alcohol and never be hung over afterward. Burned it all off or something. “Damn. Didn’t last even a day.”

He was thinking of the black leather strutting pants. Hooking her bra, Buffy reached for her top. “Looked absolutely fantabulous while they lasted, though. Maybe Will can do something. She may not like being the laundry fallback, but hey, when you have a resident witch, it’s all of the good.”

“Good. Yeah.”
Since he still wasn’t moving, Buffy went to the dresser, pulled out a pair of jeans, and tossed them onto the middle of the bed. Slowly he drew them in, got them on, and stood to fasten the necessary. Then they went down the hall to Willow’s room.

Collecting and presenting one of the espressos, that he immediately lifted and started chugging, Buffy told him, “I left word for Rona to bring all the tribute blood here ASAP. With some extra. Because, healing. I don’t know when she’ll get the message, though.”

Spike nodded, having finished the whole cup in one uninterrupted pour. “I’ll do for now,” he said, with a sly sidewise glance.

When he crossed the room, carefully keeping wide of Willow’s design, Buffy assumed he was headed for the roll-top desk, where the tray was. Instead, he went directly to Willow, who was studying the book, now laid on her bed. He set his hands at her waist and lifted her arm’s reach high while she eeked in surprise and batted him about the head and shoulders with soft, ineffectual hands. Setting her lightly down, he kissed her, and not on the forehead either. A full-contact, head crooked, holding on hard, mouth kiss, possibly even with tongue. Buffy looked on benevolently as he let Willow go and stood back while Willow made faces and noises and wiped the back of a hand across her mouth.

“I know,” he said, “guy germs. But in a severely weakened condition here, Red–have to humor me.” Over his shoulder, as he went after more coffee, he continued, “That thing blindsided me completely. Took me right off my feet. Hadn’t the slightest, what’d hit me. Drowning, like.” He got the cap off the cup and drank about half of it, eyes shut in caffeine overload rapture. “Wasn’t for the friendly neighborhood witch that makes house calls, I’d have been gone, no question. Owe you a big one for that.”

Willow had finished wiping away the kiss and was ruefully smiling. “Hey, on retainer here, remember? No separate line item charges. And don’t forget, it’s the uber-suspicious vamp that’s the reason I’d spelled the wafers and had one handy in the first place. So, team effort here. Rah, team! Except, watch the promiscuous kissage, mister. Completely professional here. Consider yourself warned!”

“Oh, come on, you liked it, you know you did. You're gay, not dead. You just don’t want to get accustomed to it, that’s all. Change the parameters.”

“I like my parameters just fine the way they are, thanks! Did Buffy tell you, something like 20% of the spell is still getting through to you?”

“I told him,” Buffy protested. “Not the percentage, but--”

Finishing the second cup, Spike confirmed quietly, “Yeah, she told me. Hard to feel what’s me and what’s not.”

“More like impossible,” Willow replied. “It just takes over. That’s what makes it magic. And a really superior magic worker wouldn’t have let you run off, last night. I mean, with the black mojo still working on you. I was all spinning theories, spell components, what modifications would have to be made to hit a vamp like that,” (Willow flung hands around her head, illustrating the spinning.) “who could make them, and the fact is, I wasn’t thinking about you at all. Only tech stuff. Objective. And after we located you, Buffy was going, and I figured she’d tell you. Except…I hadn’t told her. So my bad. Sorry.”
Spike set the empty cup back on the tray. “’M still here. On account of…I have people that take good care of me. No complaints about the service from yours truly. Have to try harder, pissing you Scoobies off, seems like. Gone all soft on me. Even that Harris, Xander, giving me wrecked old telleys an’ Morris chairs. Not doin’ my proper job here.” He folded his arms. “Where d’you want me?”

Willow pointed. “In the middle. Don’t touch any of the lines. Sit.”

“Gonna take awhile?”

“Little while, yes. Why?”

“Had the coffee, very good. Had…other things. Also very good.” Again, a glance, only his eyes flicking momentarily aside. “Now I really really really want a fag. Do more for me than getting this crap out of my head. Got time for that? Please? Make a poor vamp happy?”

“Go ahead,” Willow decided abruptly, holding out a saucer. Instead, he sprinted into the hall to collect the necessary.

“Will!” Buffy protested.

“There’s gonna be incense. Smells. A little smoke, more or less, won’t make the least difference. For once, give the guy a break.”

“But…in the house!”

Willow showed her a stern *not budging* face and Buffy had to admit the earth would not be doomed by one indoors cigarette. She allowed the basement, after all, and it was the same air. But she had the unhappy feeling of letting her mother down.

Returning, just as though he’d read her mind, Spike said at once, “Joyce let me.”

“She never!” Buffy denied hotly.

“Certainly did. Knew a chap needed his little vices, keep things all even. Fine sensible lady, your Mum. Knew there were exceptions to everything. Something her daughter knows full well. ‘Bout souls an’ all….’ Cigarette in mouth, lighter poised but not yet lit, Spike gave her one final chance to forbid. Then he lit up and turned about a third of the cigarette into ash in one long draw. He reached and took the saucer Willow was still holding and neatly tapped off the ash. Still hadn’t exhaled. Apparently that was optional. Finally, a small and slightly smoky sigh of contentment. “All right then.” He stepped carefully over the design and sat crosslegged in the unmarked middle, saucer in his lap. “Do your worst, I’m ready.”

As Willow struck a kitchen match against its box and started lighting the pillar candles spaced around the circle, Buffy asked her, “Will it be a problem if there’s talking?”

“No if you keep it down. Once I get going, I’m in my own little world. Sometimes a problem, sometimes an advantage. A problem advantage. If I say Shhhh real loud, that will be a hint.”

Buffy sat down, likewise crosslegged, outside the circle, facing Spike. He lifted an eyebrow. Buffy folded her hands primly. “If we’re gonna be here for awhile, and if all the important cats have now
escaped their respective bags…. Tell me. Explain to me what you’re doing.”

“You sure you want to know, pet?” Spike responded quietly. “Because you might feel obliged to do something. Slayer and all. Could be awkward.”

“I’m sure. Explain it to me, and about the Powers. I want to understand.”

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Spike felt it stop. Couldn’t identify, separate its presence but certainly felt it go.

Had been trying to compensate, be all chirpy and brisk for the Slayer and the witch, not let on. But when the curse’s awful undertow faded, he broke off in the middle of what he’d been trying to tell the Slayer and sagged in a puddle, arms across his knees and head bent onto them, breathing. Not even relief, because all the reasons were still left. Still unsorted, unresolved. Some, like Bit, still acutely painful. But the certainty of failure, the helplessness, and the self-loathing no longer fed into them, bloating them to insurmountable proportions. They backed off a little, leaving him a place to be.

“Spike--?” Buffy asked anxiously.

Spike patted at the air meaning it was OK, just let it alone. After awhile he steadied down a little and could try to fake normality again.

“It should be better now,” said the witch inquiringly from behind him.

“Some better. Yeah,” Spike agreed mechanically.

“How do you feel?” Buffy asked, all concerned, checking first with Willow with a glance, then leaning to reach across the chalked symbols to set a hand on his knee.

The next second he was eight feet back, crouched on the bed, game-faced and like to shake himself apart with rage.

He started hurling things at them, taking no notice of what he grabbed and flung. Snarling, shouting, “Get out! Out of here!”

The witch was minded to stay, stop him, scowling and indignant. But when he put a fist into the wall and just kept hammering at it, beating the plaster back to the laths and then hauling at them too, long splinters driving deep into his hands and forearms, but not enough, not nearly enough, the Slayer backed off and took the witch with her. The two bints withdrew, well out of the way.

He proceeded to take the room apart. Hurling books through the windows so the light blazed in through the slumping curtains, went back and forth through the beams heedlessly and that pain was nearly enough. Snatched up the pillar candles and pitched them out the windows, too. Tore the closet door off its hinges, broke it to scrap, veered away sharply from all the Willow-smelling clothes hanging inside and yanked the bed apart instead. Then another pass through the shifting sunbeams, smoking, and yes, that was the ticket, take on the strip of wall between the windows, pound hell out of it. The floorboards were no good, couldn’t get a good grip on any of them, so he dumped the dresser drawers and broke their sides off, cracking the precise dovetailing because it was all trim and fitting and competent, like it made sense. Attacked the roll-top desk next, yanked it to bloody flinders, right. Chairs came apart easy.
When he could find nothing else to break, he whirled between the smashed windows, barefoot in the glass, in and out of the light and spinning too fast for any part of him to actually catch fire. That at last was enough. He flung himself down in the mound of crooked broken wood and blood-spattered fabric that had been the bed, closed in on himself, and began sobbing.

After awhile Buffy slid back in with a tray, blood bags stacked on it. Set it on a clear piece of floor, looked at him a minute, then eased out again.

At first he didn’t want it. Wanted to kill something for himself. Have the blood hot and seasoned with fear from the hunt and the acceptance that was the last of it as the struggling slowly let off and stopped. But this was how it was now. Had to surrender that pleasure for others that maybe weren’t a match but good enough in their own way.

He waited, attending to the sufficient hurt, until the impulse to bust open the bags and throw the contents against the walls faded of itself. Could do that but it wouldn’t really be any improvement. Still sobbing with the tight, hitching breaths that went with that, he finally crawled to the tray and opened a bag. Waited until his demon grudgingly wanted this tame blood, since that was all there was. Life within the limits. Then he ripped into one bag after another and gorged himself on it till it was gone.

The splinters wanted to come out, sliding upward on the blood as the healing ejected them. He picked at them. Buffy returned, looking around at the wreckage, then came and silently started helping him work loose and discard the larger impalements.

He found he was about done with the crying, and very tired. He let himself slump into Buffy’s care and protection, content to have her do anything with him that she pleased. He was done fighting now. Whatever came after would come.

Presently he said, “Joyce, it would have been OK with her. She knew.”

Before this room had been Willow’s, it had belonged to Buffy’s Mum. He could still smell the ghost of her presence. In a dim way, he felt Joyce’s room had given its consent to the destruction. Not approved, but allowed. He folded an arm across his eyes.

Buffy picked splinters. She commented quietly, “You would now take over the title of most totally whacko boyfriend except nobody died. You gonna tell me what this was about?”

“Needed to. Needed to a long while. Maybe always. Dunno.”

The witch stepped inside, wary and angry: he could smell it on her. Surveying the Great No he’d made of the place, she snapped, “Well, that was real mature!”

Buffy said, “He confined it to one room. Unlike you.”

“Oh.”

“Only things, Will. It’ll be fixed.”

“My things!” Willow protested.

“Your turn, this time,” Buffy responded calmly. “If it makes you feel any better, you can count it as
part of your penance.”

“Penance for what?” the witch demanded, angry again.

Buffy paused, biting her bottom lip against what she otherwise would have said. “I’m sure you’ll think of something. Or just figure it’s unintended consequences from lifting the deathwish. Collateral damage.” Buffy pulled a long splinter from his wrist. There was a little blood. Then the skin sealed behind it. “Demons break things up. It’s what they do. Their métier…. Sometimes, you can’t get at what you really want to hit. So whatever’s between takes the damage.”


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After the blowout, Spike slept the rest of the afternoon.

Because he still had the locket it couldn’t have been real, only a dream, but it felt real: walking up a long aisle with pillars ranked to either side and beyond the pillars, darkness. Herself, enthroned, all armed with breastplate, helmet, and spear, on a dais waiting for him at the end of it with blind white eyes like a statue’s eyes. But she saw him well enough. He was in no doubt of that.

He said, “Lady, all respect but you’re wrong. We also serve a purpose, even if it’s not yours. We have a right to be, and we are what we are. All your power won’t make it otherwise. You chose me for this, and this is what I do. Do what you must, or what suits you. Either way, I’m done being played.”

She replied, “You are not a Power. Yet we also are constrained to do what is in us to do. What we must and what we can. You have power only over yourself. We shall see if that is enough. You are still a pawn in play while the game lasts. It cannot be otherwise.”

Then he bowed in respect and walked away down the aisle into the dark and a different dream. But that was the one he remembered when he woke at sundown, and checked that the locket chain was still around his neck, and the locket still on it. So it couldn’t have been but a dream, and his purposes still kept within him and his own to know. And he was back in Buffy’s room, in her bed, confirming a vague memory.

Folded at the foot of the bed were the new pants, supple again and cleaned of all the blood. So he guessed the witch must be over her mad, or at least willing to set it aside.

He had a proper shower, as hot as it would go, washing the smaller splinters and the embedded glass shards down the drain, standing in the heat until the water ran clear. When he was dressed and set, he went downstairs.

Buffy and Willow were in the kitchen, just about to eat dinner. It bothered him that Dawn wasn’t there. He propped himself, stiff armed, at the middle counter as they slid onto tall chairs to either side.

Buffy asked him, “Well, what’s on the agenda for tonight?”

It was strange, realizing she didn’t know about the challenge fight. But things would converge again, after this. Some way. When he’d had time to think it out, not all stupefied by the curse.

“Got a fight to see to. Up to Willy’s. Then confirm the District Masters in the territories they’ve laid
claim to. After, I'll be back at the factory. Lost a whole day on the translation. Can’t get too far
behind—money’s already spoken for. You go fetch Bit home. She and Janice don’t actually get on
that well. Best get them shut of each other while they’re still friends.”

Poking a fork into her rice-and-peas, without looking up, Willow said, “A little later, I may know
who set that spell on you. I’m about halfway back along the chain of evidence.”

“Oh, don’t trouble about that. I know.”

“You know?” Willow repeated blankly, and did look at him then.

“Yeah. Vamp name of Digger. Had his territory from the Master. Been here quite some time.” Spike
scratched the scarred eyebrow meditatively. “When he saw me still standing—in a manner of
speaking, that is—at Willy’s last night, that was it: we both knew an’ he ducked out fast. He’d set
everything on the one toss, and lost. Had a really fine chance of catching me with that. Just his bad
luck he didn’t. Has half a brain, Digger…which is more than can be said for most.”

“Did he admit it?” Willow wanted to know.

“Like I said, he ducked out.”

“Then how can you know?” Willow challenged.

Witch seemed to expect proof, human rules of evidence. Reasonable doubt. Courts, lawyers and
suchlike. Didn’t work like that. Vamp societies were not democracies, not interested in protecting the
innocent. Subordinate vamps lived on the Master’s sufferance, had no rights at all except what he
granted them. Spike shook his head and tried to explain.

“Because it was magic. Too…abstract for most vamps. Indirect. Had to plan it out way in advance,
find somebody to adapt a spell so’s it would work on a vamp. All…stages; complications. Most
vamps wouldn’t think of it, much less do it.”

Buffy paused in sipping coffee to intone, “'Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition.'”

“Just so,” Spike agreed. “And wouldn’t nobody expect a vamp to have a witch handy, able to figure
it was a spell to begin with and then block and reverse it, fast enough to matter. Not hardly the usual
arrangement.” Then he added, giving Willow her due, “Except for you, he’d have done me, no
question. Should have worked. So it was just my good fortune, not bad planning. ‘F somebody’d
tried to drop a rock on me, I’d have lots of candidates. Not magic, though. That’s Digger.”

Buffy asked, “So it’s Digger you’re fighting tonight.”

“Well, no: Michael. Been set awhile, but I wasn’t free to see to it.”

Buffy nodded: not like she agreed, but like she was thinking. She set down her cup. “I’ll drive you.”

“No, love. You see to Bit. She’s the one needs rescue.”

“I will drive you,” Buffy insisted, looking him in the eyes.

“Now, I explained about--”
“Are the SITs gonna be there?”

“Yeah, but--”

“So it’s not just the bumpy forehead contingent.”

He’d explained to her why he’d insisted on some human presence, demonstrating that his dominion spanned both, wasn’t just the usual agreement of predators on how to divide the food. “’Tisn’t the same, love. You’re--”

“--the Slayer, yada yada, I know. I’ll wear pink. Grubbies. Ugly shoes. They’ll never know it’s me.”

“Know your smell, though,” Spike pointed out.

“That can be adjusted,” Willow mentioned, mild but steely. “Custom smells department, here. Oh, and I’m coming, too.”

“No, you’re not.”

“What if this Digger has a Plan B?” Willow argued. “In case Plan A went kaboom? I have a certain investment in you to protect now, Spike: replacement of a bed, two windows, a closet door--” She enumerated the damage off on her fingers.

Buffy observed, “You’re not winning here, Spike. Deal.”

They were ganging up on him. Not a whole lot he could do about that.

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They bypassed the line outside Willy’s, but Buffy and Willow were stopped just inside the door. A vaguely familiar vamp--one of the bartenders, Buffy thought--required ten dollars a head before he’d let them by.

Spike hadn’t been stopped, had kept going. Buffy grabbed his arm, asking indignantly, “They expect to be paid?”

“’Course, love. Space is limited. That makes it worth something. Now turn loose and cough up…and let me alone, since you’re trying to be inconspicuous an’ all.”

Buffy grumped, but she paid, while Willow gazed blithely into space, like it didn’t have anything to do with her. Buffy silently vowed to get it out of her later. Fortunately, they were equipped to take plastic. The bartender vamp stamped their hands to show they were legal, then let them pass.

As Spike had said, space was at a premium. Buffy spotted the SITs, in a tight little cluster with three vamps in Spike’s colors. Wanting to dissociate herself from them, Buffy put her head down, used her elbows, and pushed through the crowd to a place at the back between two shut doors--one, she knew, led to the back room where kitten poker was sometimes played; the other, at a right angle, led to the storage area. Always good to secure your exit, she thought.

She’d had the vague expectation she’d see fight fans departing her presence in all directions, holding their noses. What Willow chose as a camouflage scent, from one of her failed batches, left them both (to Buffy’s nose) smelling like very ancient fruitcakes that had died and had a funeral. With lots of
lilies. Not to mince words, they reeked. But nobody around seemed to take any notice. Buffy could at least be confident that whatever she smelled like, it was not the Slayer. In fact, if anybody had recognized her smelling like this, wearing the abominable lilac sweats she reserved for floor mopping, toilet cleaning and the like, she’d have been seriously perturbed.

Willow, who’d drifted serenely in Buffy’s sometimes troubled wake, continued to look around interestedly. “I’ve heard about these fights,” she remarked. “I’ve even sometimes seen the aftermath. But I’ve never actually seen one.”

“Me neither,” Buffy admitted, rather keyed up to be in the middle of so many demons her every instinct told her she should be trying to kill. She used her elbow with perhaps more enthusiasm than necessary when a blue-skinned Navcoombe demon tried to push in between them. It backed off, muttering obscenities (presumably) through its mouth tentacles.

The far side of the room had been cleared and roped off. Nobody there except Spike and Mike, both stripped to the waist and game-faced, engaged in what looked like a heated conversation. Spike looked furious; Mike looked sullen. Evidently no gloves, head protection, or weapons were involved. No referee, either.

Mike was taller, broader, and had at least a thirty or forty pound advantage. Didn’t matter, Buffy thought: this was one of those situations where age and cunning would prevail over youth and strength. She’d sparred and patrolled enough with Spike to know that if presented with a choice between fighting Spike and a buzzsaw, any opponent would do well to choose the buzzsaw.

Willow remarked, “It couldn’t be any more packed: what’s holding things up?”

“Final betting, I think,” Buffy responded.

Still looking furious, Spike broke off the apparent argument and stormed away…for about three steps. Buffy knew to watch his feet and his balance and wasn’t surprised when he whirled and whip-kicked Mike in the groin hard enough to loft him against the front wall. She nudged Willow, who was raised on tiptoes, trying to see something in the other direction, past the crowd in front of the bar. “It’s started.”

“Oooh. Ouch!” Willow responded with a sympathetic wince as Mike answered with a fast series of body blows, not all of which Spike managed to avoid. He went down…and into a back roll that put him on his feet at the right distance to spin a roundhouse kick at Mike’s head. When that was intercepted and his ankle grabbed and twisted, he used the leverage of Mike’s hold to leave the floor and kick with the other leg directly into Mike’s diaphragm: not a disabling a blow with a vamp, what with the not having to breathe. But it hurt enough that it made Mike let go and bend forward, an opening Spike wasn’t in a position to take advantage of, having hit the floor on his back when his leg was released. He bounced into another backward roll, again on his feet, and barreled into Michael before the younger vamp could fully straighten or take a strong enough stance to hold against the impact. Again, Michael was driven against the wall. But this time, he’d seized hold of Spike’s left arm and was twisting, trying to dislocate it at the shoulder. Spike let him, using the opportunity to hammer at Michael’s face, particularly his eyes. When the strain on his shoulder became acute, he went airborne, unkinking the arm in a backflip and using Mike’s face to kick off against, driving them apart.

By this point, Willow had both hands to her face, peeking through her fingers. Buffy watched steadily, appraising the fighting styles. Mike, stronger but less agile and marginally slower, wanted to get close and pound away with fists and knees. Spike, the compleat acrobat, wanted distance for
kicks and aerial work, compensating for Mike’s longer reach. Toe-to-toe, the advantage was Mike’s; apart, Spike could inflict damage while taking the least punishment in return. Following that strategy, Spike would only close when Mike was off balance. Whenever Mike could catch hold and they went into wrestling moves, Spike was at a disadvantage and fought clear as soon as he could.

So the fight was a chase, with Mike trying to close and Spike trying not to be caught. And each, of course, trying to disable the other.

Human opponents would have been in the care of paramedics, or dead, by this time. Given vamp endurance and quick recovery from any injury short of broken bones, Buffy knew this was still the beginning and unless one of the combatants made a serious mistake, the end could be hours away. There didn’t seem to be any rounds or any rules, in terms of exempting any part of the body from attack.

At the half hour mark, neither had even slowed. Spike was slightly favoring his left side: Mike had again gotten a chance to wrench the shoulder nearly to the point of bursting the joint and stomped the hip a couple of times when Spike hadn’t been able to roll out of the way fast enough. The only damage Mike showed was around his eyes, that Spike got an elbow into every chance he got. Both Mike’s eyes were swollen and sometimes bleeding when the healing couldn’t keep pace with the injury.

Presenting his right side, Spike braced with the left/back foot to swing a right-footed kick into Mike’s ribs. It didn’t have much force and Spike had to hop to get his lead foot down to retreat from Mike’s answering flurry of blows. And that was the second time Spike had pulled that move. Buffy jerked Willow’s arm to make her watch this because it was really good. Either Spike was careless enough to let himself get into a pattern (which Buffy considered extremely unlikely) or he was setting Mike up for a devastating follow-up. Making him expect that off-balance hop as he changed feet.

Spike flowed into what Buffy thought was a diversion, an interval that was mostly boxing, trading punches, circling up and down the room. Spike was keeping the weaker left as the lead foot, pushing off and balancing on the right, braced behind. Which set him crooked: leading with the left, yet trying to present the right, with the right the forward hand. Then, again the set-up: a quick turn-away, left leg braced back, then spinning into a right footed roundhouse kick to the head. And Michael bought it and came in, head butted forward, to take Spike down in the off-balance hop. Except Spike wasn’t there anymore. He’d gone down on his hands and flipped, locking knees around Mike’s neck. As Mike was pulled forward, Spike switched his grip to Mike’s ankles, momentarily immobilizing them, as though Mike were a bow and Spike, the taut string. Contracting, he flipped Mike completely over into the wall upside down--feet nearly at head-height, shoulders and head on the floor, neck bent…and Spike sitting on Mike’s chest, his knees immobilizing Mike’s arms, his hands locked in neck-breaking position--one on Mike’s face, the other behind Mike’s head.

They appeared to have a short conversation. Then Mike thumped the floor twice with his fist: capitulation.

The noise that followed was something else: Willow hunched her shoulders and covered her ears. Buffy muttered inaudibly, “And the crowd goes wild.”

Somebody unfastened the rope, opening the area, and the wild crowd immediately started moving into the space, probably to congratulate the winner (if they’d bet on him) and berate the loser. With Willow in tow, Buffy moved with them because crowds plus confusion equaled vulnerability and difficulty getting clear. But Spike wasn’t waiting to be congratulated: yanking his T-shirt straight, scarlet button-down in hand, duster caped across his shoulders, he was using the barge-with-elbows
method of extricating himself from the crush, headed straight for the door, whistling up his people as he moved. He’d dropped game-face, but his human features were no friendlier--grim and set. He was mad and moving fast.

Dragging Willow, Buffy used her elbows to follow, hampered by big demons obliviously in her path. As she pushed outside, she saw Spike instructing the attentive SITs a few yards out into the parking area, absently rolling and rubbing the sore left shoulder. The parking area was almost as crowded as inside the bar and nearly as noisy. Humans and demons with bets on the fight, arriving too late to get inside but still waiting out the result and now either angry or elated, depending on which way they’d bet. Spike kept shoving them aside, whether well-wishers or complainers, concentrating on the SITs. Buffy saw only two of the trio of vamps, a female and a male at Spike’s back, both looking off into the dark like hounds impatient to be released into action; the other one had probably gone for a car, Buffy thought. *Something happening*, she thought. *Something happening NOW.*

As Buffy got close, the male vamp of the pair got in her way. She knocked him flat without breaking stride and grabbed Spike’s arm, demanding, “What?”

As Spike said, “Nothing,” Amanda burst out, “They’ve got Dawn!”

Spike and Buffy had a considerable silent conversation with their eyes. He didn’t want her involved. She was going to be involved no matter what he wanted. None of that needed actual saying.

Spike broke into words first: “She won’t come to no harm. Digger wants a meeting and he’s collected Bit for a pax bond, is all.”

“Some renegade vamp has my sister and you think you can make me stay out of it,” Buffy clarified with a million-watt glare.

“It will be worse if you’re there. It’s because of you, you and me, that he picked Bit to begin with: some damn fool with a big mouth made him figure Bit’s of value to both of us. Got my mark on her; and he thinks you hold my leash. If you come along, no way I’ll convince him otherwise.”

“Do you have any idea how much I do not care about what he thinks or wants?” Buffy shouted into his face.

Spike shouted back, “She is a pax bond, Slayer! She won’t be hurt if I meet with the fucker, hear what he has to say. After, she’ll be let go! If you don’t fuck it up!”

Buffy had no idea what a pax bond was and never wanted to, either. Hands on hips, she retorted, “Can we say ‘set-up’? Can we say ‘ambush’? What on earth makes you think this vamp wants to negotiate? He wants you dead, Spike! We know that!”

“If you show up, there will be nothing to negotiate because he won’t believe a word I say. You seriously think I’m gonna let Bit get hurt here?”

“Do you seriously think you’re gonna slug me, or set your vamps on me, and that will keep me from staying right at your heels, every step? I am not leaving my sister in the middle of a vamp free-for-all, not for any reason. And if that jeopardizes your wonderful plan for the vamps of Sunnydale, that’s just tough, Spike!”

Every syllable an effort at patience, Spike stated, “Your way will get her hurt. My way won’t.”
“Your way,” Buffy shot back, “has every prospect of getting you both killed because you are walking into an ambush, Spike! How can you not know that?”

For a second, Buffy thought he’d do it--slug her and try to impede her with vamps and maybe even SITs long enough to get clear himself.

Then Willow mentioned coolly, “Wherever you go, we’ll know. And show up about two minutes later.”

Realizing it was so, Buffy seconded fiercely, “Yeah!”

Spike still almost slugged her out of frustration: watching him work his fists at his sides, she could tell. Not the ten megaton blast that had wrecked Willow’s bedroom, but the same rage in search of a target. But he held himself still. “All right. Do this, then: I go in first, make the running. If there’s no trouble, I bring Bit out. If it goes bad like you think, you come in, sort it however you have to. Leave me to call it.”

He waited while Buffy thought it out, trying to weigh his priorities against her own complete indifference to vamp protocols and customs. Her distaste and distrust for all things demonic. But she knew it mattered to him. Mattered a lot. He’d kept it all away from her, not involved her. Not asked for her blessing. Refused her help. But she’d demanded to be told. To understand. She no longer had the luxury of ignorance that he’d granted her.

She trusted Spike implicitly. That wasn’t the issue. The issue was how far did she dare trust his judgment in a volatile situation, knowing no soul was guiding it? With, almost certainly, Dawn’s life depending on it?

Buffy said only, “There are weapons in the van.”
Bloody Sunday

Dawn was the honored guest of a very old Master Vampire. She knew because he’d told her, spilling out before her whole shopping bags of the kind of food somebody had told him a zillion years ago that young human women favored. Candy. Gumballs and Godiva all mixed together, cascading onto the table. If she’d eaten even a tenth of it, she’d have gone into sugar coma and gained about 200 pounds, probably.

It was like being kidnapped by Willy Wonka.

Horribly embarrassing. Like she was some sort of dimwit heroine loser or something, snatched after the third set of commercials in a movie you watched because nothing good was on.

She’d been ridiculously easy to catch. She and Janice had been poking through a magazine, Dawn listening in idle misery to Janice pronouncing on where a given guy should be placed on her Hotness Scale™ (patent pending), when Janice’s mom had come into her daughter’s frilly sanctum to report that Buffy had called and was picking Dawn up although she was welcome to stay for supper.

Did Dawn stop to consider that Janice’s mom was a certified idiot who’d accept any voice on the phone as Buffy’s if it said it was—including Charro or James Earl Jones? Oh noooo, Mr. Bill! Dumbass Dawn obediently trotted out to the curb and waited, anxiously clutching her second-best backpack and preoccupied with being miserable about herself and Spike…and was grabbed, just like that, by three vamps pulling up in a late-model green Hundai with a fourth vamp driving.

She’d made no attempt to use her taser: she might have taken two down but not all four. Besides, they were all fledges, minions, with maybe a pint of brains among them and therefore desperately afraid of getting their assignment wrong. If she’d showed any fight, they probably would have eaten her out of sheer nervousness. And then been terribly punished for it, but that wouldn’t have done Dawn any good. So she’d put on her meek, nobly suffering captive princess demeanor, that often could fool Math teachers, and settled down for the ride with eager interest.

They’d taken her to a rather nice motel about two miles from home, just a little short of the highway. The unit farthest from the office had been discreetly broken into--nobody actually lived there, so vamps could come and go at will--and she’d been greeted by her host, this frog-faced, bony old John Houston type who called her “Missy,” deluged her with candy, wanted her to admit she’d been treated well, and looked quite capable of going all medieval on her if things didn’t go his way.

He had loose grey hair and shrewd crinkly eyes that had seen a lot of sun before they’d had to give it up. Dawn speculated he’d met a vamp in a mining camp, in California’s olden days. Before malls, even. Certainly turned later in life than most vamps. Maybe even been turned for company because he never stopped talking.

He was willing to tell her stories about Spike’s less savory escapades when Spike first arrived in Sunnydale, with Dru--technically before Dawn existed but in memory before she’d been allowed to talk to him and thought the bleached hair was lame and goofy. Mostly they were the kind of stories Spike himself wouldn’t tell her anymore and the old John Houston type told with typical vamp relish over the most slaughterous parts.

“Never would’a thought that jackass would’a put something like this together,” he remarked, rubbing pensively at his mouth. “There at the first, he was showing off for his Lady, Drusilla. Now, seems
like it’s the Slayer, your sister, Missy, running him. Damn little rooster, brains in his balls, assuming he’s got any.”

Unwrapping a tiny Tootsie-Roll, Dawn said moderately, “He cleans up nice. I think my sister’s been a good influence.”

She decided she more liked the old vamp than not. He called himself “Digger.”

Now all Dawn had to do was figure a way to make him bite her.

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Buffy drove: it was her SUV. Which was about the shape of everything, Spike thought.

For once, he didn’t bother about who got the front passenger seat. Didn’t look, didn’t know, didn’t care. Took a place in the third row of seats with their unwilling hostage. Not that she was unwilling to be there but that Spike was unwilling to be responsible for her: called herself Star, which was a laugh—an air-headed natural blonde, claimed she was Digger’s favorite childe. Offered in swap for Dawn, as Digger’s pax bond. Pneumatic, apparent age maybe upper teens, still near enough to a fledgling that she couldn’t keep human features consistently in place. Directed to report to Spike, idiot Star hadn’t been able to find her way through the crush around Willy’s until they were ready to pull out. Bint stood beating on the van door in that knees-together semi crouch a certain sort of bint used to express frustration but mostly looked like she needed to use the loo (extra ludicrous in a vamp), bleating that they couldn’t leave without her because she was the pox.

Maybe at one time, she had been, too. Like Darla.

Once Spike got that straightened out, he shoved her in the back and got in after because he was fucking responsible for her. Whatever happened to her would happen to Dawn, who was worth a thousand of her. Buffy contended that all life was sacred, which implied all lives were equally valuable; which Spike had never believed and never would. Some people were obviously meant to be food; and fledges were infinitely disposable, a waste of the space. Star was both. She reminded him of Harmony.

As Star clattered on about how wonderful and kind Digger was, Spike was paying less than no attention, thinking:

If she fucks this up, I am fucking done with her. Slayer wants zero vamps in Sunnydale? Fine: there’ll be one less. Bitch can dust the rest in her spare time left over from working her stupid job and picking out stupid clothes.

No.

Got to take the computer with to do the bloody translation, and the bank account, and the tribute. It’s all got too complicated. The hell with it. Just let the whole thing go smash.

Back to mugging people in alleys. Hunting to feed. Don’t have to kill ’em, not all of ’em anyways. Screw the soul, I only got it for her, I can figure things out without it, thanks ever so. Only I don’t. Without it, don’t understand hardly any of what goes on, except for vamps, and they’re such boring company, I would fucking die of the boredom. Find Dru again, maybe? No, that’s gone, that’s over, can’t do that anymore. Makes no sense whatever.
Hell, just leave. If this doesn’t work out, no use to planning anything. Just take a car, start moving. Like how I got the motorbike. Saw it, wanted it, took it. Because I had to get Bit out of there with the fires and all….

No. Can’t leave on account of Bit. And certainly can’t take her with. Don’t feel right about that. And she’d come to hate me, know she would, it’s not what she’s for, if she’d even go to begin with. No, that’s no good. Can’t leave Bit. Then there’d be nothing worth the staying for. Can’t be around her, neither, with that mark. It would all go pear-shaped real fast if I was to try. I was right before: better to wait for the daylight. Have it done. Have it over.

Bitch has no respect for me. None at all. OK for fighting and fucking--oh, right, and feeding, she gets off on that now--and a damn nuisance the rest of the time or an embarrassment, yeah, don’t cog myself to her goddam limited inflexible world-view with the fucking Elect and the predestined Damned and never the twain shall meet and her mouth is so wonderful, so warm, and her eyes when she comes. But I’ll--

I don’t know what I’ll do if she won’t stand aside and let me do this one thing. Never asked for her help, kept all away from her, did it on my goddam own. Made all the running myself. And now fucking Digger has to go snatch Dawn and that brings her into it again and I will mutilate the bastard, I will fucking tear him to bloody shreds except he’s what’s needed to make this whole arrangement run, not him personally but vamps that can see past the next feed, the next fight, if they can’t see their own benefit in this it has no chance at all.

None whatever.

Powers will have what they want then. What they been trying to nudge into place, sliding the people around the board. They’ll win.

I will not let them win. But they don’t have to win. All I have to do is lose, and I’m real fucking good at that.

Can’t fight her. Never could. Not like I’d have to. Comes to that, I’d let her dust me. Won’t never do that no more.

Just leave. Get gone. If she won’t stand aside, this once, and let me finish it myself.

The SUV turned in and stopped in the marked parking spaces of the motel Mike had designated, passing along the word from Digger. Hell, for all Spike knew, maybe Mike had helped Digger snatch Dawn by way of payback though Mike had sworn he hadn’t. Spike wasn’t confident of where anybody stood in relation to him anymore.

Everybody got out. Spike stood absently working the shoulder, looking off toward the end unit in the line. Behind him, Star had finally shut up.

The three SITs and Dora, Carlo, Benny, and Huey--the latter coopted for this excursion because he was generally sensible--stood waiting for instructions Spike couldn’t give them, not knowing what the hell he was doing himself.

The Slayer came around the van and stood with folded arms, head bent. “All right,” she said abruptly. “Since she’s here,” (she jerked a hand at Star) “maybe this isn’t 100% trap like I thought. I’ll wait on one condition: Willow monitors.”
Spike eyed the witch, who was looking all perky and competent. Leveling a finger at her, Spike specified, “No spells. Not even if they come at you. Throw magic into this, more magic, it all goes sidewise. Less they throw magic at you, that is. Then it’s already past fixing and you do whatever you have to, to get Dawn and get clear.”

Witch bobbed her head, then pointed in her turn. It took Spike a second to realize she meant the locket. Yeah: blocked her, of course it did. He pulled the chain over his head and held it out to her. But Buffy took it instead and dropped it over her own head, then patted the locket into place on her chest.

“Now I have one,” she commented with satisfaction.

In his mind, Willow’s voice said, Testing, one, two, three. OK, Spike?

As always, it made him all itchy and uneasy.

Yeah, fine. Super. Just shut up and listen like the lady said, right?

Aloud, Willow said, “Right. Sorry.”

Spike stabbed a thumb back at Star. And if I think “Star’s gone,” you give them the nod, right?

Willow looked troubled, considering the bint. Likely figuring out what would lead to his giving such a signal and considering that the bint was a vamp, a fledge--shouldn’t even register on her personal protection meter. Finally Willow said, “All right. Yes.”

“Right, then.” Spike waved his people after him a little way, to give instructions privately. He told the SITs, “You’re with the Slayer. Keep out of her way, do like she says. Isadora, you’re with me. You lot, you’re on the bint: put her in the van, keep her safe unless I say otherwise. Witch gives you the nod, you dust her. Slayer says, after that, you go in, take out whoever is left standing. You don’t turn the bint loose unless you see me an’ Bit, the both of us, and I say to. Not otherwise. Huey, you’re lead--you see to that, all right?”

Huey nodded.

Spike wheeled and gave the Slayer a final, frowning look: demanding she stay put, stay out of it. Chin lifted, she returned the look, promising nothing--fierce, determined, and damn silly in the ripped-out, faded-to-pink workout gear. Stank, too: he could smell her from there. And so consummately fuckable it took him an effort to turn away.

Starting across the lot, he told Dora, “You play you’re sweet on me, hand on my shoulder or whatever the whole time. No smiling, though: that would be overkill, he’d never buy it. Just like we been fucking a lot, all right? Things go wrong, you bring Dawn out if you can. That’s first. If you can’t or if there’s time, you take out whoever Digger’s got there with him. Digger, he’s mine.”

“She’s mine.” Dora said. Then, in a different voice, she said, “Sure, baby.”

She stuck her thumb into a belt loop at his hip, her fingers down inside the waist of the leather pants. Spike nodded approval. If he could have got the Slayer to do that, it would have been even better. But best if she didn’t come into it at all.

He wanted Buffy with him and wanted her gone. Wanted to be gone himself. Made no sense.
Thinking that, he noticed the back fender and rear wheel of the bike just past the row of units. Oh fine: Mike was mixed into it too. Nothing more needed to fuck things up completely.

The vamp on the door opened it and let them in.

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The room was dim. Vamps didn’t need much light.

When the door opened, for a minute it was brighter from the high sodium lights outside where the street met the highway. Then the door shut and it was dim again, no light except what came through the uncurtained front window.

Dawn was disappointed Spike didn’t look at her or acknowledge her in any way even though she could understand it: he wanted to downplay her importance, imply she was just an attachment of the Slayer and shove the both of them out of consideration and make Digger deal solely with him. The same with Dora being much too personal, standing behind the chair he pulled away from the candy-laden table and settled into: fiddling with Spike’s hair, resting her hand on the back of his neck. Dawn hotly didn’t like it but understood it was an act and made no protest.

She watched and listened intently, trying to discern Spike’s game plan and conform to whatever role (if any) he’d assigned her in it.

She didn’t know what Mike’s role was either or whose side he was on.

He’d arrived in sullen silence about ten minutes ago: his eyes swollen nearly shut, moving like an arthritic goat. Dawn surmised that he hadn’t won the challenge fight. Big surprise. Mike had sort of glanced at her, and she’d glared at him, and that was that. He was now stretched out on the bed with a wet towel over his face. Digger hadn’t questioned Mike’s presence, which seemed a bad sign.

Not counting Spike or Dora, there were six vamps in the room and another outside the door. It was important to know things like that.

Having greeted one another curtly by name, the two Master Vampires got down to business.

Digger’s opening salvo was, “Order of Aurelius. Sounds impressive to them what don’t know no better.”

“I expect,” Spike allowed, tossing the pack on the table and lighting a cigarette a little awkwardly with bruised, stiff hands—obviously his souvenirs from the challenge fight. “Continuity’s important. Knowing where you’re at and how to do.” He gestured with the cigarette. “You been a Master Vamp in this town a lot of years. Under the Master that was, and lately on your own. Nobody to tell you any different than how you please. Your own little operation running the way you like. Somebody sticks a spoke in that wheel, you’re not gonna like it. Gonna fight back. Only natural. Except magic: that’s not natural. S’not the way we mostly do. Original, like.”

“Slayer’s been in town awhile,” Digger countered. “I can deal with her all right. Feed her a few fledges now and again, she’s happy.”

Spike’s face tightened and turned cold. “Slayer don’t come into this. You deal with me.”
“Slayer’s out in the parking lot, waiting to run in and rescue her pet vamp. I’m surprised she let you come in on your own: getting tired of your line of patter, is she?”

“All the Slayer knows about vamps is how to dust ‘em. Well, and that after a patrol, she likes a vamp to bleed off all that built-up tension for her. Give her a nice back rub, like,” Spike commented with a wicked smirk. “It’s no secret: we have an arrangement, Slayer and me. I’ve marked her.”

“And this one, too.” Digger looked slyly aside at Dawn, who affected not to notice, unwrapping a chocolate. “Sisters. I like ‘em young, too. But bedding sisters is asking for trouble.”

“Some might think so.” Brushing aside candy wrappers, Spike stubbed the cigarette out on the table. “Well, this chit-chat’s been fun, but s’not to the point of why I shouldn’t clear out your territory like I cleared out Restfield. Set somebody less…original in your place. Thought that was why you wanted this meeting, pax bonds in place and all.”

Digger leaned back in his chair. “You’re a fuck-up, Spike. This thing you started, calling yourself Master of Sunnydale, I give it maybe two months. I’d like to be around to watch it fall apart. And afterward the Slayer will swing by, picking off what’s left. Your notions have already killed more vamps than she has in the past couple of years. You--”

“Culling,” Spike cut in. “Get the numbers more manageable. Have a few acknowledged leaders to deal with, not every idiot fledge with an opinion.”

“Spare me the political speeches. Slayer lets you run with this because it suits her. Your big ideas get vamps dusted. Why should she object to that? When it don’t suit her no more, or when all the new wears off your pecker, she’ll cut you down and the rest will collapse, worse than when you started messing with it. And you’re a fool if you think otherwise. You think the Slayer don’t come into this? Hogwash. Or do you figure I’m dumb enough to believe that shit?

“You cleared Restfield, fair enough. That’s been your claimed territory awhile, and those fuckwits provoked you—turned your cow, as I hear it. All well and good. But you come into my territory and clear it, which maybe you could do with that gang of minions you’re putting together up at the factory, and the other Masters hereabouts will know none of ‘em is safe in their own claimed places with you redrawing the lines, saying where vamps can and can’t hunt, and all this stupid smell folderol. They’ll combine, what’s left of ‘em, and wipe out you and yours while they still can. So you’d best leave me be. Or this thing of yours won’t last even two months, which is no great matter except I wouldn’t be here to see it, and I’d miss that.”

“You’re dreaming, Digger. Combine? You ever see vamps combine, except under compulsion, for more than ten minutes together? Except by accident, like that fucked-up attempt to hunt me through the pipes, the other evening? How much coordination went on, putting that together, tell me? Just a bunch of Masters got nervous at the same time, is all—no coordination, the hunt all getting in its own way. I picked them off at will. You think I’ll tolerate a Master who don’t answer to me, gonna try to do me every time he thinks he sees a chance? You got one option here, Digger: bow your head, sing small, and mind your manners hereafter. Otherwise I’m better off without you.”

“What, and give you time to whip the other Masters into line, then come after me and mine with no distractions? Not hardly.”

Dawn realized, all of a sudden, that Mike was standing behind her, big and quiet. She hadn’t even seen him move. And Dora had moved to Spike’s right: almost in grabbing distance of Dawn. It was a different configuration in the room and Dawn didn’t know what it meant. She snuck her hand into
her pocket.

At her prompting, Spike had once figured a vamp could kill a human in under two seconds. And Dawn was sharply aware that she was the only human present. More or less.

“So,” Spike said to Digger, replacing his cigarette pack and lighter in a duster pocket. “You had your say. Seems like we’re not about to agree here on what’s to be done. That’s it, then. Nothing left but to go and play it out. Meeting ended.”

He stood up.

Digger said, “Pity about Star,” and flung a handful of bright, glittering powder at Spike almost the same instant Dawn hit him in the ribs with her taser. As Digger slumped, a big strong hand closed around Dawn’s, made her drop the taser, and she was pitched away, caught and whirled all in an instant like a rough, uncontrolled square dance move. Maybe the door had been locked. Anyway, whoever had an arm around her middle yanked, and the door came off its hinges. She was spun into the brighter parking area and flung sprawling onto the macadam. Legs all around her and a hand pressing her down when she tried to roll to her knees. Amanda’s voice directed, “Stay down,” so she did, realizing a fight was going on outside, too--all around her. Car alarms going off everywhere as cars were jostled and bumped or had vamps thrown onto them. It was the three SITs around her, guarding her. Lights were coming on in the other units. Dawn stayed down.

A vamp tackled Rona, and the protective triangle around Dawn dissolved into flailing limbs. Unarmed, no stake even, she scrambled clear.

Most of the vamps were around Buffy, but some them were wearing Spike’s colors, so that was likely all right. Dawn turned to look at the doorless end unit. Dora was backing out, then Mike and Spike, both of them fighting other vamps--the battle inside spilling into the open.

Dawn ran to Dora and demanded, “Bite me!”

She’d tried to cajole Digger into doing it, but he’d just laughed at her.

Dora didn’t even bother looking around, commenting, “You’re nuts.”

It was because she had Spike’s mark. Nobody else would touch it. Worse than the perfume, as a get-away.

Then Mike turned around and clouted Dora off her feet. “What she said. Bite her.”

Dora, on the ground, looked back and forth between them. When Mike lifted a fist, Dora got up warily, leaning away from the threatened blow: Mike was bigger than she was--a lot. Dawn extended her arm and Dora nipped at it, saw Mike’s fist descending, and bit down hard. It really hurt--not like getting bitten by Mike or Spike, when there’d been this tingly thing, and then the oceanic sense of the deep drawing. Eyes squinched up, Dawn directed, “More,” and Mike still threatened, so Dora completed the bite and started pulling up blood. As the pain vanished into the other sensations, Dawn relaxed.

Commenting, “That should do,” Mike staked Dora. Through the ghost-shape that dissolved and fell, he told Dawn, “We’re even now.”

Back behind, Kennedy wailed, “Nooooo!”
Spike handed Star down from the van like a princess and insisted her arm be folded into his, walking along the line of variously yodeling, screeching, and blatting cars, telling her how although an ordinary person might take it wrong that Digger had started the festivities knowing it would mean she got chopped, a really superior person would see that Digger’s heart just hadn’t been in it and he hadn’t really meant it like that at all. By the time Spike delivered to the doorless doorway and gave her a push inside, she’d chewed the lipstick off her lower lip and her eyes were steadily yellow.

Should give Digger something else to think about for awhile.

Then, because all sorts of civilians were milling about by now, trying to silence their anguished and indignant cars, Spike hotfooted it to the van and popped inside--next to Bit, as it happened--and Buffy floored the pedal.

Buffy and the witch in front, and nobody but him and Bit in the middle set of seats. And Bit smelled indefinably different, felt different in a way he at first couldn’t put a name to. Then he realized: his mark had been overset with another: Dora’s.

“Where’s Dora got to?” he demanded furiously, grabbing at the door handle. Buffy flipped on all the locks before he got the door open. “Bit, she marked you! She--”

“She’s gone,” Dawn broke in listlessly. “Dusted. I didn’t know that was what had to happen. I made her do it. I didn’t understand the consequences. She didn’t want to. It’s all my fault.”

“Now, Bit,” Spike began, and tried to draw her in, but she first stiffened and then pulled away, scooting sideways along the seat until she was sitting by the far window. “Bit, she had no business doin’ that, no matter what you said. Can’t make a vamp bite, though there are times your sis comes close. S’not your fault--”

Dawn shook her head so violently that her long hair flew. “We made her. Mike and me. Then Mike dusted her and said we were even. How does that make us even, Spike?” She looked around, all tearful and miserable.

“Oh.” Spike tried to think it out, what had happened, beyond the facts that Dawn had been retrieved safely and he’d left Digger in one piece, still immobilized by the taser but very much aware of what was going on, that he couldn’t lift a finger either to aid or to stop. Both, to Spike, wholly satisfactory facts. “Well, his claim was set aside. By mine. And now mine’s been set aside too, and the vamp that marked you is gone. So in a way, that puts you back to the beginning--as though you’d never had Michael mark you to start with. Nobody has a claim on you no more.”

“No, I’m just a vampire slut with three damn bites--”

“Watch that!” came the directive from the front seat, driver’s side. Slayer had been marked three times, too. But only the last really counted, of course.

Sliding over, Spike tugged free the arm Dawn was clutching so tight, blood seeping through her fingers. When he lifted it and bent to it, Dawn demanded harshly, “What would this commit me to?”

“Nothing, Bit. Nothing at all. Just thought I’d seal it for you. Make it quit bleeding. Nothing but that.” Spike waited. When Dawn made no more objection, resolutely not looking at her arm or him,
he licked the punctures closed. The taste of her blood was still glorious. But because it wasn’t associated with his own mark, his demon barely roused. And Spike had already fed well today. It took no special effort to taste and still let go.

He supposed he should be grateful to Dora, but a grudging acknowledgement was the most he could manage. He still would have dusted her himself if he’d caught her at it or known about it in time. A Master Vampire’s mark was not to be set aside—even when the Master Vamp himself wished it had never been set.

Humans weren’t the only ones allowed to be contradictory, he thought.


Spike shrugged. “Nothing whatever, far as I can tell. Magic doesn’t much work on vamps. Dunno what he meant it to do. I’ll maybe ask him sometime. Whatever it was, he overpaid.”

“Ask him? But he’s…. You dusted him…didn’t you?”

“Not hardly. Left him just like he was, after you done him with the taser, which was a neat piece of work: how come you still had it?”

“They took my backpack. My pajamas and…some things were in it, in case I had to stay over tonight. After they’d dumped it out, made some stupid jokes about everything, they stuffed it all back in again and took it away. However, not being totally dim, I had my taser in my pocket. They’d already found my cell, so I couldn’t say it was that, and besides, they wouldn’t have let me keep the phone. So… I said it was a radio,” Dawn explained, trying not to fizz and giggle but doing it a little anyway. “And they didn’t know it wasn’t. If you’ve never seen one, it doesn’t look much like a weapon. And here’s me, looking all girly and helpless, you know. So…they let me keep it!”

Dawn broke into giggles, and Spike was smiling too at her wit and resourcefulness. He tugged at a pinch of her hair, saying, “Digger didn’t know he’d picked Dawn Dragonslayer!”

“Oh, stop.”

“Thing is, you done him a favor, Bit. ‘F you hadn’t taken him down, I’d have had no option but to dust him. Which I purely didn’t want to do.”

She showed him a puzzled frown. “But I thought you’d be all mad, because he’d, well, taken me.”

“Now, that’s the problem: hard to know how anybody will hop, how anybody will take things. As far as mad goes, I was and I wasn’t. ‘Cause I’d set you aside in my mind. Had to. And I knew you wouldn’t come to no harm, so long as Digger still wanted to talk. So I wasn’t worried for you like your sis was, that didn’t understand what it means, to call for a pax bond to secure a meeting. I took it as a good sign, that there still might be a way to salvage things. So long as your sis didn’t go all Slayer on me and bust things up.” That last, he said deliberately louder to be sure the front seat heard and took note. “See, Digger’s useful. Smart, after his own fashion…and willing to try a different thing—magic—if force won’t get it done. Not all that fond of magic myself, but I’m impressed that he tried and would’a had me except I was lucky. But he’s also stubborn most ways: doesn’t like things changing from what he’s got used to. And that’s a useful thing, too. He’ll be just as stubborn to hold to the new ways, once they’re settled in around him and consistent, if I’m not always leaning on him, disrupting his people. He can’t have above three, four vamps that answer to him now: we done the rest. So he knows I could walk in and wipe him out anytime. But I had the chance tonight and good
cause, and let him be; and he knows it. So he’ll sing small and not make a noise for himself for awhile, till he’s built his numbers back up. And awhile is all I need to get this in place and running.” That reminded him: he pushed back the duster sleeve to consult the watch, pushing the tiny button that made the pulsing numbers light up. Going for eleven. “Oi: Slayer! Need you to drop me downtown. Willy’s will be fine. Slayer?”

“Going home first, Spike,” Buffy called back. “We have to talk.”

Well, that didn’t sound good. “Got a midnight deadline here.”

“We’ll make it,” Buffy assured him.

Dawn screeched, “Turn around! Turn around! We have to go back! Turn around!”

Everybody said, “What?”

“My backpack--my homework’s in it!”

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Having placated her sister by promising to help redo the lost homework, Buffy led the way inside, towing Spike by the hand, and plunked herself down on the battered old sofa in the front room. “C’mon,” she directed, patting her sweat pantsed thighs. There was a little delay while he slid off the duster and draped it over the nearest chair, then made as if to pull off his shirt, which got nixed, since Dawn was present and didn’t want her eyes seared by the sight of naked Spike.

Actually the brief glimpse of the purpling bruises on his abs was enough to make everybody quiet down. He settled as bidden, stretched out on the sofa with his head in Buffy’s lap, booted ankles crossed. Though he’d been clearly edgy about the threatened talk, he still sighed, relaxed, and let his eyes fall shut.

“Midnight deadline,” he warned. “I’d set the alarm on my watch, except I dunno how. All eat up with gadgets.”

“I’ll keep watch,” Dawn volunteered. “On the watch.” Making a face of comic dismay at the phrasing, she dropped down on the floor beside the couch, reaching to take Spike’s hand, hold his wrist in watch-inspecting position. Again, a little awkwardness, unease, before he’d let her. But when he had, he relaxed still further; and Dawn played with his fingers, smiling to herself.

Whatever had been wrong between them still wasn’t entirely right, Buffy observed. But she’d overheard the byplay between them about the fresh bite and hoped the self-consciousness and hesitation would fade as the mark did.

“OK,” Buffy said, having made the atmosphere as non-confrontational as she could without leaving Dawn out, “now tell me about the soul.”

“Well, it’s little, and black, an’ I keep it in a jar--”

Dawn smacked his arm. “It is not!”

“Bit, you stay out of this,” Spike directed, lifting his head and blinking at her.
Dawn immediately pulled everything in close, tight, subsiding without complaint.

Spike sagged back again. “So I lied about the jar. What is it that you want to know, love?”

“Pretty much everything,” Buffy admitted, indulging in small, non-pornographic petting and stroking around his neck and shoulders. She’d seen that vamp bitch with her hand in his pants!

But restaking her claim wasn’t all or it, or even most of it. For some time—since he’d returned from his mysterious trip, now that she thought of it—she’d felt distanced from him; and not by her own choice. There had been reachings across to one another, from both sides, but that had only made her the more aware of the gap, the separation. And once aware of it, she found it unendurable. It felt smothery, like not being able to draw in enough air for breath. She wanted to grab, hang on, but contented herself for the moment with petting.

Buffy knew that desperation wasn’t lovable and only drove people away.

“Well, it’s different without,” Spike said slowly. Frowning a little, thinking it out. “Can’t say it’s not. Sort of like if you were to try to live at the mall, in the air-conditioning. Make you forget about weather, after awhile. Nothing means very much. Or…no, that’s not a good way to say. I’ll try again here. Not much signifies. Yeah, that’s better. And a lot, more than I thought there’d be, I just don’t understand. Can’t make sense of anymore. Some of it, I know in my head or remember, enough to get by, anyways. See where they are, and what they are, but they don’t…register the same as I recall they used to. Real hard to explain, actually;” he said with an upward look into Buffy’s face and a slight laugh.

“That’s the bad part,” Buffy said, steadily petting her reassurance and making the contact she’d only just realized she was starved for. “Tell me the good part, that made it seem worthwhile or at least necessary to set the soul aside.”

“That’s easy: freedom.” No frown, no thinking required. “Not endlessly worrying about what might go wrong. What I might do wrong. What I already done wrong. But…that’s not true neither. I worry more than ever. All the time, really. But I don’t care. So I can stay with the worry, work through it, put the next piece in place and go on. Soul, it cramps you all up, like, with ghosts and maybes. Set it aside, everything’s clear and cool and the same distance away. Simple and direct—not all tangled up in connections.” His hands rolled and fingers poked between fingers, showing the confusing connections, then separated and stood apart to show simple…which to Buffy looked like isolation. Nothing touching. Connections were confusing and limiting, no doubt about it, she thought, as Spike continued, “I can just do the thing at hand an’ on to the next. Like I have to, to get this all done.”

“But you’re having explosions,” Buffy remarked, just calm, just saying it. “Like Willow’s room. Like the despair and exhaustion already there, that let the curse get at you and make it worse. Like giving in and biting Dawn, despite that being quite a big no-no to you, apparently. Things building up, inside, that it seems you have no way to handle without the soul. So it builds and builds until it explodes.”

“Yeah. Seems like. Haven’t had headaches like this since the chip. Pretty much all the time now.”

“This minute?”

“No. Too busy hurting elsewhere, I expect. No, this minute is good.”

“Then will you listen to me a little now? It’s seemed, lately, that you’re halfway mad at me a lot of
the time. Or you’re expecting me to be mad at you. Not complaining. Just saying.”


“All right,” said Spike, and reached his right arm back to draw Buffy’s head down for a lingering gentle kiss. His other arm had reached the other way, to stroke fingers through Dawn’s hair, as Buffy saw when he let her straighten. “Must be so, then. If the two of you gang up on me, not much left to argue about. It’s most likely--”

Buffy set fingers on his mouth, and he stopped, looking up at her. She said, “That’s not what’s important. I just don’t want anybody to be mad right now. Or think I am. I’ve just been thinking it out, the best I can. About the soul. And there some things I want to say and have you hear me. Both of you.”

“Go ahead, an’ I’ll try to control this overwhelming urge to knock you through the window. Or something.”

“Or something,” Buffy echoed, smiling, probably a bit wanly. “I know it’s not like I thought. Not like Angelus. Which is all I had to go by, and all I thought of. You’re not that different, soulless. And you don’t hate me, which is something I’ve never gotten over and likely never will.”

“No, love. Not even a little. Get a bit impatient sometimes, but never could hate you--”

Buffy pressed her fingers to his mouth again, and again he fell silent. She said, “Soulless, to me, is a combination of the terrible time with Angelus…and the Boogey Man Credo: what I was taught, that soulless meant thing, meant enemy, meant a monster who wanted to hurt me and everybody I cared about as much as it possibly could, and would if I didn’t stop it. It meant pain and hurt to me. Done…for fun.”

She had to stop and reassure herself with a kiss. She was remembering their old fights, before she’d come to know it as dancing. The gleeful malice. His desire to make her hurt…because he enjoyed it. The unending innuendo and implication that she enjoyed being hurt, sought him out on that account. A long time over now. But she remembered, and knew he did, too.

Biting her lip a moment, she went on, “I know you’re not like Angelus: nothing else is like Angelus. I know you went and got your soul…so you could understand. So we could stop hurting each other. I know a lot of the time it’s a torment to you, so much that I can’t imagine how it could possibly be worth it to you. Especially since I know now that you could have gotten rid of it, set it aside, pretty much any time you wanted. But you didn’t. You lived with it. And I respect you for that. If I could be free of what it means to be the Slayer, I’d be done with it in a second.”

“You only tell yourself that, love. Truth is, it’s what you are. And you’re the finest one ever. Beautiful as a sword with it, you are.”

Buffy bobbed her head. “Praise from the former evil undead opposition is praise indeed.”

“I mean it!”

“I know you do. I know you now. And even setting aside all the claptrap I still carry around on the subject of souls, and even accepting your judgment that it was necessary, to do what you believed you had to, about setting up a new way for the Sunnydale vamps to be--those that survived the preliminaries, anyway--” (They swapped a sincere, ruthless grin.) “--the lack of it is hurting you, and
it’s hurting me. It’s different, and I can feel the difference—a thousand ways. Things that should be easy, absolute no brainers, get to be these huge productions. There’s this big distance instead of close and comfortable. Like always starting out wrong-footed, off balance, so we bang into each other, get the moves wrong. Not smooth and simple, like it should be. Not because the Boogey Man Credo says so: because I feel it. Without the soul, nothing...fits right. Connects right."

"Yeah," Spike agreed quietly.

"So can you put it back? Now? Can you put it back at all?"

“Sometime,” Spike said, and sighed. “Thought it would be now, but it can’t be. Till I can back off from this Master Vamp of Sunnydale shit, that I truly don’t want now and never did, but is what has to be done to keep the balance in a way it can stay. Can’t leave off until things quit rocking. And that’s gonna be longer than I thought. Because I can’t wrap it up, tie the bow, and hand it off like I expected.

“Part of it is dealing with vamps. Can’t wonder or guess about things there. Gotta know and do,” (He clapped his hands together with the words, startlingly loud.) “just like that! Never pity ‘em. Never try to make friends because vamps have no friends. Just other demons they don’t happen to feel like killing just at this moment. Never trust. And never want to. Let it all be cold, and the same distance away, and not wish it different because it never can be. That’s the one reason. Other reason is the Powers. Bit can tell you about that. Only left off hurting the witch, and Harris, when they knew they couldn’t get at me that way. Hostages. Can’t let them do that, and they’d be right at it again if they thought it’d work. Willow can block some things. Not all of it. Specially if she doesn’t know that’s what it is, that’s where it’s coming from. Remember how her eyes got so bad? Yeah. Give you good odds, that was the Powers. Never can be completely sure, they don’t admit to it. But that’s how they do, the bitches.

“So it can’t be now, love. Or all up to now will have been for nothing, and the Powers get what they want. Big final crash, some clean-up slaughter, and no more vamps in Sunnydale. Likely not even me. Because who knows what project they’d fling at me next, if I do this one—abandon it, really—to their specifications and their taste? What would I stand against ‘em with, if I don’t stand now? It’s some better, since I told you. That I’m not trying to hide it, what I am, pretend different. Know you don’t like it—don’t blame you. Knew you wouldn’t. Thought you might even dust me over it, first you found out.”

Buffy shook her head. “Once, maybe. Not anymore. If you say it’s necessary, I accept that. I know we’re on a deadline tonight: we can hash the rest of it out some other time. But for now—I want to help. If you can’t take the soul back now, I want to shorten the time till you can. Let me help. I understand—the Slayer’s involvement would undermine your authority. So don’t take the Slayer’s help: take mine. You’ve had the SITs with you, apparently no problem there. Pretend I’m a SIT. I can mind and go to the mark. We’ve been fighting as a team a long while now. Pretty good at it, actually. On patrol, the lead changes according to the circumstances. So you take the lead for awhile. I’ll even smell funny for you.”

“Have to think about that.” Spike pushed up to sitting, elbows on knees, hands together in a fist by his mouth, gazing meditatively at the opposite wall. After a couple of minutes he checked his watch, then nudged Dawn with a knee, asking, “Think she’s earned a trial as second?”

Dawn nodded, a big up-and-down.

“Well, that’s it, then. The rest, we can work out later, like you say.”
“And I’m coming, too,” Dawn declared, springing to her feet. But her mouth corners turned immediately down when her eyes met Spike’s.

“Not tonight, Bit. This late, your job is getting to bed, and to sleep, without benefit of tucking in. On a patrol, that’s one thing. Tonight’s a free-for-all running hunt, till first light, nearly, and I couldn’t keep track of you. We’ll be all split up, scattered. And there’s nobody I’d trust you to. Can’t risk my best adviser that way. And nothing fit for you to do. Another night. Not now.”

No tantrum. No shrieking or foot-stamping. Astonishingly calm, Dawn said only, “OK, Spike. It’s your call.” She headed off toward the stairs.

Buffy understood herself collected and directed as Spike caught up the duster and nodded toward the door. Jumping up and following, she braced herself, took and lifted his hand, and set the keys on his palm. He tossed and caught them once, with the grace not to look too jubilant, then led off.

In for a penny, Buffy thought, in for a pound, though who’d want a pound of pennies eluded her. If she could defer to Spike’s lead, she could put up with his driving. Maybe she’d better not look.

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A free-for-all running hunt it was, too.

Spike sent Buffy, still disguised with worn-out sweats and scent, off with the SITs, hunting together—something they were long accustomed to and good at, so he figured he could leave them to it. His own crew, waiting by the theater—the mark he’d named—Spike briefed and then quizzed more extensively: a dozen, all in the colors.

He divided them into four squads, named the lead of each, and made sure each squad had enough stakes and clubs to see them through five hours of intermittent mayhem. He told them to stay together and fight as a unit (lot of bloody hope of that, but he told them anyway). Told them any vamp they encountered not in the colors and not with the smell (anointing them despite their expressions of disdain) was fair game. Warned them some vamps might actually be bright enough to be wearing the colors even though non-us; so if there was any doubt, go by the smell because nobody else yet had that. Told them they were not to hunt anything but vamps tonight: not if a bloody human flopped in front of them; not if they caught some non-us vamp feeding on a kill. Just dust the vamp, let the kill lie, and on to the next. Told them they were not to get dusted themselves or fall to quarrelling and dust each other, no matter the provocation. Told them if they met opposition out in force and in numbers, to break and retreat to the mark. Then they’d go after the opposition two or three squads together in something like an organized fashion.

Not a hope in hell they’d actually do it, a good half of them were fucking morons, but he told them anyway and warned them he’d be around, watching, and would know who fucked up. Threatened anybody who fucked up with horrible unspecified punishments he hadn’t thought up yet but they weren’t to know that and seemed suitably impressed and intimidated.

Sending them off, Spike knew there’d been too many instructions and it would have been better to tell them “Kill any vamp you find, except each other,” but they’d have found some way to fuck that up, too, so might as well begin as he meant to go on.

The squads had been sent to the district’s periphery. They’d come back, dusting what vamps they could and driving the rest before them, to something like a final grand melee, the all against the all, at
the mark.

At least that was the idea.

Spike picked one squad to follow and watched them from a rooftop through their first engagement, which went all right. He dropped down and gave them a word, to reinforce the notion that he was keeping tabs on them, then went to check on the next squad, clockwise from the mark. The three of them had been dumb enough to engage with five vamps by the Bronze, and lost one of the squad. Spike weighed in with his night’s chosen weapon, a pool cue, and got that sorted. Four non-us vamps dusted, one fled, one casualty. Spike chewed out the remaining pair for not waiting until the non-us bunch was busy with a kill or something before going after them. Made him homesick for the SITs, it did, and he told the pair so in graphic terms, comparing them unfavorably to teenaged girls, until he thought better of it, shut himself up, and left them to continue their sweep. Wouldn’t want to get them so resentful of the SITs that they’d go after the next one they came across, regardless of orders.

Always complications.

The third squad, he was some time locating. They’d found no vamps to dust in their first hour, sweeping the shut uptown stores where the hunting was bad after midnight anyway, and had retired to the Wander Bar to consider their options. Spike rousted them out with a severe tongue-lashing and the forfeit of their bottle, which he kept for himself since it would have been a pity to waste it.

By the time he checked on the fourth squad, which had done for six vamps so far and hadn’t fucked up in any conspicuous way, Spike had worked out all the residual stiffness left over from the challenge fight. He’d done about all the supervision he could tolerate and wanted to settle down to a few fights of his own, unencumbered by strategy or anything beyond the joyous ferocity of the fight itself.

He’d reserved a four square block area centered on the theater for his personal hunting patch. Returning there, nicely warm, he proceeded to kill whatever moved. Did two vamps in an alley, feeding on a drunk and his date. No help for the drunk, but the date was hysterical and ambulatory, so he sent her on her way with a fanged grin of encouragement, then jogged on to see what else the night would offer. Found an idiot vamp crossing a parking lot, under the lights, right out in the open: probably driven ahead of the squads. Spike did her after a bit of a chase, which he enjoyed. Did her personal, fangs in the throat and then a broken neck, very satisfactory. She’d fed less than an hour before, the blood not fully changed, so there was a bit of a snack in it for him for an extra bonus.

Heard a fight in progress, snarls and yells and wood meeting metal, and headed that way eagerly to find a squad engaged outside a florist’s with a lone vamp defending himself with a broken-off parking meter. Spike arrived just as the meter connected with ribs and slammed Emil through the florist’s display window. Lots of noise, naturally, and an alarm going off but nobody took any notice since the Sunnydale police hardly ever responded before daybreak, prudently leaving the town to the monsters.

“All right,” Spike said, carefully inserting himself between the combatants, facing his own squad, “you lot go on now. See what else you can scare up.”

“No colors,” objected Nate. “No smell.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll see to this. You lot go check the all night pharmacy on Sycamore and around there, see if you can find any vamps trolling for druggies. Then come back to the mark. Go on.”
Emil climbed out of the window, picking out glass and swearing as he rejoined Nate and Bet, and the three of them sullenly went off as directed.

Without turning, Spike said, “You’re an idiot, Michael.”

The parking meter clanged, pitched into the street. Then Mike said, “I know. Wanted to give you this back before I go. Sorry, it got busted.”

When Spike looked around, Mike was holding out the gold watch that had done duty in lieu of a locket. Mike continued, “When you flipped me upside down, there at Willy’s, it came out of my pocket. It’s quit running. Back popped open, too. I read what it said inside. Figured, an old watch like this, somebody’s keepsake. Somebody name of William. That was your name. From before. William the Bloody…. Your keepsake. Then I started to figure it out and know what kind of gigantic idiot I’d been all this while.” Mike shook his head. “Still don’t understand but that’s all right. You take it. I squared things with Dawn, and mostly with Digger, to make up at least some for the harm I’d done, being such a fucking fool. Digger, he played me, but that’s no excuse. Whenever I got mad, there he was somehow, listened real fine, telling me I had the right of things and I should get my own back for how you treated me. Let on he was my friend. Always had the price of a drink or a bottle. Welcome at his lair anytime. Would have been real pleased to have me pop off at you with my M16 instead of the .22 bolt-action. Not quite dumb enough for that, but nearly. On account of because I didn’t understand why you were doing me like that. Still mostly don’t, not why, but when I saw the inside of the watch, I knew what: you were teaching me, or trying to. As much as I’d let you, which wasn’t much. So fucking dumb and contrary, it’s a wonder you ain’t thrown me out long since, put up with me trying to set up like you done, with Dawn and all, going behind your back to Digger ’cause he’d take me when you wouldn’t. I’m a waste of the space, and best thing is to get out, you don’t have to bother with me no more, I’m gone.”

Tears ran down Mike’s face and he was breathing in quiet, tight sobs. He’d screwed up massively, got everything crosswise and tangled: a true Aurelian.

“Already have a watch,” said Spike, pulling back the duster sleeve to show it. “Don’t need that one.”

“All right, then have the motorcycle. I left it up by Casa Summers. Key under the door.”

“Don’t need that neither. Your leavegeld, fair and square. Now, will you listen to me here one minute, Michael?”

“Nothing to be said, you likely want to dust me on your own instead of letting Emil do it and I got no reason—”

“Shut up one fucking minute and listen, all right?” Spike sat back on his heels, and slowly Mike did likewise, eyes on the sidewalk, and the alarm still ringing its head off behind the broken florist’s shop window.

Spike said, “Not gonna tell you that you done good here. You nearly got Dawn hurt, and that’s something I don’t look aside from. But that was partly her fault, she asked for that mark, and I don’t know of any vamp who’d have told her no. Not even me, it turns out. And it’s taught her that what she does has consequences--maybe will make her somewhat more careful in future. She’s learned, and you have too. And about Digger, well, you always had a temper and a mouth, that’s nothing new. Maybe you learned vamps don’t have friends. Ever. Everybody out for their own interest, assuming they got the least clue what that is, which a lot of the time, they don’t. But don’t look for
that no more. That’s gone, Michael. Part of the old life, and it can’t come back.”

“You been a friend to me,” Mike contradicted, finally looking up…to argue, naturally.

“Might seem that way,” Spike allowed. “But the fact is, I have my own agenda, always have. Nothing counts between vamps except blood, Michael. S’not always pleasant, but it’s always there. And it lasts. Got something for you to look at.”

From a duster pocket, Spike pulled out a folded paper and handed it over to Mike. While Mike frowned, reading through the list of confirmed District Masters Spike had made up to post at Willy’s, and hadn’t had the time because the Slayer wanted to talk, Spike lit a cigarette and waited for him to hit the final listing—for District 2: one of the pair whose vamps had done the Kilkenny Cats thing and slaughtered one another to the last vamp with no leader surviving. By that listing, Spike had written “Michael of Aurelius.”

When Spike saw Mike’s head rear back, he said casually, “So maybe you can figure why I’m not all that pleased about your offer to get yourself gone. Have need of you, Michael. Not exactly what I’d planned, but it will do for now. You run that district, figure what vamps you’ll let stay, that will answer to you well enough, you’ll learn a good bit of what you’ll need to know somewhat farther down the road.”

“But…this says I’m your get. Your childe.”

Spike nodded, breathing smoke. “And you were made by Angelus. But no vamps here know that but us, and I don’t think Angel’s gonna acknowledge you anytime soon—do you? You’re of the blood and the Order of Aurelius. If I acknowledge you, ain’t nobody gonna dispute it with me. You’re claimed, Michael—like it or not. I claim sire’s rights over you. And I have plans for you, if you can get your mind off yourself for two minutes together and see what I been trying to put together here. Need your help with that, Michael, if you’re willing. All proper vamp self-interest. Blood to blood.”

Mike handed the paper back and rubbed his eyes dry. “All right. Sire. Hell of a thing.”

Spike quoted, “‘Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition,’” and got a blank look in reply. “Never mind: human joke. Now, Michael, what I want you to do is stick that list up by the map at Willy’s before daybreak. Meant to do it myself, but there wasn’t time.” The list changed hands yet again. Spike went on, “Next thing is to pick out where you’re gonna lair in the district. There’s at least twenty masterless vamps, and likely more, still around, besides what got dusted tonight, and I need to know where I can send them. Any you take under your word and protection, you’re responsible for. You answer for them. To me.”

“Yeah.” Mike rubbed the bridge of his nose, that Spike had broken one time for the disobedience of Mike’s subordinates. “I figure I know that.”

Spike wasn’t about to burden the lad with emotional entanglements: that would only have confused things worse. Like the fact Spike had loved him steadily, if impatiently, for some time; like the fact he was the only childe Spike had ever acknowledged (even though he wasn’t) or willingly made. Blood was blood. That had to be enough, because that was all there was or could be.

No need to tell the lad that Spike meant eventually to name him Master of Sunnydale and would have preferred that it be sooner rather than the later he now knew it would have to be. That would come up in its own time: when Mike found he wanted it and began to reach for it, and Spike was
content that matters were stabilized enough for him to let it go to the hands he'd meant it for from the first.

Have to let the lad find his own balance first before expecting him to take any substantial weight off Spike’s shoulders.

After another long drag on the cigarette, Spike added, “When other things come up you don’t understand, or you don’t know how to do, you come to me and I’ll tell you the best I know. And you can still ask Bit for advice. She’ll tell you the best she knows, just like always, and knows vamp ways better than any human you’re ever likely to find. Maybe even be your friend, because humans do that. Has to do with the soul, I think. Can’t ever rightly understand them without it. Just how it is.”

“I’m not getting no soul. If you expect--”

“Don’t expect you to, Michael. A bad impediment for a vamp, most ways. If ever you come to change your mind about that, we’ll talk about it. You come up to Casa Summers tomorrow evening and Willow will fix that watch of yours. It’s a magical protection, and you need to keep it close.”

“Figured it was something like that. I’ll take good care of it.”

“Knew you would. That’s all, then. Here, and take this.” Straightening, Spike dug in the other duster pocket for one of the perfume samples--almost the last of the initial supply--and handed the tiny bottle over as Mike rose. “In case you run into another sweep tonight.”

“Smells really foul, Spike.”

“Stink yourself up anyway. Don’t want my people dusting each other over nothing.”

When that was all sorted, Mike went off, and Spike checked his watch. Going on four: whatever vamps had evaded the sweep squads would be starting to collect in Spike’s own patch as the squads closed in. He had the prospect of several more fine fights tonight. Stepping on the coal of his cigarette, he jogged up the street, checking the alleys and the street itself. As it got nearer to daybreak, any vamps still at large downtown would go for the sewers, to lair up there.

Well, he couldn’t expect to do ‘em all in the one night. It would be a gradual process, imposing the new rules on the old anarchy. Only important things happened suddenly, all in an instant: a flash of revelation, or a decision made, or love realized or fulfilled. It was just the consequences of such sudden things that took time to play out to their ends.

As he turned onto Wilkins, his cellphone buzzed at the same time he stopped short at the sight of a pair of Sh’narth, necks amorously entwined, lumbering in stately fashion westward down the middle of the street, tails whipping in time with their strides. Over them, a hopeful, importunate Taskin wheeled on huge dragonfly wings.

Holding the phone to his ear, still watching, Spike said, “I think I know what you’re calling about.”

At the other end of the phone line, Buffy’s voice said, “I caught sight of the Taskin. Is there a Sh’narth?”

“Two.” Spike leaned against a storefront. “Matched set. Love, we’re not armed for such. There’s other business tonight. And before daybreak, before there’s hardly any people around, they’ll be at
the ocean. I say, let ‘em pass.”

“You think?” Buffy responded dubiously. “How about the Taskin?”

“It’ll go back to the rift, wherever that is, and wait for a better chance. Can’t do anything about it now anyways, flying like it is. Unless you have a rocket in your pocket.”

“Nope. No rocket. OK, it’s your sweep, so it’s your call. We leave ‘em alone and hope they go away. See? I can compromise! We’re at Fifth and Madison--where are you?”

“Fourth and Wilkins. Stay put, I’ll come to you. We’ll finish the sweep together, then drop the children and get home. All right?”

“There’s Dawn’s homework,” Buffy reflected glumly. “What teacher in her right mind will believe ‘Vampires stole my homework?’ I’ll have to write a note, I guess. And oh--nobody’s done anything about the party for Giles! And he’s leaving tomorrow!”

“We’ll put something together, love. Don’t worry. All he’ll care about is that you’re gonna miss him, and he knows that already. The rest is just details. We can do enough details to give him a proper send-off. It’s on the agenda.”

“If you-- There’s one! ‘Manda, send it back this--”

The connection was cut off. Tucking the pool cue under his arm, Spike ran, hoping some of the fight would still be left for him.

FINIS
12/07/03

End Notes

Continued in Blood Rites.

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