Let Me In
by KairosImprimatur

Summary

Buffy's gone missing, and someone uninvited has just joined the search for her.

Notes

My first-ever fanfic, full of more errors and enthusiasm than I've ever had since. It breaks from canon just before Dawn, but I couldn't let go of Oz so he's around and Willow's straight. Many things happen. B/A focus.
They had been out for hours before their sensors picked up a hostile. The beep of the alarm was tiny, but the four of them were being so silent that it was audible to everyone, and they met each other's eyes in the darkness without a word. Finally, Riley put them into an impromptu formation with a few hand signals, and they headed in the direction that the alarm indicated.

There was just one vampire, a tall dark-haired male, but he was carrying something or someone in his arms and moving at a dead run. Fortunately, Riley's team came up ahead of him, and they were able to dart out in front of him and block his path. "Freeze!" Riley shouted, and the vampire did, but Riley's heart was already pounding. He couldn't be sure about the dead or unconscious human in the hostile's arms, wrapped up in some big black garment as it was, but he had the increasing feeling that he recognized the hostile himself.

By that point the team had surrounded him, each one with a weapon aimed right at him, but of course they couldn't shoot while there was an innocent person in the line of fire. The standoff was brief, though. As soon as the vampire had sized up the situation, he turned right to Riley, heedless of the guns and the burden he was carrying, and said, "Riley Finn."

Riley inhaled deeply. "Angel."

"Find Giles, tell him I found her and to meet me at the hospital." He gestured down at the human. Riley could now see that she was a girl, and the covering around her was Angel's big black coat. A lock of blonde hair was visible though her face was hidden, and it was more than enough to confirm that Riley's worst fears had been realized.

The rest of his team had started up a low murmur of shock- this was not the kind of dialogue they expected to hear between their leader and a hostile. He didn't know if they could tell if it was Buffy. He didn't know nearly enough. Not enough to tell them to stand down, that was for sure. "You can tell him yourself. I'll take her to the hospital."

"The hell you will," Angel all but snarled. "I can get there faster. Call your boys off."

"I don't think I can do that." It wasn't easy to say that. Of course Buffy needed prompt medical attention, but how could he leave Angel in charge of that? Dammit, why couldn't the vampire detectors come with soul detectors? With Angel there was no other way to tell. "For all we know you're headed somewhere else entirely. Or maybe you only found her because you're the reason she was missing in the first place?"

Angel's face changed then, his fangs protruding and his eyes burning yellow even in the darkness, and everyone on Riley's team cocked their weapons. "If I have to," said the vampire, "I will take down you and each one of your lackeys, and break your toys, and leave you here on the ground, but I'll do it without letting go of this girl because you are not going to lay a single unworthy finger on her. If you care about saving her life, you can help by staying out of the way, so I suggest" - there he broke off and looked down at Buffy, clutching her tighter and then sinking to his knees as his face returned to its human guise.

Evidently she was coming to, though Riley from his vantage point could neither see nor hear any sign of it. "Buffy? Buffy!" Angel cupped her face in his hands, ignoring everything else around him, and the team looked at Riley for direction. Torn, Riley hesitated momentarily, then waved at them to lower their guns, doing the same with his own.
"Angel?" It was Buffy's voice, weak and beautiful and heartbreaking. Her face was showing now, just clearly enough for Riley to see the terrible shape she was in. "Angel, what- where are- oh God, Mom! Angel, I...I..."

"Shhh. I know. I've got you. Buffy, listen to me, I need you to remember." Angel's manner had changed entirely; now he spoke softly and stroked her hair with soothing motions. "Can you remember how many there were?"

Buffy shook her head, her eyes squeezed close. "Five," she said. "Six. Seven. There were seven."

"Seven is how many I killed," Angel answered. "So you're safe now. It's over."

"Where are we?" she asked in a barely audible whisper.

At this, Angel looked away from her for the first time to glare up at Riley and the other men, still standing over him in a circle. "I'm taking you to the hospital," he said firmly, an answer clearly meant for Riley as much Buffy.

There was nothing left that Riley could do. He stepped back and gestured at his men to do the same, and as Angel gathered Buffy into his arms again she caught sight of him for the first time. "Riley?" she said, sounding more confused than anything, and then Angel was running away with her again and there was no chance to even explain.

"What do we do now?" asked Carter. A man who needed something to follow, that one.

Riley threw up his hands in frustration. "I guess we go find Giles."

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Angel carried Buffy into the emergency room with an incredible sense of deja vu. At least this time, he thought, he wasn't the one responsible for what had happened to her, but no, this was worse, this was a new low and it was going to continue to plunge before it began to get better. Every time he even began to process his gratitude that he had found her still alive, it would be crushed by the realization that she still had to be told what had happened to her mother. She herself wasn't out of danger yet either, though Angel knew enough about blood loss to feel confident that she was at a point from which she could fully recover. One thing at a time.

He had kept her conscious on the way there by talking to her, and though she spoke little, her eyes stayed open and fixed on him. When the staff brought out a cot for him to lie her down in, she grabbed his hand and wouldn't let go, and he walked alongside as they wheeled her away. He tried to fill them in on any information that would help, though there wasn't much about the actual facts that they would have believed, and they nodded and conferred with each other and moved quickly. Their professionalism calmed Angel somewhat, though he was wondering what he could do if they told him he had to leave the room. He couldn't just walk away from her now, but this was no time to be making a scene, either.

When they reached the operating room, though, Buffy was the one who addressed that problem. "Please let him stay," she said suddenly to the nearest nurse, her eyes wild and desperate. "I need him to stay with me." Angel squeezed her hand.

"He can stay," the nurse assured her. "Don't you worry about that."

It was an unexpected and gratifying answer, and Buffy and Angel both fell over themselves thanking her until she shushed them gently. "Just stand where you are," she instructed Angel, and then made way for a doctor with a syringe.
As soon as Buffy registered that they were going to put her under she began objecting, but the staff and Angel together managed to convince her that it was for the best. The medication took effect quickly, and her breath soon came more evenly as her hand loosened its grip on Angel's. At that point, the same nurse who had allowed him to stay came over and asked him to leave.

Seeing his confusion, she explained, "We didn't want to frighten her while she was still conscious, but now we need space to do our work. You can be back at her side by the time she wakes up, and she'll never know you were gone."

It was a reasonable approach and Angel didn't want to fight it. He leaned down to kiss Buffy's hand, found out which room they'd be taking her to after the operation, and wandered out to the lobby. He had hardly taken a few steps before he saw the crowd: Giles, Willow, Xander, Oz, Anya...and Riley. They had apparently just arrived, all out of breath and clustering around the reception desk, and when Willow saw him she exclaimed out loud and they all turned as one and hurried over to him, various expressions of concern painting their faces.

Overwhelmed by the number of Buffy's loved ones and the distressing news he had to give them, Angel focused on their leader- Giles- and spoke directly to him. "She's going to live. She's going to heal. But it's bad."

Giles took these words in grave silence, but Xander spoke up. "But what happened?"

"She was bitten by vampires," Anya informed him. "Riley told us, remember?"

Angel nodded wearily. "Attacked by vampires, bitten by vampires, chained by vampires..."

"...Rescued by vampires..." Riley muttered. He looked up to see everyone staring at him, and wisely closed his mouth.

"But Buffy kills vampires all the time!" Willow wailed. "What was different? How come they got her this time?"

Giles placed a hand on her shoulder and spoke gently. "Willow, I'm not sure there's much use in looking for that kind of answer. Even Buffy could be overwhelmed by facing too many enemies on her own, and it only takes one mistake..."

"No, she's right," Angel interrupted. "Buffy said there were seven of them, but I fought all seven and won, and that was after they were powered up. If I beat them she should have been able to, too. There has to be something more to this."

Oz cleared his throat. "Powered up?"

"On Slayer's blood. It can heighten a vampire's strength for a while, and some of the ones I fought...well, they were stronger than they should have been." He had realized this in the middle of the fight, and the terror that it had ignited in him flared up again as he explained. He hadn't been able to see her, and he hadn't known if she was still alive, and for a moment he hadn't even been sure that he was going to win the fight...

Nobody seemed to know quite how to take the information about Slayer's blood. Willow had started crying quietly, and Oz pulled her towards himself so she could bury her face in his chest. Xander crossed his arms and turned away, and Anya looked anxiously around at what everyone else was doing.

"How do you know that?" Riley's voice was cold, and he stared right at Angel. He was making an accusation and he knew it.
"Connections," Angel replied, just as coldly.

"Right, of course," Riley said. "So you killed seven of them, huh? And some were powered up? Gee, I wonder how powered up you must have been to even those odds..."

It was more than Angel could take. He grabbed Riley by his shoulders, pushing him away from the others and against the lobby's wall. There were few strangers around at this hour, and the Scoobies, for whatever reason, made no move to stop him. He at least restrained himself from going into his vampire face, but he made no other attempt to conceal his fury. "I came when she needed me. I found her. I went in there and I fought for her life and I got her out, and where did I find you? Still out with your buddies, playing war games. You want to know what your great accomplishment in all this was, Riley? You delayed me. You held me back while I was trying to get her to the hospital, and you did it because you didn't want to believe that I could be trusted. Now that was just a few minutes, and as it turned out, those few minutes didn't cost her life. But there wasn't any way you could have known that at the time, was there?" He loosened his grip and stepped back a little. Riley actually looked a little scared, or at least stricken. Angel finished his piece before letting up completely: "Right now I have a few very good reasons to not harm you." He gave Riley one last murderous look. "But don't make me question them."

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"...And some of my clothes...No, I should have enough weapons here. Listen, I'll also need some books, do you have a pen? Okay, Aurelius and Other Orders, the first three volumes of Blood Chronicles, The Life and Death of Catherine the Relentless...because it has a passage about a Slayer's healing abilities. And talk to Wesley, he might have a few other ideas...Good, I'll meet you tonight at the mansion. Oh, I have to go, I think she's waking up. Thanks, Cordelia. See you later."

Buffy kept her eyes closed for a few minutes after she woke. Pain was waking up all over her body at the same time, but otherwise things weren't so bad. She was in a soft bed, and as long as she couldn't see anything, she could live in a world which was just a soft bed and that dear, familiar voice. He was there and nothing else mattered. Eventually, though, she had to take a look at him to be sure, and she slowly forced her eyes open.

"Hey." He smiled down at her, though his eyes were sad.

"Hi, Angel." Her voice came out as a croak, and she tried coughing it back to normal, but that hurt her throat. He understood her anyway. He touched her fingers lightly, and she curled them around his hand.

"You don't have to talk if you don't feel up to it. I'm not going anywhere."

"No, I do." She coughed again, but her voice was getting stronger as she spoke. "I do have to talk. Angel, I think I remember...there was a thing in the house, and we were attacked outside, and, and I remember my mom..." She looked into his eyes as she trailed off. "Did...did that really happen?"

When he replied his voice was full of compassion, but he didn't flinch. "Yes," he said. "She was killed. Buffy, I'm so sorry."

For a long time, she didn't have to talk anymore. For a long time, nothing else mattered.

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When the Scoobies returned to the hospital it was just Giles, Willow, and Xander, all of them looking as worn out as Angel felt. Xander was carrying a brightly colored bouquet; Willow had a big box of chocolate and a travel mug, the latter giving off the welcome scent of blood. "Bless you,"

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Angel said gratefully as she handed it to him. "I thought I was just going to have to go without for another day."

Xander shot her a confused glance. "I thought that was coffee."

Angel stayed outside of the room while the three of them visited with Buffy, figuring his presence would just take up more space. As he had anticipated, Buffy had been nervous about receiving visitors in the state she was in. He knew she needed to face them sooner or later, not only for her own sake but for theirs, but rather than lecture her about responsibility he had chosen to concentrate on telling her how much they loved her and wouldn't judge her, and eventually she had agreed to see them- just the three of them. Oz and Anya, and Willow's friend Tara, were still at the Summers house, fixing it up for Buffy's return. Riley had not been heard from since Angel sent him out of the hospital, and Buffy had not asked about him.

It was hard to be away from her, even for a few minutes, but Angel took the opportunity to stretch his legs and sip from the cup of blood. He could hear conversation coming from the room, and though he couldn't make out most of the words, the tone was light and calm. Nothing to worry about. He had thoughts of taking a walk around the hospital- it was late morning, so he was confined to the inside of it, but there might be some space to cover just to keep himself occupied- but before he could make up his mind, Giles poked his head out of the room and beckoned to him. Angel hurried back in and took his spot next to the bed. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," said Buffy. "Just missed you." Her eyes moved from him to the others and back again, and he realized that she wanted him to find a way to make them leave. He winced. Apparently all three at once had been too much pressure after all.

"How are you feeling? Sleepy yet?"

Buffy nodded, a little too quickly. "Yeah, way tired. All of this being wounded in bed is taking its toll, I just wanna sleep and sleep..."

Giles took the hint first. "Perhaps we should leave Buffy to get her rest. We'll be nearby, Buffy, if there's anything you need. Angel, when you have a moment..." He gestured vaguely at the door before exiting, and the others followed, murmuring goodbyes in tones of forced cheerfulness.

Angel took Buffy's hand and kissed her forehead. "Not really sleepy?"

"I wish I were. I can't get comfortable with my foot up like this. My back feels like it's on fire. Aaand...whine whine whine. Your tolerance for whining is magnificent. How long have you been here, anyway?"

He smiled. "About as long as you have."

"And it's daylight now."

"Yeah, but that's not a problem." He held up the travel mug. "Got everything I need to camp out until the daylight stops. And they should be letting you out tomorrow morning."

"Really?"

"Don't jinx it." He leaned closer, setting his cup on the floor away from her. "Will you be okay here tonight if I leave for a while? Giles can stay with you, or Willow, whoever you want. I'll just stop at the mansion, do a quick patrol, check back in, and then I can be waiting at your house when you get there tomorrow."
Buffy groaned unexpectedly, and Angel was already trying to backpedal before she stopped him. "Nothing wrong with that plan, I just hate it when someone else has to patrol for me. Don't get me wrong, I know you can handle it. I just want to get back on my feet as soon as humanly possible and not have you covering my responsibilities."

"Your responsibility right now is to get better. Mine is to help you get better. So patrolling is my job, not yours." Secretly he worried that she would even talk so soon about getting back on her feet. She had hardly been rescued for a day.

"Mm," she agreed, still clearly dissatisfied, but then an aide came in with a meal on a tray and she had no chance to continue. She put on a smile and thanked the aide, but after he left she poked the food with her fork and looked almost queasy.

"It's been a while since I've eaten, hasn't it?" she asked.

Angel nodded. "At least a couple days."

"So why doesn't this look more appetizing?" She set down the fork and sighed. "Feels like my insides are at war and I'm not sure whose side the stomach is on."

"Please eat," he requested quietly. Something in his voice must have told her that he was serious, and she frowned but started eating.

"Only for you," she said. "And it's probably cheating if I just finish all the Jell-O, right?"

He cracked a grin. "Jell-O isn't food."

"Don't knock it until you've tried it. And I bet you never have tried it, have you?"

"If I say no, is this going to end with Jell-O in my mouth?"

She smiled- a real smile this time- and scooped up a quivering red cube on her spoon. "Good idea. Just for the sake of the argument, you know."

Seizing on the opportunity to please her in some small way, he let her feed him the spoonful and rolled it around in his mouth, unsure of what to do with it. She saw his grimace and giggled, and he swallowed the whole lump with an exaggerated shudder. "I think I win the argument. I at least know what food feels like and that was definitely not food."

"You'd probably understand if you could taste it better."

"Maybe. What flavor was it?"

"Red."

"It's my sense of taste that's deficient, not my color vision."

She shrugged. "Flavors don't apply to Jell-O. Just colors. Welcome to the world of synthetic sustenance." She turned back to her tray and the lighthearted spell they had shared began to fade. "Wow. For a moment there I kind of forgot..."

He nodded, not needing her to finish the sentence. "Is that bad?"

"I'm not sure. It didn't feel bad." She met his eyes, her hand still pushing the fork into her food. "You just take me back, is all."

"I'll take you wherever you want to be." He brushed a lock of her hair back from her eyes, and then
remembered Giles and stood up. "Mind if I step out for a moment?"

"Go 'head. Hey, if Willow and Xander are still out there..."

"I'll send them in." He pointed at her tray of food. "Don't cheat."

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Giles stayed in the corridor to talk to Angel; they couldn't see Buffy through her room's window, but they were close enough to come quickly if anyone in there called for them. For a moment they were both silent, looking towards the room as if there were answers there, unsure of where to start.

"How is she?" Giles asked finally. He didn't think he needed to specify his meaning. Along with his fierce devotion to Buffy, Angel had a touch of Watcher in him. He could look through his own emotional turmoil in times like this and analyze the situation, see what was needed.

Sure enough, Angel bypassed all talk about her physical condition and went right to the heart of the matter. "Mostly in denial. She's not acting crazy or anything, she's just not ready to think about what happened. She understands that her mother is dead. She cried about that. She can grieve, I think, get through it in time."

Giles nodded. "And the rest of it?"

Angel took his time answering. He was still holding the travel mug that Willow had brought for him, and his knuckles went white on the handle for a moment before he leveled his gaze and spoke. "I think you're going to have to be the one to talk to her about that. I don't want anyone else try to approach it before you do."

"Why is that?"

"Because you're the only one of her friends I know of who has been tortured."

The silence that followed was an ugly one. Giles didn't want to be thinking of anything but Buffy, but Angel's presence alone was sometimes a forcible reminder of that day, and the two of them had never actually discussed it. Furthermore, Giles wasn't at all sure that the experience could help him with counseling Buffy. He swallowed hard. "And what about yourself? Haven't you been tortured as well?"

"A few times. And there was Hell. But for me it's too old, too much a part of me." He made a motion as if to brush it off, dismissing his own history of torment. "I don't want it to be a part of her. I want her to recover."

"Yes, of course."

Another silence. Angel broke it with a question, his voice betraying no emotion but curiosity. "Do you still hate me, Giles?"

Giles couldn't answer for a moment, and Angel filled the gap by saying, "You don't have to tell me." A noble gesture in its own way. "I always thought it would just insult you if I tried to apologize, but if it would help..."

Giles shook his head firmly. "No. No apology." He breathed in, feeling strangely grateful for his own dependence on oxygen. "Angel, I have studied you and your case extensively. I understand the nature of the soul as well as anyone can claim to, and I know how its absence applies to vampires and how losing and regaining it affected you. Buffy has the extraordinary ability to keep you and
Angelus separate in her mind, and that is something that I cannot fully acquire, but I can at the least use my intellect to pardon you when my intuition falls short. You have grievously harmed me and those I care for, but given your remorse and the punishment you've already endured for it, I see nowhere to take my complaints. I don't hate you."

Angel relaxed visibly upon hearing this, and Giles wondered if this exchange meant more to him than he was willing to admit. It was a rare moment of acceptance between them. Giles wished he could leave it at that, but instead he plowed on: "But I fear you."

The vampire stiffened, his eyes flashing.

"The demon is still there, Angel. You show no sign of it, but I suspect it takes more control than you'd like us to know. You left Buffy for all the right reasons, but now that it seems she needs you here again, I can only hold my breath and hope that someone else has a plan. I trust you because I have no choice. I still fear you."

He had nothing more to say and no way to soften what he already had, so he turned away without another word and went back to Buffy's hospital room to collect Willow and Xander. Angel remained in the corridor until all three were leaving, and barely nodded when they wished him farewell. Giles glanced once over his shoulder as they departed and saw that Angel was still standing just outside the doorway, looking for all the world like he was afraid to enter.

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Angel had lived in the mansion for a relatively short time in his life, but it was full of memories, not all of them pleasant. He steeled himself as he approached the front door, and having no key on him, prepared to break the lock, but instead the door swung open as his hand touched the knob. Well, that could mean anything. He knew he had left it locked up, but it had been over a year since he'd been back, and all kinds of people might have decided to go in and take a look in the meantime.

He moved silently through the antechamber, and saw them before they saw him: two vampires, both young and male, lounging on Angel's couches and talking of trivialities. Angel sized them up and chose the stupider-looking one to kill first. He pulled a stake out of his pocket, came up behind the couch, and dusted the vampire before either of them had a chance to rise. The other reacted with a shriek, stumbling and tripping over the furniture as he tried to get away, but there was really nowhere for him to go anyway, and in seconds he was on the floor with Angel's foot planted on his chest.

"You're going to tell me everything you know about the attack on the Slayer and her family."

The vamp's eyes widened. "Holy shit, you're Angelus."

Angel tapped his stake against his fingers. "Not only that, but I'm pissed off and impatient. Short fuse. Tell me who was involved aside from the ones who died for it last night."

"Last night?...Hey! You killed my sire!"

Maybe this was the stupider one after all. Angel kicked him in the face, careful not to break his jaw, and let the pain speak for itself as he pinned him down again. He didn't think this was going to have to escalate into a full-scale inquisition, but sometimes Angelus's reputation alone just wasn't enough.

"I don't know anything!" the vampire yelled. "There was some big plan, lots of whispering, I wasn't part of it! Even my sire said I'd screw it up if he let me join them! You know as much as I do, I swear!"

"Uh huh. Except I don't know what you're doing in my house."
"I just needed a place to sleep! Come on, nobody thought you were ever coming back!"

That much at least was likely. Angel himself hadn't thought he was ever coming back. On the other hand, he could have sold the mansion, but he had kept it...just in case? "Give me the name of anyone who's still plotting against the Slayer, and I'll let you go."

"There isn't anyone! I don't know!" The vampire was headed towards full panic, but it changed to confusion when Angel lifted his foot off of his chest and let him up. He staggered to his feet and gave Angel a long, suspicious look. He didn't believe he was being given his life.

He had good reason. Angel took one step forward and plunged the stake into his heart. The vampire had time for his expression to evolve into full-blown shock, and then he was ashes. Angel dusted some of them off of his sleeve and slipped the stake back into his pocket. The mansion was going to need some heavy duty cleaning. It was going to need a thorough inspection before being pronounced free of more squatters, too. He was just glad he had gotten there before Cordelia.

While waiting for her he searched each room for anything out of the ordinary, checked all the locks and windows, and straightened up what he could. There was enough furniture and tools left to make the place livable, and even a few rare items and works of art that he had forgotten about. One window was broken, probably the work of the two trespassers, but that was easily fixed. All in all, it was in good condition, aside from being big and dark and overstocked with questionable memories.

Feeling the need to occupy himself with something, he starting fixing the lock on the front door. Cordelia showed up while he was working on it, her heels clacking loudly as she hurried up the walkway. "Angel!" she panted. "Okay, tell me everything."

"There's nothing new to tell. She's asleep in the hospital." He peered outside at the moon. "I've got a few hours before sunrise. I want to put a few things in order before they take her home in the morning."

"On it! Help me get your stuff out of the car."

The luggage was piled up in the trunk and back seat of Wesley's borrowed car. "Wow, Cordy," said Angel. "You brought my entire wardrobe." He unzipped a bag to reveal its brand-new contents, price tags still hanging off of the clothing on top. "...And then some. What's this about?"

She gathered up a couple of the smaller bags and rolled her eyes. "Please, do you even realize how fast you go through clothes? Blood stains don't just come out in the wash. Neither do bullet holes, for that matter. Besides, shopping on the company's dime? Pretty much a good time even if it's not for me. Don't worry, I've got your style down pat."

Angel smiled. Cordelia's attitude could be oddly comforting in troubled times. He hauled the rest of the luggage out and followed her back to the house, where they set everything down in the middle of the floor and looked around. "Dark," Cordelia proclaimed. "But classy, in a...vampire way. I guess I'd be more impressed if I wasn't already used to you living in your own hotel."

"Electricity's not back on yet," Angel explained. "I don't always keep it dark, I swear. It's not in bad shape but I still need to take care of that, and the plumbing, fix a window, get some firewood, dust the living hell out of it..."

Cordy sneezed. "And here I thought I could only notice that dust because of my pesky breathing habits. Look, don't sweat that stuff, I got it. Once it's daytime and I can see the dustpan, anyway. You go dote on your girl, or whatever your plans are."
He nodded slowly and picked up some clean clothes to change into. "Actually I was going to check out the nightlife."

"Be careful," Cordelia said, then flipped her hair and laughed at herself. "Duh. Anyway, I'll be in town for a few days so I'll catch up with you tomorrow. And no offense but I'm totally not camping out in this place tonight."

"I'm sure someone will put you up. And thank you. For everything."

"Just doin' my job," she assured him. Then her face grew more serious. "But hey, Angel. It looks like you're really settling in. Like you're gonna be here for a while. Any idea...?"

He shook his head helplessly. "I was hoping your visions would tell me. But if they don't" - he added hurriedly, seeing her begin an objection - "then I'll keep you informed. I don't really know what to expect here but I know they're going to need me."

"Agreed!" She flashed him another wide, disarming smile. "Go kill something. You'll feel better."

***

Buffy was fast asleep when Angel checked in shortly before dawn, his patrol having come up empty. It would have been a stretch to say that she was sleeping peacefully, though. Her eyelids fluttered and her hands twitched, and even her heartbeat didn't seem to be at quite the right pace. He laid a hand on her shoulder to wake her from her nightmare, but Willow's tired voice stopped him.

"Don't bother. She hasn't slept any better than this all night, and she's gotta sleep sometime, right?"

"Yeah," he said, drawing back. He turned his attention to Willow and they spoke in hushed tones. "Are you doing okay here?"

"Not the best night of my life." Indeed, her face was haggard and her eyes were puffy. She was balled up on a cushioned chair, covered with a quilt, but Angel doubted she had done any sleeping herself. "But I'm coping. I'm so glad we're bringing her home tomorrow."

"Me too," he replied. It was half a lie. He knew Buffy wanted out of the hospital as soon as possible, but he thought of the way she would feel when she went back to her house and it didn't have a mother in it, and wished for an alternative.

Willow reached for the little digital clock on the night table and then turned her bleary eyes back to Angel. "Shouldn't you be...?"

"I should." He gave Buffy a goodbye kiss, lightly enough to keep her from waking. "Everything under control for tomorrow?"

"Uh huh. When can you get to her house?"

"I'm headed there now. I'll see you in the morning." He turned to go.

"Hey, but-" She called him back, then hesitated. "Nobody's there right now. Do you have a key?"

Angel smiled sadly as the memories rushed in. "I won't need one. She's never locked that bedroom window."

***

Despite the constant churning of his mind, despite his desire to be up and alert at all times, despite the
powerful feelings brought on by being in her room, Angel slept. He lay down on her bed, still fully dressed, and let the scent of her blankets comfort him until the strain of the last few days caught up and he dozed off. He was woken by the sound of the door being opened downstairs and the voices of Buffy and several others. It was bright and sunny outside, but last night he had taken the precaution of pulling the drapes on all of the windows to make it safe for himself in the morning. He jumped up and rushed to the stairs.

She wasn’t accompanied by the complete crew again, just Giles, Oz, and a still-exhausted Willow. Buffy herself was in a wheelchair and clearly hating it; Angel saw her swat Giles's hands away from the handles as soon as they had cleared the doorway so she could propel it herself. She glanced around the room. "Hey, you minimized the fallout. Looks good."

"Yeah, and we had such a good time doing it that we partied here all night just so we could clean all over again," Oz offered. "We're thinking of making it a weekly thing."

Angel descended the rest of the stairs, and Buffy smiled when she saw him. "Angel."

"Buffy." He knelt next to her wheelchair and they clasped hands. She looked better. For Buffy, anything as minor as a bruise tended to clear up overnight, so there was little evidence on her face of her ordeal. Her foot was in a light cast, and she wore loose and comfortable clothes. No cross around her neck. He wondered if he should go get her one from her room.

Without asking for help, Buffy aligned her position with the couch that Willow had already flopped onto and used her arms to push herself into a half-standing position. Everyone in the room automatically moved towards her to lend a hand, and she managed to glare them all away without saying a thing. In a few awkward seconds she had heaved herself from the chair to the couch. She gave the chair a shove. "Can we get rid of this thing, like, immediately and forever?"

"If you wish," said Giles, "but we're allowed to rent it until-

"No."

"Very well."

Everyone stood or sat there for a moment looking at each other with blank expressions on worn out faces. Buffy broke the silence bluntly. "When do we bury my mom?"

Giles answered with cautious words. "The arrangements have been made. We were waiting to hold the funeral until you were with us again."

"We can do it tomorrow," Willow told her. "I talked to them. The people."

Buffy put her hand over her friend's. "Thanks Will. Tomorrow is good."

"Do you want to talk about her?" Angel asked, knowing she wouldn't, knowing they couldn't change the topic until he had asked.

"Not right now. Actually, if you don't mind, I think I'd really like to be alone for a little while." She looked up at the stairs, down at her broken foot, over to the wheelchair, and then up at Angel. "Take me upstairs?"

This time she really did look sleepy, and he also believed that she really did want to be alone, so after settling her into her bed he went back downstairs to the living room. Willow had spread out to the full length of the couch, and finally had her eyes closed for some actual rest. Oz was sitting on the floor in front of her, idly stroking her fingers with his own, and Giles was on the phone with
somebody in the other room. Angel dropped into a chair and massaged his temples. This would have been a good time to study the books that Cordelia had brought them, but they were all at the mansion. He was essentially stuck in the house until nightfall, and then he would have to leave Buffy again to patrol, and at some point he needed to find a time and place to sleep. How was this going to work?

"Tossed that ring, huh?"

Angel looked up. Oz was addressing him, casual as ever, but Angel couldn't pin down his meaning. That ring? Did he mean the claddagh ring? Oz had never even seen it, as far as he remembered. Then it came to him. "The Gem of Amarra. Yeah, it's gone. Everyone told me I was going to regret it, and you know what? I do."

Oz shrugged. "To be honest I thought it was kinda gaudy. Besides, where's the thrill in life if getting set on fire doesn't even pose a threat?"

"That's one way to look at it." The mention of the ring made him think of Doyle, hero for a day and then gone forever. It was his visions, passed on to Cordelia, that had alerted Angel to Buffy's disappearance. Doyle's gift was still at work, helping to save lives, and that was a comforting thought.

"She's gonna be okay," Oz said softly, still looking at Angel, still caressing Willow's hand. She hadn't moved or opened her eyes since Angel came downstairs, evidently undisturbed by his quiet conversation with her boyfriend. Angel raised an eyebrow, but had no other response.

"She will," Oz repeated. "She's Buffy. You saved her, now just trust her."

"I didn't save her soon enough," countered Angel. "She was down there for two days. Two days, Oz. Alone. Afraid. Grieving." He shook his head. "I left town to try to keep her safe, and then this happens and I'm not around to stop it. What am I supposed to think? Every choice I make seems to end up hurting her in one way or another."

"Life on the Hellmouth. The monsters suck but it's the moral dilemmas that really get you."

"Hm." Angel sat back and shut up for a moment. He was surprised that he had opened up that much just now, and relieved that Oz didn't claim to have a solution for him. The Hellmouth had dealt a lousy hand to both of them, and he didn't mind commiserating on it a little. "How's that werewolf thing working out for you?"

"Could be worse." Oz held up the hand that wasn't entwined with Willow's. It was wrapped in a string of finely crafted beads, recognizable as some kind of magic charm. "Full moons not so much an issue anymore."

As Angel was congratulating him, Giles reentered the room. "I've called Xander and Anya over, I think there is a great deal of discussion that needs to take place between us all. Cordelia is with them. I can't seem to get ahold of Riley, however."

Angel held his tongue. Oz asked, "You think something happened to him?"

"Doubtful. I reached some of his friends, and they say they've heard him coming in and going out, but nobody has actually spoken to him since yesterday." Giles took off his glasses and began cleaning them. "Perhaps something or someone has made him feel unwelcome around us."

That one was a bit harder to ignore, but Angel was saved from trying to defend his actions when Willow woke up- at least a little- and said, "If we do a Scooby meeting here everyone has to be nice
and no yelling."

Oz leaned back and kissed her forehead. "You got it, baby. Just rest. No meeting yet."

Willow closed her eyes, but she didn't go right back asleep. "Joyce got me a Hanukkah teddy bear last year," she said. "It had a little plastic menorah glued to its paw."

Angel had no concept of how much time passed before Xander, Anya, and Cordelia came to the door. Willow had said nothing further, and neither had anyone else.

***

Xander had never thought about exactly how agonizing it would be to have his ex come to town and stay the night in his apartment with himself and his extremely possessive girlfriend. He had never considered that it might actually happen. Honestly, he had never really thought that the universe had a sense of humor that was quite so cruel.

When it did happen, though, there were a few more things happening that he had never expected, first among them being Buffy's deliverance from the hands of her enemies, and against a backdrop like that, the drama of relationships didn't seem that important. Aside from showing her disappointment when she learned that sex was not an option when someone was sleeping on the couch in the next room, Anya hardly complained about Cordelia's presence, and Cordelia's bitchy streak seemed to have faded somewhat since the last time he saw her.

The really odd thing was that the girls hit it off immediately. They had met before, of course, but Cordelia had never gotten Anya's full story, and between that and the stories they each had from the last two years, they hardly stopped talking. Inevitably, Anya brought up her fondness for money, and then they had even more to talk about. Xander himself was the one who eventually left the room to give them space, throwing himself into bed to wait for Anya to get tired and join him.

Before she did, though, he heard Cordelia shriek and went scrambling out of bed to the living room, where she was curled up on the floor clutching her head. "I didn't touch her!" Anya insisted. "She did this herself!"

"It's okay," Cordy said weakly. "I'm okay, it was just a vision." She pushed herself into a sitting position, still rubbing her head.

"A vision?" Xander echoed. He wished he had paid attention to what people had been saying about Angel Investigations.

"Yeah, I get visions now. Graphic images of the atrocity du jour, set to the tune of searing pain. It's a barrel of sadistic monkeys. I need an aspirin. And some water. And-" she hesitated, wrinkling her brow as if she had just noticed something. "Huh, that's weird. Can I use your phone?"

***

"You know, catching up with old friends isn't as simple as it used to be," said Xander to Willow and Oz as he entered the Summers house. He pointed to Cordelia, who was coming in right behind him with Anya. "She gets visions of people in danger. Did you see that coming? I did not see that coming."

Angel got up from his seat and rushed over to Cordelia. "You had a vision? Why didn't you call me?"

Cordelia smiled broadly, not a typical expression for her to be wearing when visions were involved.
"'Cause it wasn't for you, hotshot. Figured I could let you sleep."
"It wasn't for...what do you mean?"

She sighed. "Look, don't ask me how I know, it was just part of the vision. Every other time I've
gotten one, it's given me an Angel vibe, but this time it had Wesley and Gunn written all over it. I
called them right away and they're hard at work on it, so just chill and let them do their jobs."

Angel considered this. "Are you sure?"
"If I wasn't I'd say so, don't you think?" Cordy scolded. "And I'd say so if I didn't think Wesley and
Gunn could handle it. Really loudly, in fact."

"Alright," he surrendered. The last thing he wanted was to be called back to LA right now, anyway.
"But what was the vision?"

She shrugged. "Something with an orange tongue. So, we're gonna do a meeting here?"

The dining room table was big enough for the seven of them to gather around, though they had to
find extra chairs from around the house. Everyone sat down awkwardly, feeling a formality in the
occasion that didn't quite fit. Angel suspected that his presence, and possibly Cordelia's, had
something to do with it- the rest of them probably had frequent meetings during all kinds of
circumstances. He realized, too late to amend, that the chair he had chosen was at the head of the
table, and hoped nobody would think he was trying to take over.

All the same, he spoke first. He didn't want to waste time with social courtesies, and he was the one
with the most information. "Okay, so I think what we're dealing with here is someone's long term
strategy to get rid of the Slayer. I'm guessing it's all vampires this time; they're the ones most
threatened by her and most likely to target her directly."

Anya's hand shot into the air. Angel stared at her for a moment. Was he supposed to call on her like
this was a classroom? She didn't wait for permission, though, just said, "What about the thing?"
He stared again. She looked around the table for support. "The thing? Didn't Buffy say there was a
thing in her house and it chased them outside?"

"Oh, right. That thing. We'll see if we can identify it when she's ready to tell us more, but I think it
could have been some kind of summoned hellbeast. Savage, hard to kill, but no intelligence of its
own. The vampires would have set it loose in there to get her away from the protection of the house
and into their trap, and it probably got automatically ported back to its home dimension afterwards."

"So if they had her trapped, why didn't they kill her?" asked Xander.

Giles answered this time. "They wouldn't want a new Slayer to be called," he said. "Vampires
attempt to kill Slayers all the time, but I expect all of them would prefer to, ah, have her in captivity if
they could manage to take her alive."

Angel could have added to that, but he didn't want to talk about Slayer's blood. He didn't want to
think about it, either. How many times had they drank from her? Had she screamed? Struggled?
Passed out? He tried to shake the images out of his head and concentrate.

"Well, automatic disappearance of the hellbeast thing is good news, right?" asked Willow hopefully.

There were a few scattered shrugs and halfhearted nods around the table, but Giles brought it back to
the cold truth. "Good news if it's true, but even so, not everything has disappeared." He looked
squarely at Angel. "Has it?"
"No. Nobody but her and her mother saw what really happened that night, but it's safe to say she went down fighting. Before they knocked her out she must have killed a few, maybe a lot. And that plus the seven who were guarding her...it's too many."

"Too many vampires to kill?" said Cordelia. "Uh, why?"

"Too many vampires to be involved," Angel corrected her. "Vampires don't work in groups that big. A few might form a nest or travel together, but too many in one place means too much competition. And they might enjoy each other's company, but they're not going to make sacrifices for each other, so any organized attack falls apart pretty quickly once they're put in real danger. It's very unlikely that this was just the result of some locals getting together and starting a Capture-the-Slayer club."

"Then what was it?" Oz prompted.

That was the real question, of course, and now the real theorizing had to begin. "There had to be some kind of network that kept them all in communication, and there have to be some of them left to question if we can just find them. We're also going to be looking for some individual who's leading it, someone old, influential. Probably from a prestigious order, unless they started a new one just for this."

He saw Giles pull out a small notebook and make a few hasty notes. "You got some ideas?" he asked, trying to see what was being written.

Giles adjusted his glasses and kept writing without looking up. "More like stray thoughts. There are a few orders I'd like to investigate, especially the ones we've encountered here before, Aurelius perhaps..."

Angel shook his head. "It's not Aurelius, they haven't been worth the mention since the Master died. Might be one that branched off of it at some point, though. Do you have a copy of Librum Gentis?"

Xander cut in before Giles answered. "Okay, did all that go over anyone else's head, and if so, can we just let the two of them go gossip about it and come back when there's something the rest of us can contribute?"

"I can contribute," Anya protested. "I mean, I can gossip about vampire orders. There was always a lot of gossip when one of those broke up, I'll tell you that."

Giles sighed. "I suppose at this point the next step is research. Anyone who wants to join in can meet me at the Magic Box, all of the books are there. Are we finished here for now?"

"One more thing." Angel's voice sounded weary in his own ears, but he spoke firmly as he looked around the table at everyone. "If she's okay with it, I want to move Buffy to the mansion."

The reaction to this proposal was loud, upset, and inevitable. Everyone spoke at once, but it was Willow's voice, full of anguish and indignation, which stood out to Angel. "You can't just, just isolate her like that! I know you don't want to crowd her but we all get that and she needs all of us, not just you!"

"I know," he answered, trying to sound reassuring. "I'm not going to isolate her. You're all welcome to visit any time you want to and she wants you to. My point is that I think my place is safer. It's like a fortress at night when it's locked up."

Giles cleared his throat. "Fortress it may be, but it has one, ah, disqualifying feature as far as safety is concerned. You're not human, Angel. Vampires can enter your home uninvited."
"Not if Buffy lives there too."

Clearly this had not occurred to Giles. "That's an interesting theory," he said, removing his glasses and furrowing his brow. "Probably unprecedented, a vampire and a human living in the same house. Offhand I can't think of any reason it wouldn't work, but..."

"But it's kind of irrelevant when we're looking at the bigger picture?" Xander snapped, unable to hold back any longer. "Is that what you were going to say? Something about how Angel gets too close to Buffy and his happiness clause kicks in and then he kills her in her bed so no one else has to do it, oh, and then he goes after the rest of us-"

He was cut off here by Angel standing up and slamming his hands down on the table. "Didn't see that happening at any point in the last three years," he growled, "even in the best of conditions. You think I would even approach the idea of sex in the state she's in now?" His voice was getting steadily louder, and he nearly shouted the last couple sentences. "Buffy has been ravaged. Happiness is the last thing on my mind!"

Complete silence lingered around the table for a few seconds, broken at last by Oz's softly spoken question: "Still here, Angel?" It wasn't until then that Angel realized he had taken on his vampire face. He quickly morphed back and slumped back into his chair, feeling shamed.

The debate carried on, but Angel won. He wished he could think of it as convincing the group that he was right rather than 'winning,' but he had the uncomfortable feeling that he had simply worn them down. He at least was convinced that he was right, though, so when he saw the opening, he said, "I'll go ask what she wants to do," and went upstairs.
"And he thinks he's so cool because he's got a long black coat and super strength! And he drinks blood! And that's disgusting! And he has a girly name!"

Xander paused for breath and Anya said helpfully, "You're angry because Angel is back, and you don't like him."

Anya was standing at the register at the Magic Box, paging through order forms, and Xander was on the other side of the counter, leaning on it. He picked up a miniature bottle from a display full of them and toyed with it. "Yes, Anya, I don't like him. For the reasons I just mentioned and also because he is sometimes a psychotic killer."

She plucked the bottle out of his hand. "Don't touch that. If you shake them too hard they summon little fairies which are difficult to clean up after. You think he's going to kill us all?"

"No. Well, yes. Well, no, not really." He tapped his fingers on the counter, frustrated. "It's just...he's different than he was when he left. He never used to act like this."

"Like what?"

Xander looked up. "Like, in charge. Did you see the way he dominated that meeting? He used to keep to the shadows, go brood all by himself, or whatever."

"Who was in charge before?"

"Giles," said Xander automatically. Then he sighed and shook his head. "No. Buffy."

Anya gestured with the papers in her hand. "But Buffy can't be in charge right now because she's traumatized."

True as it was, that was difficult to hear. "Buffy's been traumatized before," he complained. "She always gets over it and comes back to us." He stopped. "Oh God, I just realized how horrible that sounded."

"I think she'll get over it and come back to us," replied Anya, unfazed. "Some girls need brooding men in black coats to help them get over things. I guess."
Giles came in from another part of the store, holding a book open in front of him and another tucked under his arm. "It's all rubbish," he announced without looking up. "If an established vampiric order is involved, there's no sign of which one it is, and there are any number of ancient vampires in the world who could be pulling the strings. Until we have someone to question, we're completely in the dark."

"But on the bright side of being in the dark, that means we haven't been attacked again yet, right?" Giles looked up. "Oh, hello, Xander. If you're here to help I have a few more volumes you can search..."

"So I can look for something we won't recognize even if we find it?" Xander supplied.

"That's about the size of it, yes."

"I think I'm going to have to pass on this one." He leaned over the counter to give Anya a quick kiss. "Maybe Willy the Snitch knows something. At least I can budget a bribe for the cause."

"Ooh!" said Anya. "Or you could punch him!" She pumped her own fist to demonstrate.

As Xander left the building he heard her explain to Giles, "I like it when he punches people. It's sexy." At least there was someone in town who could still put a smile on his face.

***

Joyce's funeral was held in the daytime, so Angel went to pay his respects later on, by himself. The fresh grave was piled high with flowers of all kinds: there was hardly room for him to set the bouquet of white roses he had brought. For a long time he simply stood there in front of the headstone, wondering what he would be saying to her now if she were alive, wondering what she would be saying to him. The last time they had spoken had been a heart-wrenching moment in Angel's life, one of the crucial steps that led him to his hardest choice. Joyce would have told him that he had done the right thing in leaving, but what would she say now, finding him back in her daughter's life?

For that matter, was he really back in Buffy's life? He had to stay near her for as long as she needed him, there was no question about that, but he hoped he would know when she didn't need him anymore, and that he would have the strength to leave her again. He wanted to talk to her about it, to reiterate the impossibility of resuming their relationship, but it might take some time before he could even bring up any cold hard truths with her. She was dealing with enough of them as it was.

"I promise I'll keep her safe," he said finally to Joyce's grave. "I promise she'll be happy again. I don't know how but I'll find a way."

With that he turned and walked briskly away. There was still time to patrol, and he was already in a cemetery.

***

Packing for Buffy was a simple matter and the ride to the mansion was swift and mostly silent. Buffy was still recovering from her mother's funeral earlier in the day. She looked dazed, but she was lucid, and alternated long looks at Angel with examining the scenery and his Plymouth GTX. "Always wondered what you would drive if you drove," she commented at one point. "Not that I didn't think you could drive." He chuckled, and she almost seemed to smile back at him.

When he carried her to the door they were faced with a confusing dilemma- Angel couldn't get in. There was an invisible barrier, as he'd felt many times before, but this was the mansion, his own home. It didn't make sense.
"What is it?" asked Buffy. He was carrying her in front of himself, but she of course couldn't feel the barrier. She was a human, she couldn't be blocked from an entrance no matter who lived there...

"Oh," he said finally. "Could you invite me in?"

"Huh?"

"You live here now. I guess it took place before you even went in."

"Oh, weird," said Buffy. "I invite you in."

As they crossed the threshold she continued, "New developments in the field of vampiric invitationology. I bet Giles can write a paper on it for the Watcher's Council. Sorry for blocking you from your own house, though."

"No, I'm glad," he said, setting her down carefully on the softest chair. "It's good to think you'll be at home here. Close to me."

She made a sound of consent, showing some emotion that she wasn't ready to release fully, and then changed the subject. "So, what are we going to do all night?"

Memories of nights they had spent together assaulted Angel's mind, and he pushed them away. "Well, we need to change your bandages, but that shouldn't take long. I can build a fire and we can sit down here until you're ready for bed, if you want."

"Okay."

For a long time they spoke very little. Angel concentrated first on the fire and then, when it was blazing, on finding more ways to make her comfortable. Mirrors - he would have to get some mirrors. Buffy would want the mansion to be more girl-friendly.

Every time he glanced at her she was gazing right back at him, a constant scrutiny that would have made him uncomfortable if it had come from anyone else. She was just watching him, though, and for his part he supposed he was doing the same thing to her. He didn't have to use his eyes to watch her; the room was imbued with her scent and he was basking in it.

He brought her upstairs to tend to her injuries, as the bed was the easiest place for him to sit behind her while her foot was burdened by the cast. He took a deep breath as he carefully stripped the bandages from her back, revealing the numerous gashes beneath. They seemed to glare at him, all angry and red and accusing, and before he could bring himself to begin the process of cleaning them he had to put his arms around her first. He held her awkwardly, trying not to touch the raw skin of her back, but she responded by gripping his arms in front of her and tilting her head back to lean against him. All of the misery that Angel had been trying to hide for her sake came to the surface, and he found himself with his cheek pressed against hers, their tears mingling silently, rocking her from side to side.

After a long moment he steadied them both and reached for the water and sponge he had brought to clean out the wounds. To revive them both from their little brush with hysteria he began speaking as he would normally: "I can see them healing already. The bitemarks, too. They probably won't even scar."

She nodded, still facing away from him, and touched the right side of her neck. A bandage remained there, as Angel hadn't gotten to it yet. "Except for this one."

"That's true. You've been bitten there too many times."
She uttered a short, humorless laugh. "Six. Half of them from the last week."

Angel paused after he dipped the sponge back into the bowl of water, doing the math. "The Master...me. There was another?"

Now she sounded almost shy. "Do you know Dracula?"

"Dracula," he muttered. "Yeah, I've met him, the son of a...did you kill him?"

"A couple times, but I guess he's still out there. Angel, I didn't want to let him do it, he's just got that thrall thing and I couldn't get him figured out. I'm, I'm sorry." She sounded it, too.

"Don't say you're sorry. Why would you be sorry? You weren't to blame and anyway it's your own neck. I'm just glad it wasn't anything worse. He's old. He's powerful."

"I know. But I got so angry after it happened, I felt like I shouldn't have let it happen. It's my neck, but..." Her voice dropped to a whisper, and she touched the bandage again. "...This was your spot."

***

Oz knocked on the door of Spike's crypt, then decided that knocking on a crypt was a silly idea and pushed the door open without waiting for an answer. Spike was slouched in an armchair watching daytime television, which would have looked incongruent if they hadn't all seen him doing it already when he was living at Giles's house.

"Bloody hell!" yelled the vampire. "Shut the damn door, you're letting in the sunlight!" He jammed a cigarette into the ashtray beside him and glared at Oz. "And shut it with yourself on the other side of it, while you're at it."

Oz closed the door with his foot, but he took a look around before answering. He hadn't been inside before; Buffy usually claimed the bribery or threatening of Spike as her own job. There wasn't a lot to see in there, just the stone and dust and coffins one expected from a crypt, along with a few modern conveniences that made it look less like someone's home and more like someone's morbid joke.

"Nice place," he said.

"Seems like everyone thinks so, the way you're all barging in at indecent hours. What do you want, anyway? I already told the Slayer's boy toy everything I know."

That was odd. "Angel was already here? What did you tell him?"

Spike gave a choking laugh. "Angel? One of us is seriously out of the loop regarding Buffy's lovelife, mutt. It's that corn-fed GI Joe I'm talking about." He raised an eyebrow, suddenly interested. "D'you mean to say that he hasn't filled you in yet? Well, that doesn't bode well, does it?"

Oz blinked a few times. Nobody had seen nor heard from Riley since the incident. Could he really be trying to solve this independently? "Alright, so what did you tell him?" he said.

"First I'd like to mention that he paid good money to hear it."

"And you think you're getting paid for the same information twice? Nobody's that lucky, man."

Spike leaned back in his chair and put a fresh cigarette in his mouth. "I don't count myself especially lucky," he said around it, "but I do have a knack for profiting from other people's disharmony, and it
looks like your sources are me or the one with unknown motives."

Oz shrugged. "Fair enough. I'll pay you half of what he did."

"Now we're talking. Let's see it."

Money changed hands- it wasn't all that much, so Spike must have been telling the truth, or at least somewhere close to it, when he named Riley's amount. He counted it, tucked it away, and said, "Big Ugly in town, name of Daemonis. Hasn't been in town before this. He's old, attracts minions pretty easily. That's all I got."

"That'll do. Thanks." Oz turned to go, but stopped when he heard Spike laughing. "What?"

"Thanks? You don't thank someone after bribing them, mutt." Spike blew out a cloud of smoke and shook his head, still laughing. "You're a novelty. Tell them to send you again next time."

"I'll put in a request for you." Oz shut the door behind himself. It didn't hurt to be polite.

***

Willow and Xander entered the mansion the next afternoon to find Buffy wrapped in a blanket on Angel's couch, showing no sign of her injuries except for the cast on her propped-up foot. She smiled when she saw them and flapped a hand to beckon them over.

"Buffster!" Xander exclaimed as both he and Willow leaned down to exchange careful hugs with her.

"How's life in Chez Dead Guy?"

"It's good. Look, he's cooking breakfast for me." She pointed across the room to the kitchen area, where Angel had returned to the stove after letting the visitors in. "Angel's cooking," she repeated reverently.

"Bah. I can cook. Lots of guys can cook. Of course the concept that Angel cooks, well that means awards are in order." He paused. "Actually that is kind of weird. How come Angel can cook?"

Buffy shrugged and Xander wandered into the kitchen to ask, as Willow sat down crosslegged on the couch beside Buffy. Effectively alone, they automatically started talking in lower voices, both feeling the need to converse privately, at least for a moment. "You really are okay here?" Willow asked. "Anything you need us to bring?"

"Nah, really I'm fine. Well, not fine, but...he's got everything taken care of. And just having him around again kind of counteracts some of the doom and gloom. I had no idea how much I missed him."

Willow smiled. "Maybe not, but for the rest of us that's a big duh. I talked to Cordelia, she said her vision of you was followed by her own little mental image of you going 'hooray for Angel being back in Sunnydale!' A look of concern crossed her face. "But you're not hooraying too hard, are you? There's a lot you've gotta deal with right now, I don't want you to block it out."

Buffy looked away. "Not making with a lot of hoorays. Earlier today I was sitting right here, and I just started crying, and crying, and don't worry Angel was here for me but I just couldn't stop crying."

"That's good though. You should have a good cry sometimes, because good cries are...good."
"I guess. But last night I apparently started screaming in my sleep, and I'm not sure that's good." Willow winced. "Was Angel there for that, too?"

"He came running. Had to pretty much shake me awake. It was scary."

Before Willow could reply, Angel came in. "It's done," he said. "You want it in here or at the table?"

"Table please." Buffy threw off her blanket and carefully lowered her hurt leg. "I've decided that plates on laps are entirely too wobbly."

"Table it is. Willow, there's enough for everyone if you're hungry." Angel reached down, Buffy reached up, and in one smooth motion he had lifted her up and was carrying her in his arms.

The sight of the Slayer being so openly vulnerable, and the vampire being so openly tender with her, gave Willow a momentary pang. Instead of dwelling on it, she said brightly, "Free late afternoon breakfast? Count me in," and followed them to the kitchen table, where Angel was settling Buffy into a chair across from the one where Xander was already sitting.

Willow was a bit worried that Angel and Xander would start nettling each other- she had been hesitant to come here with just him, but she couldn't exactly tell him that- but they were both civil and she soon accepted that neither was about to do anything to distress Buffy right now. The closest they came to locking horns was when Xander mentioned his bribery of Willy, which had turned up nothing useful. Angel's reaction was, "You don't have to pay that guy, you just tell him you're not putting up with his bullshit." A look from Buffy stopped him from taking it any further, but Willow took a good look at him and could have sworn that he was jealous, as if by talking to Willy, Xander was doing his job.

Otherwise the four of them had a genial meal together, a little quiet at moments but not too forced. And Angel, though he himself had only coffee, actually was a decent cook. She wondered if Xander had actually gotten some kind of explanation on it out of him.

Afterwards Xander suggested they go sit out in the garden. Angel supported this idea immediately, and Buffy joked, "What, trying to get rid of me already?"

Angel looked serious. "No, it's just...you should get some sunlight."

Willow understood, and she thought Buffy did too. No matter how attentive Angel was with his patient, he couldn't take her outside during the day, and if she didn't get her sunshine in one way or another he'd take it as a personal failure.

"If you can get out there alright," Angel added.

"No problem," said Buffy. "I've got one good foot"- she reached out with both arms and Willow and Xander both ducked under one to hold her up- "and two good friends. Sturdy ones. See you in a bit."

A little while later Willow excused herself from the patch of sunlight they were sharing. The reason she gave them was that she had to use the bathroom; the unspoken reason that she was sure they believed was that Xander ought to get a few moments alone with Buffy, too; the real reason was that Willow wanted to see if she could talk to Angel for a few minutes.

She didn't see him when she came back in, so she found the bathroom and then wandered around a little, taking everything in. Angel had a lot of old stuff, old in the way that wasn't shabby and wasn't exactly antique, just ageless, like he was. Some of it gave off vibes that weren't quite clear, but definitely excited the witch in her, and some of it had paranormal uses that she could easily identify.
And the books...she stopped in front of one small set of shelves which held a row of leather-bound volumes behind a locked glass front. She stooped to read the spines, and right away one jumped out at her: a moderately thick brown one titled simply Angelus. She shivered as Angel came over and stood beside her.

"Wow," she said, still focused on the shelf. "Someone wrote a whole book about you."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I just wish I knew if there were any other copies. I guess it doesn't matter."

Willow straightened and peered into Angel's eyes. "Could I borrow it?"

"What?" He raised a hand, as if attempting to ward her off. "Hey, I know you're...naturally curious, and, and studious, but Willow, that's really morbid. There are things in that book that make me nervous, and I'm the one who did them."

She bit her lip and glanced furtively around. Buffy and Xander were out of hearing range, and no one else was around. It was the right time to tell Angel what she had in mind. "I'm working on a spell for you."

He raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. That was enough to put the pressure on, though, and she floundered for the right words to explain it. "It's just- I thought- you're doing a really good thing here, you know? For Buffy. You're just giving her all you've got and you're not expecting anything in return, and this after the whole going-to-Hell thing, which I'm kind of scared to know what that was like so please don't tell me about it, and here you are again with her sleeping right in your house, and it's still all 'be good, no touchy.'"

"It doesn't matter. I can handle it."

Willow's eyes slid to her feet. "I just don't think it's fair. You guys deserve to make each other happy."

"Fairness hasn't really been a part of life, as far as I've seen. Atonement, that's a concept I can grasp. It's easier to tell myself I'm atoning than it is to wonder if it's fair." Angel sighed. "So what's your spell?"

"Um, it's based on the one that Miss Calendar worked out to get your soul back in the first place. Only, that one was just copied off the original gypsy curse, so it was designed to maximize all the guilt and suffering and, you know, eternal torment. That's why happiness broke the curse- it just wasn't fulfilling its function if you weren't feeling bad, so it disappeared. Mine's going to have purer intentions. No loophole."

Angel was silent for a moment. Willow wanted to see him hopeful, but she knew it was unlikely. The best outcome she could ask for at this point would just be permission. Finally he spoke: "This could be getting in too deep for you, Willow."

"I'll be careful. I'll be very very careful. I mean right now I don't even really know if it's possible so the first thing is to figure out if it's possible and if it's not then so much for that. But don't you think it's worth a try?"

"Maybe," he said grudgingly. "What do you need the book for?"

"Oh, right. It's just that I'm trying to custom tailor this to you, and it helps to have some history, especially from around the time you were cursed. That's in there, right?"

"Yes, but...couldn't you just ask me whatever you need to know?"
He sounded dejected, and Willow was sympathetic. Usually nobody prodded Angel about his past; he was not an open book in the figurative sense and it was obvious that he didn't want to be one in the literal sense either. But Willow wanted to help him, and it looked like that was going to mean breaking the unspoken rules. "I won't really know what I'm looking for until I see it," she confessed.

At last Angel rubbed his forehead and then unlocked the glass doors - the key was sitting right on top of the shelf, so he must not have been that concerned about safeguarding those books - and placed Angelus into Willow's hands. "This isn't light reading," he warned her. "It goes into excruciating detail at some points, and I'll tell you right now that most of it is true."

"I have a nightlight," she assured him. "Wait, just most of it?"

"I made notes in the margins where I found inaccuracies." He smiled - it looked like it took some effort, but he smiled. "You promise you're not going to do anything without talking to me first?"

"Couldn't even if I wanted to," she replied. "This one's going to take cooperation."

***

Although Angel had taken over Buffy's standard patrol route while she was laid up, the Scooby Gang wanted to maintain an active role in protecting her and the town, and all of them used what experience they had to hunt and kill in the areas not covered by Angel. Giles had agreed to arm anyone who wanted to go, provided they stayed in groups of three or more, and sometimes he came along. This time it was just Willow, Xander, and Oz, though, and the prospects of finding something to kill were looking dimmer by the moment.

"Man, I wish Riley gave us some of those vampire detector gadgets before he decided to disappear," griped Xander as they tramped through their third cemetery of the night. "It would be really nice to be following a beep right now."

"Hey, I tried with the locator spell," Willow grumbled back. The locator spell had temporarily given them a tiny white beacon of light, but it vanished too quickly, all three times that she tried it, and she was still sore about it. "I'll tweak it when we get home. And anyway those gadgets weren't Riley's, they belonged to the Initiative."

"Which doesn't seem to be making much of a splash these days, does it? If you ask me, their military structure wasn't set up to endure losing its key leader figures, and now it's too weak to stay together. So! Time for them to donate their tools to a good cause."

Willow scowled and shivered. Her feet were getting wet. "Riley's a jerk. He hasn't even tried to see Buffy again."

Oz stopped walking suddenly. "Hey," he said, and the other two halted as well. Silently he stretched out an arm and pointed far out, to where they could just barely see a dark shape moving among the tombstones.

"Good call," said Xander, in a voice more quiet than the ones they had been using. He hefted his crossbow and began stalking towards the figure, and Willow and Oz followed suit.

It was difficult to get close, as the person was walking at a normal pace and they were trying not to be seen, and they couldn't engage in combat without being sure he was a vampire. When they were finally near enough to make out some of his features, he stopped walking and so did they. He looked like a man in his fifties, sporting a short greying beard and dressed in an old-fashioned black raincoat and a hat with a wide brim. Before anyone could approach or decide what to do, he looked right at
them and said clearly, "Daemonis isn't here. Go home."

With that he turned away and kept walking, leaving the three of them standing there blinking at each other.

Eventually, Xander found his voice. "Am I crazy or was he wearing a..." he gestured at his throat. "...priest collar thing?"

Willow nodded. "We just got dismissed by a priest who knows Daemonis."

"Okay," Oz said in summary, "that was weird."

***

The Magic Box had been closed for hours, but Giles and Anya were still there with a single light on, him sitting at the table with a spread of books and papers, she at the counter, organizing the accounts. The store was locked, as it ought to be, so when they heard a knock at the front door Anya looked vexed and moved to send the visitor away, but Giles stopped her. "We may have to start making allowances for certain after hours visitors," he said. He got up and let Angel in, locking the door behind him again, neither of them saying much.

"Do you know anything about Daemonis?" Giles asked as he sat back down in front of his research. Angel thought about it. "Old...influential. Enough to fit the bill, anyway. He's been quiet for the last few decades. I wasn't sure if he was still alive."

"We have word from...a source, that he's in this area."

"That could be something." He sat down in one of the other chairs around the table and reached for one of the books. "Can I...?"

Giles nodded absently. "Be my guest."

The two of them studied in silence for a time, and Anya, sitting at the counter, concentrated on her own work and said nothing. Eventually she stood up and she and Giles exchanged some shop-related talk, and then he bid her goodnight and she headed out. Only at that point did Giles say, "Willow tells me she's formulating a spell for you."

Angel went motionless. "It's not what you're thinking."

"What am I thinking?" inquired Giles, turning a page in his book.

"That I'm digging for a chance to be with Buffy again. That I think I can take shortcuts to redemption, stop the punishment without earning it."

"Oh. Well, then it's a good thing it's not what I'm thinking."

Angel shut his book and addressed Giles with sudden intensity. "Listen. You said you fear me. Well, I do too. When I lost my soul I let something terrible loose in the world, and I had never even guessed it could happen like that. And now that I know the rules, I'm safer, but the truth is that I don't really know how to guard against happiness. If there's a way the demon can get out, and there's a way I can stop it, I say that's all the reason I need to go through with it."

Giles leaned back, giving him the attentive audience he was looking for. "And Buffy?"

"That's up to her. She doesn't know about the spell, and I'm not going to let it pressure her."
"I see." Giles removed his glasses and began to clean them. "Willow is very young to have this kind of talent in witchcraft. I've looked over her work so far to see if I can identify any dangers in it. I expect you'll want to do the same."

"I will." Angel looked back at the table, and as he did his eyes apparently fell on a sentence he had missed before. He read it aloud: "'Daemonis once claimed to be the only vampire to have ever experienced the agony of having a soul.' Huh." He passed the book over to Giles. "Now why would he say something like that?"

***

Buffy had spent most of the day practicing getting around the house using a pair of crutches, although opening doors gave her trouble and she didn't attempt the stairs. Angel was glad to see her regaining her self-reliance, though he couldn't help commenting, "I'm going to miss carrying you around everywhere."

She flashed him a sweet smile. "Maybe I'll let you keep doing it sometimes for fun."

Angel was home for the evening; he had staked two vampires almost as soon as he set out on patrol and was ready to call it a day after checking a couple other hotspots. Buffy wanted to know all about it and he obliged, though there wasn't anything unusual to report aside from his frustration at how few vampires in town seemed to know anything he wanted to know. He had already been active enough to advertise his presence in town, and they were starting to recognize him and run for cover.

At least he had progress in the research to tell her about. She listened to his account of his conversation with Giles- minus the part about Willow's spell, of course- and mulled over it, repeating the name "Daemonis" a few times to herself.

"You don't think he really has a soul, do you?" she asked.

"No, but it's possible he did at one point. There's nothing saying I was the first one of all time. I've got to say I'd really like to find out more."

"Me too." She chewed her lip for a moment, looking pensive. "I'm going to have to fight him sooner or later, right?"

Angel winced. "I don't know," he answered truthfully. "It depends on where we're at by the time you're fully recovered. And how you feel about it."

She gave him a skeptical look. "How I feel about it? Slaying isn't exactly a when-the-mood-strikes-you activity. And the thing was responsible for killing my mother. I want his head on a plate." She considered this, then amended, "His ashes on a plate."

"I know, just...don't rush it. If you get too eager and join the fight too early it could be a disaster. We hardly know anything yet, and you know I'm not going to keep you in the dark about anything we learn."

"Uh-huh. Stairs first, killing Daemonis second."

He smiled. "Wanna go for a walk?"

The air was crisp and refreshing outside, and a few stars were twinkling merrily as Buffy and Angel made their way along a loop around the mansion. She held onto his hand and leaned on a crutch with her other arm, and made such an effort to keep to her normal walking pace that Angel had to slow her down. He could tell she was happy to be out of the house, and it lightened his spirits too.
They had been out for about ten minutes when Angel spotted a man in a raincoat and hat walking toward them. It was a bit late for anyone but a vampire (and a Slayer) to be out for a walk, but as they approached each other he could tell by the man's scent that he was human. He was about to pass him and forget about it when the man said, "Stop right there"- and took a crossbow from under his coat.

Angel's mind spun. He had expected no danger of any kind this close to the house, and hadn't brought any weapons. The house was too far for Buffy to get there on her crutch. He tried to push her behind him, but she smacked his arm and pushed back, glaring at both him and the bowman. The crossbow stayed pointed precisely at Angel's heart, showing that its owner knew how to use it, but when he spoke, it was Buffy he addressed.

"You know he's a vampire," he stated.

"Yeah. How come you do?"

Angel was critically examining the threat; he saw now that the man was not very tall and not very young, but physically fit and full of confidence. There was a large wooden cross around his neck, which Angel couldn't not notice, but he also noticed something especially unusual: a clerical collar. He cast a sharp look at the priest's face, but he was still looking at Buffy.

"And you're in love with him," he said, and again, it was not a question.

Angel felt himself glow a little hearing that, in spite of the predicament, but Buffy just snapped, "None of your business! Tell me who you are, and stop pointing that thing at my boyf- my, my vampire!"

Slowly, very slowly, the priest lowered the bow. "Goodness, dear, you're not just a human girl, you're the Slayer. How could such a thing...ah. He has a soul, does he? And I thought Daemonis was the only one."

Buffy looked about ready to explode. "What are you, psychic? You know something about Daemonis? Give us some answers here!"

He smiled, giving him a kind expression which looked very appropriate on a priest despite the weapon in his hand. "Perhaps if you and your vampire would invite me into your home we can share all of our answers. That is your home, isn't it?" He pointed at the mansion, a clearly visible silhouette looming in the darkness.

"I see no reason to invite you anywhere," said Angel coldly, speaking for the first time.

"Right, right, we haven't quite gotten off on the right foot, have we?" The priest chuckled. "But you must understand, a man of God who sees a young lady walking arm and arm with a vampire tends to make certain assumptions."

It was the man's inexplicable wealth of knowledge that was bothering Angel more than being at the end of a crossbow, but Buffy squeezed his hand and said, "We can't talk here, let's go inside."

"Is that alright with you, Angel?" asked the priest politely.

Buffy cut in again. "And now you know his name?"

"Indeed, and now I know that yours is Buffy, and for a rather long time I've known that mine is Father Tom Ambrose." He tipped his hat at them both and moved aside so they could turn around, back towards the house. Before anyone started walking, though, he looked around, saw something that interested him, and said, "Wait."
Angel looked. It was the distant shape of a very tall man, broad across the shoulders, and Angel felt sure that this one was in fact a vampire. Father Tom Ambrose seemed sure as well; he raised his crossbow in the direction of the figure, then said, "I apologize deeply for backing out on you now, but that's him." He hurriedly tipped his hat to them one more time and added, "You were right, by the way. I am psychic."

As he sprinted off at a surprisingly fast clip, Buffy asked flatly, "Daemonis?"

"That would be my guess." Angel hesitated. "Maybe I should..." He thought some more. He couldn't catch up with them without leaving Buffy out here alone, and even if he did he didn't know enough about the situation to fight properly. "Maybe we should get inside," he said instead.

"Okay," Buffy said in summary. "That was irritating."

***

Willow stepped out of the bathroom at Buffy's house, wearing a bathrobe over a towel and using another towel to dry her hair. Since Buffy wasn't going to be there for a while, she and Oz were housesitting until something more permanent could be arranged, and that had led to everyone else stopping frequently at the house so they could all communicate. At the moment Cordelia was in the guest room, and Xander was downstairs waiting for Anya. It had been a long night so far- and an unsuccessful one, if the complete lack of staked vampires meant anything- and Willow really wasn't looking to socialize with any of them.

She went into Buffy's room and smiled when she saw Oz lying on his back on the bed holding an open book over his face, and then the smile dropped as she saw what the book was. In her possession for one day and she'd already forgotten about it!

Giving a little squeal, she scurried over to the bed and snatched *Angelus* out of his hands, tripping and landing on his chest in the process. "Don't look at that! Angel will kill me! I mean not really because he doesn't do that anymore, but I'm not supposed to show it to anyone!"

"Oof," said Oz in reply, and Willow blushed and hoisted herself off of his chest. He sat up and ran a hand through his hair. "Okay, I won't. I think I already saw enough to keep it off my list of recommended beach books, though. I wonder what he had against puppies."

Willow's eyes widened and she put a hand to her mouth. "I forgot there were going to be parts about puppies," she said miserably.

"What's this about?" Oz put his arm around her. "You're not reading it for fun."

She let out a long breath, shaking her head *no*, and told him all about the spell and her conversation with Angel. She could tell he felt wary about her experimenting with magic of this magnitude, but all he said when she finished was, "You really think you can do it?"

"Pretty damn sure. I didn't even want to tell him how sure I was, 'cause you know he'd just doubt it even more. And I didn't tell him how long I've been working on it, either."

"How long have you been- oh, hey. I remember, you mentioned it...last year. Thought you'd given up."

She shrugged. "It was an on-and-off kind of thing. Ran into a few hints by accident now and then, though. And I'm getting more powerful, Tara's helped me a lot. I really want to do this for them. It must be awful."
He sat behind her and put his arms over her shoulders. "Awful," he said quietly into her ear, "to not be with the woman you love."

"And if he doesn't want to be tempted," she continued, leaning back against him, "he can't even get close to her."

Oz kissed her on the cheek. "Can't even kiss," he said.

She took his hands and folded them into her own. "Or flirt with each other," she murmured. The towel around her body, which had been threatening to fall for some time, finally did so. Oz reached for the sash of her bathrobe...

A knock on the door. Xander's voice. "Guys, you decent? Can I come in?"

Willow arranged her bathrobe more tightly around herself, muttering a string of curses that made Oz laugh, and replied, "Fine."

Xander opened the door and poked his head in. "Buffy just called. We weren't the only ones to run into His Holiness tonight."

***

Without really planning it, Angel and Buffy fell into a daily schedule at the mansion that allowed him to care for her around the clock. She woke up in the late afternoon, like he did, and when the sun went down he left the house to patrol and her visitors showed up to keep her company. It was usually two or three at a time, whoever had a few hours to spare, although Willow came alone sometimes and so did Giles. When everyone else had gone home to go to bed, Buffy and Angel would still be awake until close to sunrise. Buffy didn't seem to mind, but Angel worried that she'd get bored and thought up a number of ways to keep her occupied while she was still mostly off of her feet. He found books she would like, helped develop her strategy in chess and Go, and taught her a few scattered words and phrases in a few different languages. Xander and Anya showed up one day with an old TV and VCR, and Angel started stopping at the video store after patrolling on some nights.

The steady improvement in Buffy's physical condition was clear, but she remained frustratingly reticent about the things that were really troubling her. She had spilled all the details about the night of the attack, down to the place she had been standing and the color of the hellbeast's eyes, but she evaded answering any kind of question that dealt with her future, or what the incident had really meant to her. She was willing to let Angel comfort her when she got too emotional, but wouldn't let down her guard around anyone else...and then there were the nightmares.

During the second night that Buffy spent at the mansion, she had woken Angel again with a fit of screaming. Again he came running, again he woke her and held her tightly, whispering reassurance. But this time, after her tears dried up, she had looked at him and said, "Angel, I appreciate that you gave me my own room and all, but if you let me sleep in yours I promise I'll behave." He couldn't deny her. From then on, when she had a nightmare he would take her into his arms and calm her down before the screams set in. He knew such proximity was questionable in their situation, but she behaved as she'd said she would, and he was too worried to be tempted.

On the third day, Cordelia dropped in to say goodbye before she went home to L.A. Buffy was still asleep upstairs, making up for some lost time, and Cordy said she'd wait to see her before she left. In the meantime they talked about the agency and how to manage it while Angel was gone, and he aired his fears about reaching the point where he needed to be in two places at once.
"I had another vision yesterday," Cordelia revealed. "Addressed to Wesley and Gunn again, so sit tight. I don't know how long this is going to go on, but I think the Powers That Be are making it pretty clear that your duty right now is to rehabilitate the Slayer."

Angel nodded, relieved. "I'll be calling. Every day."

"Boy, that's gonna get old fast." She smiled. "You know, I don't want to be too optimistic, but maybe there's an Apocalypse waiting for you here in Sunnydale. You know, in a Shanshu kind of way."

He grinned back at her. "You never know."

At that moment there was a rapid knock on the door, and Willow burst in without waiting for an answer. She saw Angel and Cordelia and rushed over, saying, "Where's Buffy?"

"Sleeping upstairs," said Angel, half-rising, "but if it's important I can-"

"No no no!" Willow replied in a stage whisper, making shushing motions with her hands. "Don't wake her up! Shhh!" She dropped the backpack she was carrying, pulled a chair up close to Angel's, and sat down. Cordelia leaned in to hear too.

"I finished working out your spell," Willow said in a low voice. Angel reeled- he had never expected to hear that so soon. Cordelia looked confused: she hadn't heard Willow's plan, but she knew better than to interrupt.

Angel searched for a response, but all he came up with was, "Are you...are you sure?"

"Totally sure," said Willow. "So completely positively sure it's scary. See, phase one, we just lifted that right from the books, and then the second part...the hard thing was actually narrowing it down."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I mean there are two parts to it because it's two different spells. We can't just change the curse while it's still on you, so we remove your soul, bring you back to square one, and then perform the second spell to get your soul back without the loophole. Are you okay with that? We can lock you up while you're evil, it shouldn't be a problem."

"Yes, I'm okay with that. But I meant, what do you mean about narrowing it down?"

Willow hesitated, probably realizing that she'd led the conversation somewhere that she wasn't quite ready to go, but she was too excited about her accomplishment to backtrack. "I mean, I figured out how to get souls back into undead bodies! Bam, whoosh!" She fluttered one hand into the other in a gesture that was probably meant to represent a soul landing in a body. "It takes some work and some tools but otherwise there's no limit. So mostly I just had to figure out how to specify which vampire I wanted re-ensouled. And the book you loaned me, well, it worked! We can do it!" Her volume was rising, and she suddenly glanced up at the ceiling and clapped a hand over her mouth.

Angel counterbalanced her enthusiasm. "There has to be a catch to this."

"Oh, shoot!" said Willow. "There is! This is the important part!" She reached into her back and pulled out a little datebook, opening it to a calendar of the full year. She had marked it up with an elaborate pattern of red lines and arrows, and she pointed to various parts of it as she spoke. "See, this kind of spell is powered by cosmic rotation, and there's this algorithm you can use to figure out which alignment works best, and we're in this quarter, so..." She glanced up at Angel and Cordelia's blank looks, and lowered the calendar. "Okay, the relevant part of what I'm saying here is that it has
to be within the next few days. Ideally, tonight."

There was a short, stunned silence, and then Cordelia said, "Angel's getting his curse fixed tonight? Oh, I can so put off going home for another day."

***

They chose to perform the spell in the underground cage just off campus, where Oz used to lock himself during wolf nights. When Willow and Tara got there, they could hear Angel's and Cordelia's voices echoing through the stone chamber. It sounded like Cordelia was trying to convince him that he was going to be stressed out by the procedure and that they should make preparations to do something afterwards that would make him feel better. Angel, predictably, refused to allow anything of the sort, until Cordy suggested he do something nice for Buffy instead.

"That would be okay," he conceded as Willow and Tara descended the steps.

"Knew it," said Cordelia, smiling broadly. "Okay, we'll stop at the grocery store when we're done here and pick up a gallon of ice cream, and then you can give it to her and she'll give you that cute little only-for-Angel smile and the rest of the night will just fly by. Hi Willow!"

The cage kept Angel safely separated from everyone while remaining in the same room, and he tested the structure carefully to make sure he couldn't break out of it while evil. Even after he approved it, though, he still insisted that they tie him to a chair, and he spent a few minutes trying to get out of these restraints, too, before finally agreeing that they would hold.

As Willow and Tara set up the spell components he observed everything in silence, but when Willow asked if he was ready he said, "You'd better gag me, too."

"There's nothing you can mess up by talking," Tara assured him.

Cordelia held up a hand. "Ahem. He's right. Gag him."

"But why?" asked Willow, feeling slightly amused in spite of it all. "Are you afraid you're going to hurt our feelings?"

"Yes," answered Cordelia and Angel at the same time.

Willow didn't know what that was about, but she felt like she had to show them that she was the one in charge of the spell. "I'd rather have your mouth free once it's over, so you can tell us that you're back before we untie you."

"No," said Angel with surprising vehemence. "Listen, Willow, you remember I said I go through a little bit of amnesia when I get my soul back? Well, it doesn't work like that the other way around. I'm going to remember this conversation, and I'm going to know what we're doing and what's going to happen to me next, and if I think I can talk my way out of it I will. I'll tell you I'm re-ensouled whether I am or not. If we're going to do this at all, you have to know that it worked. Or if it didn't, stake first and untie later and tell Buffy I'm sorry."

Upon hearing all this, Willow almost lost her nerve, but Tara nodded confidently. "We can do that. It's easy." She turned to Willow and smiled. "We can do that," she repeated.

Cordelia had been digging in her purse during this exchange; now she straightened and held up a thin scarf of some kind. "Gag," she explained. "I'll do it." She stepped into the cage and tied it over Angel's mouth, and he grunted to tell her it was secure. After she stepped out again and they set the
combination lock, there was nowhere to go but onwards.

Willow withdrew a handful of powder from her bag. It was deep purple and finer than flour, and had a sweet scent to it. At the same time, Tara scooped some golden, coarse powder from her own bag, and at once they blew into their hands, sending clouds of scintillating dust into the cage. Angel closed his eyes and let it settle over him.

Tara began the incantation: "Anime, vale. Spirite, ablite."

Willow continued: "Nullem corporem iam habes."

"Hic vir nunc solus est."

"Spirite, liber es."

As Willow recited the last words, she and Tara pressed their powder-coated hands together, and the purple and golden swirls in the air suddenly flared up, shone briefly, and disappeared. Angel's body lurched violently backwards and would have toppled the chair if they hadn't braced it against the wall. He let out a scream, muffled by the gag but still a wretched sound, and then the chair rocked back onto all four legs and he sat very still, his head hanging down in front of him.

When he lifted it again, it was a different face. Angelus gave a low growl, bared his fangs- and bit right through the gag.

"Oh," said Cordelia. "Guess we didn't think of that."

"Having fun, ladies?" Angelus asked politely.

Willow's palms went sweaty. She had thought she was prepared to face him again, and after all, he was caged, bound, totally harmless, but those malevolent eyes, that voice that was Angel's but wasn't...it terrified her. She turned away from him as quickly as possible and started fumbling with the magic supplies.

"Stage one completed," said Tara in a positive voice that Willow knew was put on for her benefit.

Angelus laughed. "Well, I'm having fun. Watching amateurs at work is always an amusing experience. Let's hope stage two goes just as smoothly, right?"

"Amateurs?" Cordelia huffed. "You know damned well they're going to pull this off without a hitch. Why not just shut up and use your last five minutes to meditate on your own evilness, or something."

"Nah," he said, "no need. See, I've got it all figured out now. I'm not going to fight your witches. Why should I? All this work you're all putting into securing my soul, and nobody seems to realize that it doesn't even mean anything."

"Nice try, Dark Revenger," said Cordelia, "but experience tells us differently. You're over. Face it."

Willow wished Cordelia would be quiet. Didn't she know there wasn't going to be any meaningful dialogue with an evil vampire? She unwrapped her orb of Thesulah with shaky hands and glanced at Tara, who was flipping rapidly through their book of spells.

"And experience is going to tell you some more, given time," said Angelus. "Personally I think I've got a lot to look forward to. All the old Sunnydale haunts, a nice massacre here and there, the taste of Slayer...it's all going to open up to me. So maybe I'll have a soul, what of it? Soul doesn't have to get in the way of a good time."
This time Cordelia took longer to retort. Willow looked at her to see why, and wished she hadn't, because Cordelia's frightened expression deepened the fear that was already blooming in Willow. Concentrate, she had to concentrate! "Can everyone just ignore him please?" she requested. "We just have to finish the spell." Tara took the point and thrust the book at her, open to an ancient spell with a page of loose leaf paper beside it, bearing their alterations to the spell in Willow's own handwriting.

But Angelus refused to be ignored. "You know what's funny? Rupert Giles. See, not too long ago, Rupert tells me he understands the nature of the soul, that he knows what it means to vampires." He leaned forward as much as his restraints allowed, his yellow irises burning. "Tell me how a human can think he understands that? If he did, don't you think he'd realize that it's all in our heads? Wouldn't he notice that most of the evil in the world has come from beings that supposedly have these so-called souls?" He laughed again. "It's so easy. Go on and cast your spell. I can still bring it all down around you."

Willow and Tara had already started reading aloud from the book and were halfway through the spell. Willow tried to speak over Angelus, but she could still hear everything he was saying and she had to settle for not thinking about it too hard. Everything would be okay if they could just finish the spell. Of course it would.

"But you won't," said Cordelia uncertainly. "Once you have your soul back, you won't want to hurt anyone."

"Try me," he purred. "I know how the guilt trip feels. Sooner or later I'm going to realize I'm happier without it."

At last they reached the final words of the spell. Willow snatched a dove's feather out of her pocket and waved it in an intricate pattern in the air, and the orb of Thesulah pulsed with a gratifying glow. Angelus was thrown back again, and this time his chair did fall over. He remained strapped into it and apparently unconscious with his face pressed to the floor, but now it was his human face and that revived Willow's courage a little. She was about to open the cage when Tara took hold of her shoulder to stop her.

"He wanted us to check and make sure that it worked, remember?" She stretched out her arms and pointed her hands at Angel. "Veritas," she said, and her hands shone bright white for the merest instant. She lowered them and smiled at Willow. "Did work."

Angel was regaining consciousness already when Willow opened the door. He looked up at her with great confusion, and twisted his body against the ropes and the chair as he examined his position. "What's going on here? I don't remember-" His eyes went wide as realization struck him. "Oh God, have I been evil?"

Willow went at the ropes with her pocketknife; the knots were too complicated for her to bother untying. She didn't really feel up to filling Angel in on the last few minutes, either. He'd remember it all in time.

As the restraints fell away Angel kicked away the chair and slowly got to his feet. He looked at Willow with extreme worry. "Did I...did I kill anyone?"

They all let the question hang in the dusty air of the stone room for a few moments, and then Cordelia, unbelievably, began to laugh.

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Anya rolled her three red dice onto the table. "Six-six-five," she announced. "And Xander has three
and one. So! I get Kamchatka, and that means Asia's mine." The doorbell chimed, and she was the first to jump up. "I'll get it! Just move my little horses into Kamchatka. And you can take your turns and then I'll come back and take Australia."

Xander stared at the game board, his brow furrowing deeply, as he counted up his few remaining territories again. Buffy grinned and nudged his arm. "She's good at all kinds of stuff, isn't she? I wonder if being a vengeance demon requires a lot of strategy." She picked up the defending dice and looked toward the antechamber. "I really wasn't expecting anyone else tonight. Maybe Willow and Oz got bored."

But Anya reentered the room alone, explaining, "Buffy, there's a man in a hat out there who says he wants to talk to you and Angel. Should I invite him in?"

Buffy leaned her elbows on the table. "Um. Is he a vampire?"

"Can't be, he was wearing a big cross." Anya patted her throat. "And this collar thing, like a..."

"Priest?" Buffy supplied. "Anya, that's Father Tom! Let him in."

Anya turned to go back to the door, and Xander said, "You sure about this? I mean, we're the only ones here, and we don't really know anything about him..."

"I really don't think he means us any harm, and I want some answers. I'm the lady of the house, I get to invite people in."

When Anya came back, Father Tom was strolling along behind her, holding his hat and not a crossbow. He greeted her with an incline of his head, and then saw Xander and said, "One of the young hunters, I see! I might have known you knew each other. I'm sorry if I was impolite the first time we met; I'm afraid I was in a bit of a rush. Please call me Father Tom."

"Uh, hi. I'm Xander." He pulled out the chair beside him. "Have a seat? Wait, maybe the lady of the house should say that."

The priest accepted the chair and sat down, between Xander and Buffy. "Where is your vampire tonight?" he asked.

Buffy was about to answer, then stopped and thought the answer instead. "Guess."

"He's out searching for vampires and killing them, which you would be doing if not for your injury. He came down from Los Angeles to help you, and the two of you have a complicated history together which seems to involve his death." This earned him some impressed looks all around, but he seemed merely resigned. "You know, I try to avoid doing that unless I have a good reason, but you did request it."

"I'm not complaining. But I can start at any time." She was about to start demanding answers again, but then she remembered something. "Can someone grab me the phone? Giles should be here for this. He's my Watcher," she explained, probably unnecessarily, to Father Tom.

"Ah, of course. My order has had some limited communication with the Council, but they never told us anything as concrete as the Slayer's location, except that it was on a Hellmouth. Quite a surprise to find you here."

"So you can't read Watchers' minds?" asked Xander eagerly as Buffy called Giles.

"My child, I've never met one."
"Cool," said Xander. "I've never met a psychic. Except for that one time when Buffy was one. So do you listen to confessions or just dole out penance to whoever's thinking bad thoughts?"

Anya reacted to this question before Father Tom did, looking alarmed. "What counts as bad thoughts?" she asked with nervous gravity. "Am I thinking bad thoughts right now?"

Father Tom gave a low whistle. "Twelve hundred years of vengeance? You're an interesting bunch."

Buffy finished her call and set down the phone. "And the witch and the werewolf aren't even here. But the Watcher's coming, And the vampire will probably show up before long."

Anya looked distressed about her identity coming out, and Xander put a protective arm around her shoulders. "I'm sure the good father isn't here to lay the smack down on ex-demons," he said, making it sound just a little bit like a challenge.

"He's quite right," Father Tom confirmed. "In fact, nobody's past is any of my business unless you want it to be. I'm here to swap information, since your collective thoughts have made it clear to me that we have a common enemy. Who, incidentally, I have not yet killed. We'll wait for the Watcher to tell the whole story, but I didn't want to keep anyone in suspense about that part."

"Right, okay," said Xander, "but tell me if I've got this right: you're a psychic vampire hunter battle priest, right?" He looked around at Buffy and Anya. "I think I finally figured out where I want my career path to take me."

Anya slapped him on the shoulder. "Xander! You have to be born psychic or it drives you insane. And priests can't have sex!" Her nervous expression came back and she looked to Father Tom. "Oh no. Was that another bad thought?"

By the time Giles arrived, they had moved into the living room, leaving their unfinished board game intact at Anya's insistence. The priest and the Watcher shook hands cordially, and everyone settled down to listen to Father Tom speak. He claimed to want to hear more from them than what he'd already picked up from their thoughts, but admitted readily that he was the one who had the most explaining to do and ought to go first.

"There are a few religious orders that the Church doesn't readily talk about; mine is one of them. We take our vows and dedicate our lives like any other, but we're concerned with fighting the forces of evil in a much more material way. Vampires are vulnerable to the tools of our trade, and they're our favored enemies. We fight them where we find them, and sometimes the finding takes more work than the fighting."

"Now, I live with my community in upstate New York, and for the last few years, so did Daemonis. He's crafty. We knew he was there but it took a long time to flush him out. I was able to confront him once, but I missed the heart and he fled. Fled far, as you can probably gather by the presence of both of us in California."

"You chased him all the way across the country?" said Xander, sounding awed.

Father Tom nodded. "The real mystery is why he's running instead of fighting me. He has powers beyond the average vampire, and I'm only a man."

Buffy was thinking hard, but Father Tom didn't seem to be looking into her mind. It was actually Giles who appeared to have the telepathy at that moment, for he asked exactly the question that Buffy had in mind: "How long has he been here?"

"In Sunnydale? Not more than a week, I should think."
Buffy slapped the arm of her chair in frustration. "Then he couldn't have been the one to arrange the attack on me and my mother. That would have taken longer."

"Don't be so sure," said Father Tom. "I think he's fully capable of setting up an attack from a distance, if he has good reason to do so." Then suddenly he looked straight at Buffy, aghast and full of pity. "Oh, dear child, I am so sorry. The Slayer must endure so much, it's always true..."

She swallowed hard and closed her eyes for a moment. "Not now, please. But thank you. I just want this to be finished."

Giles nodded firmly. "Is it true," he said, "that Daemonis has a soul?"

Everyone was silent and alert waiting for the answer. Buffy kept wondering when Angel was going to return; there was no reason that they couldn't repeat everything to him later, but his absence was making her anxious. Father Tom cleared his throat.

"Frater Daemonis- Brother of the Demon- was a scourge of humanity when he was first turned. Of course, nobody really knows when that was, but the name suggests that his origins are in a time when the residents of Hell mixed more freely with each other, and more openly with us poor souls on Earth. When he was cursed, and it seems fairly certain that he was cursed, it was by an ancient people using primitive magicks. Both the people and their magic are gone by now, but they were powerful, and they restored his soul as the Romani did for your Angel, Buffy, much much later.

"There is evidence that he no longer has a soul. There are stories of the lengths he went to trying to get rid of it, and they are not reassuring stories. There is also a great deal of controversy about how long he had the soul. It could have been hundreds of years. More."

Giles grasped the implications of this immediately. "To have a conscience for so long, and still wish to return to pure evil...he must have felt no remorse."

Buffy squirmed. "Angel never tried to get rid of his soul," she murmured. "I don't think so, anyway."

"I have no doubt that he's taking the path of repentance," Father Tom told her with warm forthrightness. "I can see it in your thoughts of him."

"You met him," said Xander. "Could you see it in his thoughts, too? I'm just asking," he added as Buffy cast him a sharp look.

"His mind is closed to me," the priest replied. "Vampires are-"

"-Unreadable!" Anya interjected. "I knew that."

Buffy smiled. "Yeah. Me too."

She was relieved when Father Tom left. Not because she didn't like him- she was quite convinced now that he was of the good- but because the conversation had exhausted her. Following his departure, she subtly persuaded everyone else to leave, too, mostly by assuring them that she could handle a moment in the mansion by herself for once. Father Tom would be back, they even had a phone number for him now, and they had a lead on the evil thing that had destroyed her life so quickly. Time to call it a night.

Angel came home just minutes after Giles left. He looked strained, troubled about something, but he put on a smile when he saw her and held up a small white bag. "Brought you some ice cream," he said.
Sacred Spaces

Chapter Summary

Curse? What curse?

Willow sat on the floor and leaned her head on Oz's knee, staring off into space. He was tuning his guitar, filling the living room with repeated twangs that made her mind wander into nothingness. She looked out the window and saw the sun had moved a few inches. The day was going to pass right in front of her eyes, and she should have been studying for classes. She had been studying so hard to complete Angel's spell, though, that books just didn't hold any appeal for once. So maybe her grades this semester would break her steady 4.0. There were more important things.

"He's so cruel," she sighed. "How can something so cruel be inside Angel?"

Oz kept strumming tunelessly. "Is it inside him? Your spell worked, oughta be gone from now on."

She rubbed her eyes against his jeans. "Not gone. Just suppressed. It's the demon that keeps Angel's body alive, not the soul. If the demon died, he would too."

"Oh. See, you know what you're doing."

"I do. But I swear there was something else I wanted to look into after we finished casting that spell, and now every time I try to retrace my steps and figure out what it was, all I can think about is evil demons animating good people."

Oz stopped tuning long enough to caress her hair. "Sounds like someone's brain needs a break. You should try doing stupid things sometimes. Just for a change of pace." The doorbell rang, and he raised his voice. "Come in!"

"You shouldn't just invite someone in without seeing who it is," Willow scolded him. "I did that once in my dorm and it was a vampire."

"It's daylight," he objected, but the door opened and someone walked in covered from head to toe in a black blanket, sizzling slightly.

Willow sat up. "Angel? What's wrong."

"I knew it!" yelled Spike as he hurled the blanket off of himself. "I sodding knew it! Angel's back in town and not a sodding one of you lot saw fit to tell me! And the Slayer, not even living here anymore? Probably over at the mansion with her tongue down my old grandsire's throat! What does it take to get some information out of you bastards?"

"You could pay us," Oz suggested.

"Uh, Spike?" Willow said, settling back down. " Aren't you always saying you can't stand any of us and the only way you want to see us is with money in our hands? Why would we be keeping you updated on our lives?"

"Because this is my life!" Spike raged. "Angel's my history! My ancestor! The bane of my bloody
existence! If it weren't for him I wouldn't be stuck in this miserable town with this bloody chip in my head!"

Oz held up a finger. "Pretty sure Angel didn't put that chip in your head."

"Yeah," said Willow. "I mean, if anything you should be blaming Riley for that, right?"

Spike calmed down a little. "Well, indirectly, if Angel hadn't stolen Drusilla away from me, I would still be out of the country somewhere with her, and then you know, I was supposed to have a ring that made me invincible in which case they never could have taken me, but while we're on the subject I've got no love for that big vanilla soldier boy either and it's not a real hoot having him hanging around. Damned if this town doesn't attract the most-"

"What's Riley doing?" Willow cut in. "Why's he hanging around?"

Spike crossed his arms and gave her a condescending glare. "So, we've all got something we want to know, right? Why's Angel back?"

Willow and Oz exchanged glances and Willow thought hard. Spike was harmless to most of them, but he was still capable of violence toward other vampires. On the other hand, he was bound to run into Angel sooner or later, and obscuring the truth wouldn't change the outcome of a fight if it came to that. Spike couldn't get into the mansion now that Buffy lived there, so Angel had the advantage, at least. "He came to help Buffy," Willow said. "She was held captive, we think by Daemonis."

"And now she's good and rescued, why is she holed up with him instead of in her own house?"

"She doesn't want to be here since her mother died."

Spike leveled his gaze at Willow and said, "Joyce is dead." He turned and slammed his fist against the wall, fortunately not hard enough to break it. "And why in the devil's name haven't I seen a grave for her? I live in the cemetery. Haven't even found her body yet, have you, useless bloody little team of would-be superheroes..."

Oz started to reply, "There's more than one cemetery in-" but Willow cut him off. She was done with Spike, done with trading information with him, done with listening to him being self-righteous as if he wasn't still evil by his own admission.

"I found her body," she said in a voice of pure ice. "And I stood vigil over her. I stayed there all night with a stake in my hand, so that if my friend was still alive I wouldn't have to tell her that her mother had turned into a demon while she was gone. An abomination. Like you." She took a deep breath. "Well, she didn't, so we buried her body and not her ashes, and now you know the story and you can stop pretending you give a damn about what happens to our people."

For a moment Spike just stared at her, drawing out a silence of unmasked hatred. Oz and Willow stared back, still sitting as they had been before, Oz with one hand on his guitar and one on Willow's back.

Finally Spike said, "Riley's trying to use the Initiative to draw Daemonis out of hiding. To kill him, I s'pose, or maybe just plant a chip in him too. The oaf doesn't want to work with Buffy's friends, though, so he's working with me instead. And now you know the story."

When he finished speaking he scooped up his blanket from the floor and draped it over himself, making him look like a black Halloween ghost. He grabbed the doorknob through the fabric and stormed out, heedless as ever of the spectacle he made and the pain of sunlight.
Oz strummed a few sudden, rapid chords. "Want to help me write a song about how Spike's an asshole?"

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"I don't really feel like a Slayer right now. Not just because I can't slay. It's just, you know, Chosen for what? So I can put my loved ones in mortal peril just by being what I am? What kind of a destiny is that?" Buffy frowned into her tea, which Giles had poured for both of them before even thinking to ask if she wanted some. She was in Angel's soft armchair, he was on Angel's couch, listening to her in sympathetic silence. "For a while I thought I'd just give it up," she continued. "Convince the world I'm not a Slayer anymore, and then we'd all be safe. But we wouldn't, would we? So that doesn't make sense either."

"You're trying to take responsibility for your mother's death," Giles chided gently. "You mustn't do that."

She raised an eyebrow at him and half-smiled. "I know. In my head I do, anyway. Don't let me worry you, Giles, I'm just letting off some steam. Believe me, you and Angel between the two of you have told me enough times that it's not my fault."

He hesitated, hoping that this was enough opening to bring it up. "Perhaps we should, ah, talk about..."

"...Angel?" She looked at him and saw she'd guessed right. "How'd I know that was coming?"

"Buffy, I don't mean to pass judgment on you. About anything. I'm simply concerned about how close the two of you seem to be since you began sharing this house with him."

"Pretty close, yeah," she said dryly. "Probably because we're in love with each other. Don't look so surprised, you already knew it was true. I'm just done with denying it. Telling the truth is not cause for panic."

"No," he agreed, disliking his paternal duties more and more, "but your feelings for Angel almost were, once."

"You'll notice I haven't made that mistake twice," she reminded him. Then she sighed. "Look, Giles, I don't know what you're trying to tell me here. 'Don't sleep with Angel'? Fine. Not gonna do it. But I can't stop loving him just because it would be more convenient."

Giles considered this. Apparently she didn't know about Willow's spell yet, which was a relief, but of course she'd find out eventually. "There's more that worries me about your romance with Angel than just the terms of his curse."

Buffy remained remarkably patient, but he could see she was getting annoyed with him. "I really don't need a refresher course on this. He's immortal. He's sterile. He's allergic to daylight. And supposedly all that adds up to no future. But you know what? Nobody seems to be asking themselves what kind of future I'm looking for. What kind of future I'd have without him."

"There will always be someone to love you, Buffy. You and Riley seemed to be building a foundation."

"Yeah, but as soon as Angel saved me I realized I couldn't stay with Riley even if he offered me a perfect life dipped in chocolate. It's not fair and it's not right and I don't want it. I can't be in love with more than one man at a time, and the love I have now isn't about to expire."
Giles had said nearly all he could. It was time to play his trump card. "He drank your blood. He nearly killed you."

Buffy lowered her eyes; he could tell she had expected this to come up. Instead of denying it or citing forgiveness, though, she answered in a vague evasion: "I think that's something we can work on." Seeing Giles's skepticism, she added, "Angel's at his best when he's with me. You have to admit that."

"To be honest, I wouldn't really know." He had thoughts of bringing up Angel's relatively passive hundred years without her, as compared to the rampage brought on when she broke his curse, but that seemed more likely to just hurt her feelings than to change her mind about anything. "I won't harass you about it. You must know I'm only trying to look out for you."

She smiled at him, an innocent smile of trust. "I know." For a moment she just looked into her teacup again, swirling it idly, and he got up to refill their cups from the kettle on the stove. When he'd sat down again she started speaking in a detached way, as if she didn't know or care if anyone was listening.

"As soon as I fell in love with Angel I knew we were doomed. Subconsciously, deep inside. And he knew it too, probably better than I did. We never talked about it- not in those terms, anyway- but every time we were together there was this desperation, this need to make every moment count because it might be the last one. Seize the day. Don't let any chance slip away, one of us might be dead before the chance comes again. And then I took a chance and I seized the day and that was what brought the doom on. Ironic, right?

"When he was brought back to life I kind of lost those fears. I thought that maybe all the bad stuff had happened to us already and we could be happy together. Angel knew better, I guess. He just thought he could avert it if he stayed away from me."

She looked up. Her eyes were just barely glistening, but her voice was steady. "Don't misunderstand what I'm doing with Angel, Giles. I know we're still doomed. But we're doomed if we're together and we're doomed if we're apart, and we've already gotten pretty good at facing our doom as a team."

***

Angel knocked on the front door of the Summers house, which wasn't the Summers house anymore. Xander and Anya had moved into Buffy's mother's bedroom, and Willow and Oz were finishing the process of moving into Buffy's former room. It was a decent arrangement, since Buffy didn't want to sell the house and it was helpful for most of her friends to be based in the same place, but everyone seemed a little uncomfortable when talking about it. It was hard not to feel like they were taking something that belonged to her, despite her enthusiastic agreement to the plan.

Xander came to the door and Angel sighed- it would be Xander, wouldn't it? "Hey," Angel greeted him, and tried to avoid further conversation by brushing past him and into the house, forgetting momentarily that he hadn't been there since the others moved in. He ran into a barrier and Xander saw it happen.

"Oooh, tricky entrance, man," he taunted. "Hey, guess who lives here now? And guess who hasn't been invited in yet? And that means that the one who lives here now- and that would be me we're talking about, by the way- is at his leisure to grant or deny entrance to the one who hasn't been invited- and that one's you, you probably guessed- and that means-"

Angel peered through the doorway and spotted Willow crossing the room. "Willow!" he called out
to get her attention, and she turned and saw him. "Hic stultus non me admittiet. Adjuva?"

Willow looked surprised, but she smiled and replied without missing a beat. "Is molestus interdum est. Te invito."

Xander cut his ramble short as Angel walked past him into the house. "Great," he said loudly, still holding the door open, "so now we have other languages to mock Xander with, because English alone sure wasn't cutting it."

"How'd you know I speak Latin?" Willow asked Angel as Xander left grumbling.

"You spend enough time in spellbooks, you pick up a working knowledge of it whether you're trying to or not. So you're probably way past working knowledge." He shifted his feet. "I came to get some more of Buffy's things."

Willow nodded. "Mmhm." The way she was looking at him wasn't exactly expectant, but it wasn't letting him leave it at that, either.

"Also to give Buffy and Giles some room to talk without me around." He tried to laugh and met with little success. "Since I'm probably one of the things they want to talk about."

She was still giving him the look. Finally he caved. "And also because sooner or later you and I have to talk about what happened while you were doing the spell."

"Ah hah," she said conclusively. "Come sit down."

She led him up to the room she was sharing with Oz, who didn't seem to be around tonight. They hadn't changed much so far, and they were keeping most of the furniture in there, since Buffy didn't need it at the mansion. The room still smelled primarily of her. Angel sat by the window and Willow perched crosslegged on the bed, looking oddly serene.

"Have you told anyone about the things I said?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nope. Should I?"

He thought carefully before answering. He wanted to just tell her no and be done with it, but unless he could convince her that there really wasn't anything to worry about, keeping secrets wasn't going to help. "I knew it was hopeless. I was only trying to scare you."

"Need I say you succeeded?"

"None of it was true. I swear. There's no way I'd ever want to kill again, or hurt people, not unless I lost my soul. And thanks to you and Tara that's not going to happen anymore." He attempted a smile. "You did an amazing job. There's really no way it could have gone any better than it did."

"Except that you basically told me that I can't trust you anymore, and now you're telling me the opposite." Willow wrung her hands together and gazed at him with eyes heavy with worry. "Angel, which one of you tells the truth?"

He looked around the room, seeking strength from Buffy's energy there. "The one who's still alive?" he offered.

It didn't seem like that was the answer she wanted. She sighed heavily. "Look, if you think you're safe, I'm not going to fight you on it. I just want to know that if anything goes wacky in your brain, you're not going to try to handle it yourself."
"If Giles starts having doubts about me, Willow-"

"I know," she broke in. "Hence the me not telling anyone? We're talking about what happens if you start having doubts about you. If you can't tell Giles, if you can't tell Buffy, you've gotta tell me. I don't even know right now what I could do about it, but someone has to know."

Angel nodded hesitantly. "Okay. That makes sense. It's a deal."

Willow yawned. "Want some tea?"

"No, I'd better...on second thought, I'd better give Buffy and Giles some more time. Sure." As they both stood up he remembered to ask, "Willow, is Tara likely to say anything about it?"

"No. But if Cordelia does that's your problem."

Angel smiled. Cordelia was back in LA by now, after privately threatening to kill him in creative ways if he ever turned evil again. "Even a little bit," she had added, leaving him to wonder what counted as 'a little bit evil.'

"Cordy's not a problem," he said. "Do you have Earl Grey?"

***

Father Tom began stopping by the Magic Box with some regularity. He perused Giles's books and found quite a few that interested him, explaining on his first visit, "Many of the churches I know have an occult section this size, but the titles in our collections are almost completely different from these. Oh, except for this one. And this one."

Xander told him that Giles was going to be jealous, but the two men quickly developed a scholarly respect for one another. They began seeking each other out to share any new information, and Xander suspected that they were also discussing moral quandaries when no one else was listening. Well, that was their business, but Xander couldn't help being intrigued by the very existence of a psychic battle priest, and Father Tom had some especially cool stories about his sacred mission of smiting evil. It was enough to make Xander actually volunteer to help them research, and Anya grew suspicious and asked him if he was going to give her up so he could join a celibate order.

He wasn't, of course. In fact, he had secretly resolved to stop helping if it led to being told to go to church, and then realized that he couldn't exactly keep secrets from Father Tom and kept waiting to be assigned some penance. But that never happened, and there wasn't much to do besides research anyway. Buffy was getting tired of constant supervision, Willow was absorbed in some kind of wiccan studying project again, and with both Angel and Father Tom working the beat, patrolling with the Scooby Gang wasn't that useful. Daemonis hadn't shown his face again. Actually, Father Tom was still the only one who had seen him up close.

"That's good news," said Father Tom when Xander brought it up. "He doesn't feel strong enough to face us yet. He has a weakness. We just have to figure out what it is."

***

"So the next step is recon," Angel told Buffy as she picked up a dishtowel and started drying off the dishes as he washed them. "We're going tomorrow night to see if we can find any clues."

Buffy scowled. "And I'm still too gimpy to come, of course. Dammit."

"You...might not want to anyway. We're starting in the crypt where I found you."
"Oh." She pondered this, but didn't dwell on it. "I guess detective work is more your specialty, anyway."

He smiled. "Angel Investigations, we help the helpless." He set the last few dishes into the strainer and drained the sink. "But you'll be back in the field before you know it. Let's take a look at your war wounds."

Although she hadn't needed to bandage them for a while, Angel was still checking all of her injuries every day. "Hey, good news," he said when she had sat down on the floor in front of him and slipped her shirt off. "The rest of the cuts finished closing up. Soon they won't be there at all."

She exhaled and twisted her head to flash him a smile. "Does that mean I can finally get a backrub?"

"Sure thing." He kissed her temple and stood up. "Here, I'll get a blanket. You can lie down in front of the fire."

She settled down on the blanket face down, crossing her arms underneath her head. He had tended the wounds on her upper body so many times by now that her bare skin hardly gave him pause, but seeing her reclining in the firelight, looking so peaceful, moved him to stillness until he snapped out of it and knelt down beside her.

Backrubs were easy. He had no special technique, but he could feel which of her muscles needed attention (most of them), and his hands were strong enough to work the tension out of them. And she was enjoying it, that was clear. Her eyes were closed and her breathing steady, and she might have been asleep until she murmured, "I'm sorry about Riley."

It was a surprising thing to hear, but he tried to keep his hands moving in the same rhythm. "Why?"

"Don't ask me that. I know it hurt you. I gave myself to someone else and I flaunted it. Riley could never replace you, but I tried to make you think he had. It just...seemed like the only way to cope."

"But I wanted you to cope. I told you to move on."

"But it hurt you."

He had no answer for that. Of course it had hurt him. He thought it might have been okay if he had only had a sign that she was happy in her new life, but all he had seen of Riley was his misunderstanding, his sad attempts to be close to a woman he could never truly know. And from Buffy, Angel had sensed only isolation and her need to release tension with Riley. The nice guy. He hadn't made her happy.

As Angel's hands kept traveling across her back and shoulders, she whispered, "I don't want to hurt you."

"No more guilt," he answered, just as softly.

When she pressed her forehead into her wrists and drew a shuddering breath, he realized she was crying. "How can there be no guilt? My mom's dead. I didn't save her. I should have. Everyone who ever gets close to me is in danger, and now there's this new danger I never even saw coming, and instead of saving the day I got chained up and you had to come rescue me and I'm useless..."

As her babbling began to trail off into slow sobbing, Angel stopped massaging and stroked her hair instead. She wouldn't look up, but she didn't resist his touch either, and eventually she quieted and wiped the tears off of her face. For a moment she propped herself up on her elbows and looked straight ahead, but then she let her head drop back down to the floor, and Angel heard her muffled
voice say, "Keep rubbing please?"

He obliged, offering the words, "You're not useless. You're the most precious thing I have ever laid eyes on."

When she spoke again it was in a different voice, somber and distant. "Angel." She hesitated only for a second. "Tell me about Hell."

This time he was shocked enough to lose his rhythm. "Why?" he managed before continuing.

"Because you got out. Because you're still sane. All the sources say you had to have an amazing strength of will to come through that, and I need that strength. I need to know how you can take the pain like you do every day."

"It was you," he told her. "I was gone. You brought me back. The details don't matter."

"They do matter," she insisted. "I want to know what you went through. I want to understand."

He kept rubbing her absently, stroking both palms up and down her back. "Maybe," he conceded. "But not now. It's hard to talk about." He thought about that for a second. "I think so, anyway. I don't believe I've ever tried talking about it before."

Without warning Buffy twisted, reaching her arm around and catching his wrist, and he froze. Had he said something wrong? But she just pulled him to the floor on his back, displaying some of the Slayer strength she hadn't used much since she'd left the hospital, and rolled over on top of him. Pinning him with her hands, she set her lips on his and gave him a long, hungry kiss. He closed his eyes and returned it; he hadn't the power to refuse. She touched his cheek lightly and went in for another kiss, and he ran both of his hands through her hair. It had been so long...

And abruptly it was over, as Buffy took hold of herself and pushed herself off of him. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

He sat up slowly. "Don't be sorry."

"No, I am. That was too far too fast, I can't do that or I'll just want more and hey, you have to show some restraint here too, mister." She looked down at her bare chest, blushed hotly, and hurried to gather up the blanket from the floor and drape it over herself. "God, look at me. Halfway there already."

"Buffy, there's something I have to tell you." He stood up and offered her his hand, guiding both of them to the couch when she got to her feet. When they had settled down beside one another he put his hands on her knees as she watched him expectantly, still holding the blanket around her shoulders. He steadied himself. "Willow cast a spell. Last week, that night when Father Tom came here to talk to you, she changed my curse. My soul is staying where it is from now on."

Buffy stared. After a moment she shook her head in disbelief, then said, "Perfect happiness...?"

"Is just perfect happiness."

"Oh God," she gasped, shaken. Then her eyes narrowed and she jerked her hands away from his. "Last week? When were you gonna tell me?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't make the first move. I know I want you, I've never wanted anything else. But this is something you have to choose for yourself and I can't let myself influence you. Not like that. Not yet."
"I want you. I do. You have to know that."

Angel reached out to her again, just a light touch on her hand. "Buffy, when I brought you here and you had to invite me before I could get in, once I understood what was happening, I felt so relieved. Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because it meant that you chose to let me into your life. It meant that you were the one to decide that we were going to share a home. The rule about invitation, it makes life harder for me but I wouldn't give it up for the world. Vampires are evil and unnatural, but it's good and right that they can't enter the places where people sleep at night. That's the power that comes with humanity, that sense of self that lets you call the shots on who comes into your sacred space. And you let me come into yours."

Buffy listened attentively to all this. She was starting to smile, just barely.

Angel touched his fingertips to her heart, feeling its steady thrum under the bulky blanket. "And this is your real home. This is your sacred space. And right now it's lonely in there, I know. You want company. But sometimes finding it can just end up hurting you more, and I know that because I know how much I've hurt you. We don't have the same danger that we did before, but I still see something in you that I want you to protect, even from me." He caressed her face, keeping his eyes locked onto hers. "We can be together. I believe that. But first you have to really, truly know that you're safe at home."

"I love you, Angel."

It was the first time either of them had used those words with each other since Angel's return to Sunnydale. Speechless, he leaned forward and kissed her, soft and romantic, tongues meeting slowly through parted lips. The rest of the night passed with more cuddling than talk, but the talk had been enough to keep their clothes on (or in Buffy's case, to put the clothes back on). Buffy confessed at one point that she still didn't fully understand why Angel wasn't as eager as she felt about getting physical, but made a point of saying that she could tell when she should yield to his wisdom, with or without full comprehension.

That was enough for him. He didn't want to talk about it anymore, not only because he had exhausted his words on the subject but because it was smothering him with a memory that he didn't want to describe to her, one that filled him with pain and pride at the same time. He remembered being soulless, facing her with a sword in his hand, smirking at her fear and anger. He remembered taunting her: "No weapons, no friends, no hope. Take all that away, and what's left?"

The clarity he had felt was the hardest thing for him to recall now that it was gone. The total lack of remorse as he had thrust the sword at her for the killing blow. The emptiness, the evil. But the pain hid a jewel that made it tolerable: he had lost. Buffy had stopped him with her bare hands, met his eyes, and answered his question with a single word, truer than she even knew: "Me."

She would prevail. She was at home in herself. They fell asleep in each other's arms and he had never trusted anyone more.

***

The recon party met at the Bronze, in part so that Buffy could see them off and Giles could pick her up from there and take her home. He had volunteered to keep her company for the night so that she didn't get too depressed about being left out, but everyone else was going. Willow, Oz, Xander, and
Anya all came together. Willow thought they would be the first to get there, but as they entered the club she spotted a rare sight: Buffy and Angel standing at the edge of the dance floor, swaying together and locked in a deep kiss.

Willow batted at Oz's arm in barely contained excitement. "Look! Buffy and Angel are totally sucking face! In public!" She bounced on her heels. "I am suddenly very proud of myself."

Oz just smiled, but Xander overheard and gave her an incredulous look. "Okay, two questions: one, why are you taking credit for this; and two, how is it possibly a good thing?"

It didn't take long to explain about the spell she'd done, especially since she decided not to care if he wasn't happy about it. He seemed a little hurt that he had been so thoroughly kept out of the loop, and that she did care about, but she made a mental note to talk to him about it in greater depth once they weren't in a noisy club. Anya actually helped, for once, by getting them off the topic.

"We could be sucking face on the dance floor too, you know," she said.

"Better idea," said Oz. "I propose that we all go sit at that table near them, and when they come up for air the first thing they see is all of us staring at them. All in favor?"

Four votes of "aye" brought them to the table, and Slayer and vampire looked up at the same time. Buffy blushed and hid her face against Angel's chest, but she was smiling, and he actually looked less embarrassed than she did. He had probably known they were there all along, Willow realized, but it was nice that he was allowing the public display of affection. He had always been very discreet about that when their relationship was new, and Willow didn't think discretion was Buffy's favorite thing.

"So you finally told her," Willow said to Angel as he and Buffy sat down with them.

"Congratulations!" added Anya. "I hope you enjoy your happiness!"

Angel acknowledged both of them with a nod, and Buffy gave them a wry little smile. Then she cast Willow a challenging gaze and asked with mock-aggression, "So, getting pretty good at keeping secrets, huh?"

Willow shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "I figured it's okay to keep a secret from someone when it's about a present you have for them."

As she and Buffy ribbed each other, Angel and Oz started up their own conversation in low voices. Willow tried to eavesdrop, and heard Oz say, "I was getting pretty tired of Will being more interested in your sex life than mine," and Angel answer, "I'm pretty tired of everyone being interested in my sex life."

Willow was still trying to decide if she wanted to interfere with this discussion when Buffy asked, "So what are you going to do with yourself now that you don't have the world's awesomest spell to work on?"

Xander jumped in. "She's already started on another. Got her nose in one of those big old leather books at all times, and won't tell anyone what it is."

"Really?" Buffy looked intrigued. "C'mon, spill. What's the next big thing?"

Willow leaned back in her chair and mimed zipping her lips. "It's big, and probably the first thing you hear about it is going to be that it's not going to work and I was silly for trying. Don't try squeezing it out of me! In this matter I am officially unsqueezable."
"You know," said Buffy, "I am so impressed by your newfound powers of mystery that I'm actually not going to try squeezing it out of you. As long as I get full reports on everything that happens tonight, because here come Father Tom and Giles."

The priest and the Watcher were making their way to the table through the crowd of teenagers and twentysomethings. Giles had his usual aura of indifferent tolerance for the party scene, while Father Tom looked all around with a scholar's interest, oblivious to his own incongruence in the Bronze. Everyone rose except for Buffy, who kissed Angel's hand before letting it go.

"Have fun," she said to all of them. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

***

There was more than one room to the crypt; it continued on underground for more space than it would have needed for just burial. It had probably been built by humans originally, but claimed and hollowed out by vampires, and it was now more a dungeon than a crypt.

That was what they started calling it as soon as they began to explore it. Angel thought they could have made the party smaller, but didn't say so- everyone wanted to help, and they had a right to do so. More pairs of eyes in a case like this could be an advantage, anyway. They all came armed, Angel with a large battle axe and everyone else with bows or stakes, but they weren't really expecting any of that kind of action. Vampires weren't likely to stick around a lair that had already once become a killing ground.

The dungeon was very atmospheric, dark and chilly with rats scurrying about and the sounds of dripping water between leaky stones. It was pitch black, but Willow murmured a few words and a ball of light showed up to accompany them, making the place even more atmospheric. Angel continued on to the next room while the rest of them were still near the entrance. He was the only one who had been inside this place before, and he knew where he was going, with or without the light.

It was exactly as it had been when he left it with Buffy in his arms. The manacles were hanging from the same place on the wall, and the ashes on the floor which had once been vampires were hardly disturbed. Angel stood staring until he heard the others coming in behind him. Without looking back he raised a hand and beckoned. "Oz," he said.

Oz stepped forward. Angel spoke for his ears alone: "You smell anything?"

Oz inhaled. "Buffy," he responded reluctantly, after taking a moment to consider. "Really faint Buffy, anyway. And a lot of vampires. Nothing else I can really pin, except for us."

"Me either," said Angel. "Just thought I'd ask." He kept staring at the wall. "You guys can go check out the next room, I'll finish up in here."

Oz moved away and Angel heard him and the rest continuing to the doorway, but Willow remained. "This is where they had her?" she asked in a small voice.

Angel nodded. "Bound with industrial strength chains and they still decided they had to break her foot to keep her there." He had found the key to the manacles and used it to release her, the only way he could have done it without injuring her further. The key was still jutting out of one of the restraints.

Willow swallowed and turned away. Angel didn't. Hoisting his axe over his head he brought it down directly onto the chains, smashing them loudly, and then repeated the motion five or six more times
until bits of stone and metal were quivering on the ground and the wall itself gained a gaping hole where the chains had been screwed in. Willow gasped and jumped away, but didn't run and didn't say anything.

Finally Angel lowered the axe and left the mess behind him. Willow was looking both impressed and cautious. He caught her unspoken question and shrugged. "Felt the need for some spontaneous destruction." She raised an eyebrow, and he sighed. "Not the evil kind of spontaneous destruction. I told you I'd tell you if I was lapsing. I'm not." He slung the axe over his shoulder and headed in the direction that the others had gone. "Just a little angry," he added, not caring if she heard.

In the next room, the team was shining their flashlights over the walls and into the corners where the magic ball of light didn't reach, but they all looked up when he and Willow entered. "Did that big noise give us cause to be concerned?" asked Xander.

Angel shook his head. "I broke something."

"I see," said Xander, not sounding like he saw at all. "So are we learning anything?"

"So far it doesn't look like anyone's been here since I was," said Angel. "But I want to keep looking. Some of them probably lived here at some point, we should see if they left anything in the other rooms."

The 'rooms' became more like caves the farther they were from the entrance, and they weren't set up with any logical plan, just one in front of the other so that anyone who wanted to get to the last one had to walk through them all. "I'd rather not have us all cornered in the back like this," said Father Tom as they approached the end. "Might we split up?"

He returned to the front with Willow and Oz, and Angel inspected the last two rooms with Xander and Anya. There was indeed evidence that vampires had been using it as a lair, but nothing that was worth coming back for even if the occupant was still alive. Angel shuffled through anything paper he could find, looking for letters or anything that might have names or plans on it, but the vamps here didn't seem to be the well-written sort.

The three of them had just agreed that they weren't getting anywhere with the final room when they were interrupted by shouts and clatters from the first one. Angel snatched up his axe and used a burst of vampire speed to get back up front, catching up with Oz, who was rushing out of the chain room by himself. They both saw the same thing at the same time: Father Tom staking a vampire and being grabbed by another, two more coming through the door, and one gripping Willow from behind, holding down her arms and going for her neck. She was struggling to break free and also trying to recite an incantation of some kind, but interrupted herself with a cry of pain as the vampire's fangs reached her skin.

Angel didn't think twice about which enemy to attack first, but Oz chose the same one. With a yell that turned into a roar midway, he changed, right before everyone's eyes, clothes tearing off of him as his body warped and grew into a monstrous lupine creature. The vampire biting Willow let go of her immediately and turned to run, seeing that he was the werewolf's target, but he didn't get far. Oz reached him in a single leap and went right for his throat, tearing it out with a set of fangs bigger than Angel's. He didn't stop to mangle his prey any further, just moved on to the next closest vampire. Willow, despite her obvious shock, had the reflexes to get down to the floor and stake the fallen vampire before he got back up. Father Tom was down to a single opponent and handling it, so Angel tried to help Oz take his down.

He didn't get the chance. The vampire had seen what the werewolf could do, and he turned tail and ran up the stairs, back outside. Oz followed, snarling and single-minded as only a wolf on the hunt.
could be. There was a final explosion of dust as Xander and Anya came running up, a second too late to join the fight. They saw Father Tom leaning his hands on his knees and breathing heavily, and Willow kneeling in a pile of ashes and bleeding from the neck, and rushed over to help her. "Oz," she panted, pointing up the stairs.

Angel took all this in and left them to help each other recover. He ran up to the entrance to stop the werewolf before they lost him, but as he cleared the top few steps he was stopped short by the appearance of one more vampire.

And what a vampire. He must have been seven feet tall, his chest bulging with muscles, clearly visible because he wore no shirt. Angel could see why: he had a hump on his back that protruded too far to allow normal clothing. It didn't seem to affect his posture, but the deformity continued up his neck and pebbled the skin of his bald head. He also had an identifying mark of a different kind: a round red scar in the middle of his chest, directly under his collarbone. Like all ancient vampires, his face was fixed in its fanged form, though that didn't stop him from giving Angel a hideous smile. When he spoke, his voice was a bit gravelly, but otherwise unremarkable. "Angelus, right? We'll have to talk sometime." He stepped out of Angel's line of vision- Angel was still within the doorway of the dungeon- and was gone by the time Angel advanced to follow him.

Father Tom and Anya had come up the stairs behind Angel with just enough time to see the vampire before he disappeared; now they came outside and looked around for any lingering sign of him. Angel was confounded. Nobody should have been able to hide so quickly, especially since there was nowhere to hide. He whipped around and said to Father Tom, "Daemonis, right?"

"It was. And there's no use trying to catch up to him now. He's prone to vanishing. I'm not sure how he does it."

Angel slammed his hand against the wall of the dungeon in frustration. "No time for that anyway. We have to catch Oz before he does any damage."

"Right," said Father Tom, "and speaking of that..."

Willow stumbled up the stairs, supporting herself on Xander's shoulder and pressing a handkerchief to the wound on her neck. "It's not even a full moon!" she cried.

Everyone automatically looked up at the sky to confirm it. She was right: the moon was hardly a crescent, nowhere near wolf time even if Oz hadn't already found methods to prevent it. This is turning into a really bad night, thought Angel uselessly.

"We'll find him," he told Willow. "Father Tom and I. The rest of you should go home."

Willow pushed Xander away and took a few unsteady steps toward Angel. "No," she said, "I have to find him!" She cupped her hands to her mouth and called out into the darkness, "Oz! OZ! OZ!"

"Willow," Angel urged, taking hold of her shoulder and twisting her to face him, "you're hurt. You have to go home. We'll find him, I swear. Please just trust me."

She looked up into his eyes. "You need the tranquilizer gun," she said. "Giles has it."

Angel cursed inwardly. She was right. He glanced at Father Tom. "Will you be able to find me if I start tracking him while you go with them and get the gun?"

"Uh, guys?" said Xander. He held up a cellphone. "Miracle of modern technology." Soon he had reached Giles, outlined the situation, and handed the phone to Father Tom. "He'll call back when he's got it..."
and meet you out here. Track away."

"Thank you," said Angel sincerely. "And I'd appreciate it if the three of you stayed at the mansion tonight until we come back. Buffy needs to know what's going on."

They looked at each other and nodded, and headed off in that direction. They'd only taken a few steps before Willow looked back and warned, "Don't you dare hurt him," but after that she let herself be led away without resisting.

As soon as Angel and Father Tom were on the trail and out of earshot, Father Tom pointed at his chest and asked, "Did you see a little scar on him? Right about here?"

Angel forced his mind off of Oz and onto Daemonis. "Yeah, I saw it. Looked a little too fresh to be called a scar, though."

"I saw him about a month ago and he had that mark. Two months ago he didn't."

The werewolf had left a clear path to follow, both visual and olfactory, and Angel was able to keep on it without paying much attention as he considered Father Tom's remark. "It should have healed up if it's that old. I don't know what that could mean."

Father Tom looked straight ahead grimly, keeping pace with Angel's long stride. "I think I might."

***

Nobody could sleep, and being indoors felt too restrictive. They huddled together on the steps in front of the mansion, hoping that the vantage point would let them see someone or something come out of the dark tree line and end their long waiting game. Father Tom had called just once since Xander, Anya, and Willow had arrived, saying that he and Angel had met up with Giles and received the tranquilizer gun, and that he was turning off the cellphone so they wouldn't be distracted by it. Buffy had the cordless house phone on her lap anyway, in case the search party ran into an emergency, but the first news they got wasn't a call but a howl, long and mournful, far out somewhere in the night.

"That's him, isn't it?" asked Buffy quietly.

Willow nodded, staring blankly in the direction of the sound. It couldn't have been anything else, really. It was too forceful and otherworldly to be a dog or coyote, and it went on and on, sometimes stopping for a few minutes and then starting up again from a slightly different location. It was mesmerizing- Buffy had a hard time even speaking, as if she'd be interrupting it.

Xander didn't, though. "Well, if that's him, that's a pretty good sign." Three pairs of eyes turned to him, and he explained, "If his mouth is busy howling, it can't be chomping on someone, right?"

Willow sniffled, and Buffy put a hand on her shoulder. The door opened behind them. Giles had come back to the mansion after delivering the gun, but wouldn't sit outside with them and plainly disapproved of them doing it either. "You're very exposed out here," he mentioned, not for the first time.

"Uh huh," said Buffy. "So exposed that we can see anything coming a mile away and run like squirrels back to shelter." She leaned her head back to look up at him. "Is it time for another safety talk already? Thought we had a few more minutes."

He sighed. "Actually I was going to offer to order a pizza for you, ungrateful hoodlums that you are. You don't even know how long you've been out here, do you?"
"Wrong. Checking my watch every thirty seconds or so. Pepperoni."

"Pineapple," said Xander.

"Onion," said Anya.

Giles gave another long-suffering sigh and went back inside. Buffy felt guilty for a second- Giles really did have a thankless job, and it wasn't even really a job- but thinking about anything but Oz and Willow right now was making her feel guilty, so any new guilt was just redundant. Of course she wanted Oz to get back safely, but the real reason she kept checking her watch was because she couldn't stop counting down to daybreak. She told herself that Angel knew what he was doing, he had been successfully avoiding the sunrise for over two hundred years, but she wished she knew why it was taking so long to track down a single werewolf. There were so many things that could go wrong.

"Dawn's coming soon," said Anya, as if she knew what Buffy was thinking. She had a different conclusion, though: "So Oz ought to turn back into a human and then he won't rip throats out."

"Who knows?" mumbled Willow, the first words she had spoken in a long time. "He's only supposed to change on nights around a full moon. If it's happening now, there's no way to know what to expect."

Buffy tried to sound confident. "Hey, if there's a way for him to change, there's a way to change him back. Don't worry, Will, they'll find him. He'll be Oz again before you know it."

Willow responded with a weak smile, but she couldn't be distracted from her surveillance of their surroundings. A pair of large pizzas arrived and got eaten up, Giles came out to tell them they needed to stand up and stretch, and the howling went through a few more rounds before ceasing completely. Nobody knew what to make of that, either, but Buffy figured that wolves had to get tired of making noise eventually. He had probably just gone to sleep, as she told Willow.

It was perilously close to sunrise and Buffy's heart was pattering overtime before a solitary dark figure finally approached the mansion. Buffy's concern at seeing him come alone was momentarily surpassed by her relief at seeing him at all, and she hopped over on her crutches to meet him and hugged him tightly. Angel returned her embrace, but it was Willow he addressed. "He's still out there."

The collective response to this was surprisingly calm. Buffy realized that they had all been fearing the worst: that Oz was dead, that Father Tom was dead, that both were vampires, that Oz had killed dozens of innocents. If the first thing Angel had to tell them was just that Oz wasn't captured yet, then it couldn't be too bad.

"We couldn't get close," Angel continued. "All night long we've had vampires attacking us, and every time we stopped to fight them, Oz got a little farther away. Father Tom is still searching for him, and we're hoping he'll have better luck now that the vampires have to leave him alone."

Xander shook his head in amazement. "And we had, what, five of them come at us in the dungeon? Is Sunnydale's entire bloodsucker population out partying tonight?"

Angel shrugged. "No, they were just cannon fodder. You want to cause trouble, you have your gang sire a bunch of minions the night before and send them on suicide missions. It's an old tactic. What I want to know is what brought Daemonis out of hiding. He should have had no reason to go back to that crypt." He squinted up at the lightening sky and stepped past Xander and Anya, still sitting on the steps, to get inside. Buffy and Willow followed, and as they entered they saw Giles sit up, after apparently falling asleep on the couch.
Willow looked deeply pensive about Angel's last words. She looked first at Angel, then at Buffy, and then said, "What if we're not the only ones looking for Daemonis? What if someone else brought him out of hiding?"

"Like who?" said Buffy.

"Like..." Willow sounded tentative, and Buffy wondered if she was hiding yet another secret. "...the Initiative?"

Angel was in the kitchen, half hidden by the open refrigerator door. "I wouldn't put it past them," he said as he set something back into the fridge and closed it. "We'll have to look into it." He came back into the living room and stood facing them, as Giles stood up and started rubbing first his eyes and then his glasses. "Willow, I'm sorry. I told you I would find Oz and I didn't. If I could, I'd be out there right now..."

"It's okay," said Willow quickly. "Not your fault. But, um...maybe some of us should go take over for Father Tom? I mean, he's kind of old to be staying up all night, isn't he?"

"One would think," muttered Giles, and then in a clearer voice, "I'll go. It seems I'm the only one who's had any sleep at all tonight."

Buffy could see Angel was starting to brood, a specific variety of brooding that she recognized as the one brought on when he couldn't help out because of the daylight. This time she empathized- she wanted to be out resolving things, too. She sat down with him on the couch and rested her head on his shoulder, hoping she gave him some comfort as he did for her.

Before Giles could leave he had to have an argument with Willow about whether she was allowed to accompany him. Buffy was impressed. She wouldn't have had the nerve to tell Willow she wasn't allowed to do anything right then. The conclusion was foregone, but before they could actually get to it, Anya opened the door and started yelling excitedly, "Guys! Guys!"

Buffy, Willow, and Giles rushed outside; Angel hovered just inside the doorway. At a distance, but still clearly visible in the morning sun, an oversized canine was taking slow, uncertain steps towards the mansion, his head hanging down and his sides heaving. When he saw the crowd he spun around and ran a short ways back to the shelter of the trees, but instead of bolting away altogether he stopped and turned again and resumed his gradual approach.

Oz's wolf form could not be mistaken for a dog by anyone knowledgeable about animals, but nor did it look exactly like a wolf. He was bigger, for one thing, with stronger jaws and longer claws: a brutally efficient killer when he had the full werewolf beserker rage in him. But as far as Buffy remembered, that mode went hand in hand with the transformation. Where was the rage now? "Don't anyone get too close," said Giles in a hushed voice. "He may still be dangerous-"

Willow ignored him completely and walked away from the mansion before anyone could stop her. She moved just as slowly as Oz was moving, and he didn't stop or turn away when he saw her coming toward him. He whined a little, and Willow starting speaking in a soothing voice, words that weren't quite discernible to Buffy. They were no more than ten feet away from each other now, and Giles whispered, "If he attacks her, we may have to..."

He didn't need to finish the sentence, and in a moment it wasn't relevant anyway. As everyone watched, the exhausted werewolf turned into a naked, exhausted Oz, and he stumbled to close the distance between himself and Willow on a human pair of feet. As he launched himself into her open arms, the voyeurs on the mansion's stoop burst into ragged cheers- and catcalls, Buffy noted. Trust Xander to call attention to the absurdity of the situation. Oz looked over as if seeing them for the first
time, which, in a way, he was.

When Father Tom showed up at last, he found all seven of them nestled into Angel's living room. Nobody was fully awake and Xander was snoring loudly from the floor with a single pillow under his head, but Oz was squeezed into an armchair with Willow, wrapped in her arms and looking distinctly odd in Angel's dark and oversized clothes. "Hey, man," Oz greeted the priest. "Sorry if I kept you up last night."

***

Everyone left Angel's house by noon, and he had the best day of sleep in recent memory. Buffy clung to him like a barnacle and snored lightly, and he woke up in the early evening and watched her until she too opened her eyes. She yawned and gave him a sleepy kiss, then picked herself up off his chest and reached for her crutch. She hobbled into the bathroom and he got up and got dressed while she was out of the room. He was still avoiding nudity around her, though she hadn't been very self-conscious about it ever since he'd told her about the alteration to the curse.

She was still in the shower when he heard the doorbell. He was torn for a moment— if he wasn't upstairs when she was ready to come down, she might well attempt it on her own rather than call for help, and he was pretty certain that stairs were still a bad idea in her current condition. He had at least a few minutes, though, so he ran downstairs and opened the door, staying behind it to avoid the last few rays from the sunset.

"Oz," he said with some surprise. He hadn't expected to see him again so soon, especially on his own. "Come on in."

Angel went into the kitchen and started making coffee as Oz sat down at the table. His experience had left him none the worse for wear, and he was dressed in his own clothes now and had brought back Angel's. It was a few minutes before he actually spoke, though, aside from monosyllables answering questions about coffee. After Angel took a seat with him he finally said, "You have any idea what the hell happened to me last night?"

Angel shook his head regretfully. "Werewolves aren't my specialty."

"Well, that makes all of us." Oz rested his chin in his hand. "So here's what's chewing on me. You skipped out of here because you thought you were dangerous, right? How did you know? And what changed that made you come back?"

"I left because I hurt someone," Angel said carefully. "I came back because someone else did. Nothing really changed. Not until Willow cast her spell on me, anyway."

Oz drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "It's not really the same situation, is it."

"No, it's- hold on." Angel darted up the stairs just in time to intercept Buffy, who gave him an exasperated look but allowed him to support her on her way down the stairs. The two of them reached the kitchen as the coffee finished brewing, and Angel went to pour it as Buffy sat down.

"Didn't think Willow was going to let you out of her sight for the next month," she said to Oz by way of greeting.

"Kinda had to sneak away," he agreed. "I wanted to ask you guys if you had any pointers on making sure this never happens again."

Angel set down three cups of coffee and sat back in his chair. "Are you sure that's what you want?" Both Buffy and Oz gave him a bewildered look. "Uh," said Oz. "You were there, right? You saw
me turn into an animal and go postal all night?"

"I saw you save Willow," Angel pointed out. "I saw you send a couple vamps running in sheer
terror, and frankly I was pretty impressed myself. If you had that kind of power under full control, I'd
probably be offering you a job."

"Hm."

"Hey," said Buffy, her eyes widening in sudden realization. "You did kind of control it at the end
there, didn't you? I mean, have you ever gone back to human out of choice before?"

Oz scratched the stubble on his face. "No. And actually I remember more of it this time than I ever
have before."

"Really?" Buffy looked intrigued. "What do you remember?"

"Definitely remember seeing Willow and turning human. And just before that, deciding that howling
wasn't fun anymore and I should go find...something. Find you guys, I guess, I just didn't understand
it at the time. And I remember fighting vampires, though I guess I couldn't have actually killed any,
huh? Too bad werewolves don't have wooden claws."

"Do you remember transforming in the dungeon?" asked Angel.

Oz nodded slowly. "I had never been so angry in my entire life."

Buffy and Angel exchanged glances. "Guess we found the trigger," said Buffy.

Oz sipped at his coffee, lost in thought and still not looking quite comfortable. "So now what? Just
don't ever get angry anymore?"

"We can work with you," Angel offered. "Remembering what happened, choosing to come back,
understanding where it comes from, those are all good signs. Give it some practice and you may be
able to use it to your advantage."

"It's kind of cool, isn't it?" said Buffy happily. "I bet Willow's gonna be psyched."

Buffy certainly had the optimism covered, but Angel could see that Oz's apprehension wasn't about
to disappear. "Don't leave town just yet," he said bluntly. "You haven't hurt anyone."

Oz met his eyes. "You don't think I'm dangerous?"

"Oh, I think you're dangerous alright. Like I said, you made quite an impression last night.
Fortunately, dangerous is exactly what we need right now."
Bloodstream

Chapter Summary

Drug use warning!

Xander knocked on the door of Riley's apartment. He had been there a few times before, but so much had changed since Riley was Buffy's boyfriend that he almost expected it to be vacant, Riley off living somewhere that nobody could find him.

"He's probably not here," said Anya. "He's probably doing Army stuff, or hanging out with his friends. He still has friends, doesn't he?"

But Riley answered the door, looking morose and a little shaggier than he used to be. He took a long look at Xander and Anya, hiding any surprise he felt at seeing them with military discipline, then said, "Come in."

Xander hadn't kept Riley at the top of his admiration list lately, but as soon as he saw the guy again he started to feel for him. The apartment, like Riley himself, was slightly unkempt, something Xander never would have expected of him in the past. After letting them in he leaned against a wall, crossing his arms, and waited for them to speak first.

Anya looked around briefly and dropped onto the loveseat, and Xander sat down next to her. "Where'd you go, dude?" he asked.

"Nowhere," said Riley, rubbing a hand through his hair. "I've been right here."

"Oh!" said Anya, as if something had finally clicked. "You've become a recluse! I read about that. You're too depressed to leave the house, so you stay in here all day and use the internet to get food delivered to you, don't you?"

Xander stepped in before Riley had to find a reply to that. "No, I think it's more likely that he leaves from time to time so he can shoot vampires with his gadgets and corner Daemonis before we do, thus proving he's the better man. Riley? Input?"

"Christ." Riley looked down at the floor, then sharply up at Xander. "Why are you on his side, Xander? Where did this come from?"

"Who?" Xander choked back a laugh. "Angel? Could you be any worse at reading this situation? I'm on Buffy's side. And call me crazy, but until you dropped off the radar, I thought you were too."

This elicited the reaction that Xander was hoping for: more anger. "Everything I do, I do for Buffy," Riley snapped. "Don't even think about acting like you know what's going on here."

Xander spread his hands. "No intentions of it. I have no clue what's going on here. Listen, buddy, here's the rundown on what's been happening since you let Angel chase you away with your tail between your legs. Willow figures out a spell to make Angel's soul stay put, but half of us don't know about it until yesterday. Now she's working on another one and won't tell anyone about it. In the meantime, a battle priest waltzes into our lives and reads everyone's minds, but gets all mysterious when we want to know what's on his. Daemonis has a scar, did you know that? And it means
something! But don't ask me what, because all Father Tom has to say on the matter is 'I have to make some calls.'"

Riley started to reply, but Xander cut him off. "Wait, there's more! Buffy decides she's going to live at Angel's place, and doesn't seem to feel the need to explain why she thinks this is going to end any better than it did last time. Giles is probably the only one who could talk some sense into her, but for no reason that he sees fit to share with me, he hasn't said a thing. And then, to top it all off, we get attacked last night. Willow nearly gets killed, Oz turns into a wolf, and only then do they remember to tell us that Riley and the Initiative are hunting Daemonis- alongside Spike of all people. So you know what? I'm getting pretty damned sick of not knowing what's going on here and I thought this might be a good place to start rectifying that."

Anya looked smug. She liked when Xander chewed people out. Riley just gaped at him for a moment, then said, "Buffy is living with Angel?"

"Wow," said Anya. "One track mind much?"

Xander rolled his eyes. "You weren't exactly around to stop it. You know? Maybe you could have. Or at least you could have messed up his face a little before you took off. Throw me a bone here."

"You think she'd talk to me?"

"I think that's what you're supposed to find out in the only way you can. But I'm still trying to get started on the finding out what's going on here. Can we talk about my pain for a second, Lovesick Emo Boy?"

Riley's eyes remained blank and glassy for a moment, and then he shook his head as if to clear it. "Fine. Yes, I've been hunting Daemonis, yes, I involved the Initiative, yes, I used Spike. I don't know why anyone would say I'm working alongside him, though. He gave me a good lead and I took it. And it sounds like Daemonis is finally starting to feel threatened, so I'm not sure why any of this is the wrong thing to do."

"Because he's feeling threatened enough to threaten us back," Xander said. "He found us last night. He knows us now. Probably thought we were with you. And I kind of hate to say it, but this all probably would have worked out better if we were."

"What," said Riley, "you want to join the Initiative?"

Anya looked from Xander to Riley. "What kind of uniforms would we have to wear?" she inquired.

"We're not joining the Initiative, Anya," Xander said. "We're just trying to cooperate with them." He addressed Riley again. "I'm pretty sure it's crossed your mind that we have the same goals here. I think you know we can help each other, even if it's just by staying out of each other's way. But you won't even pass the latest news on to us. You wouldn't even tell us you were still in the game. And I'm trying really hard not to look at your feelings for Buffy as some kind of motivation for this, but...didn't you just say a couple minutes ago that everything you do is for her?"

Riley was glowering. Xander didn't think it was even possible for him to completely let go of his civility, but he was definitely radiating strong 'you don't get it' vibes, and Xander didn't have a lot of patience for that. He was about to restate the accusation in more explicit terms, but Riley responded first. "You're right about one thing. We can help by staying out of each other's way." Then he unfolded an arm and made a placating gesture. "I don't know if anything I did put you in danger, but...I'm sorry. From now on I'll warn you if there's anything I know about that you don't. But I'm just talking to you and me, here, because I still have enough self-respect to not be taking orders from a
vampire."

For some reason, Xander looked to Anya. What he wanted right now was one of her completely inappropriate remarks, something that would cut Riley to the core because it was so brutally honest and spoken with such nonchalance. The best part was that it was all due to Anya's ignorance of social norms, so nobody could ever really blame her for it. She was like his own personal force of nature. But now she just returned his glance and shrugged, waiting for him to finish up the conversation.

"You want to show your girl you can be everything to her," said Xander. "You want to kill her enemies for her and you want to do it before Angel does. I understand that. I understand that really, really well, actually." He stood up to go, Anya following suit. "But if you're going to insult her and her entire team to do it...maybe you should have just stuck to the flowers and chocolate."

***

"Here."

Giles looked at the notebook that Willow had just placed into his hands. It was the plain green spiral kind that sold for a dollar apiece, but on the cover she had written 'Willow's Super Secret Magic Spellbook- You Are Not Allowed to Read This!' in ballpoint pen. He glanced at her. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Read it, of course."

"Well it says here-"

"Read it." She yanked a chair out from the table and thumped into it, folding her arms on the table. It was still within business hours, and the store wasn't empty, but they seldom had trouble with eavesdroppers here, and he thought she was being a little too reluctant to talk. "Analyze it," she added. "Check my equations and cross-reference my sources and call your special hotline that reaches directly to Merlin. Do whatever it takes, just tell me I'm wrong."

Giles slowly sat down next to her, still examining the cover of the notebook though it told him nothing. "This is your secret project? All that work and now you want to be wrong about it?"

"It's too much. I don't do well with this much responsibility." She heaved a sigh of frustration.

"Giles, the only reason I started studying this was out of curiosity. I thought it was interesting when I first noticed it and I wanted to be the one to be able to describe exactly why it wasn't possible. And then I just never got to that point. You have to help me. I can't just leave it like this."

"But you haven't actually cast anything yet?"

"Oh, no. Definitely not. I mean, unless the spell I cast on Angel counts, because that's the one that kicked this off. And I don't want to cast anything, that's what I'm telling you!"

He frowned. "I'm afraid I'm terribly confused about what you're telling me. Willow, if you don't want to cast a spell, don't do it. Do you really need me to tell you that?"

"You'll understand when you read it. I mean, maybe we can do that. Maybe we can just decide we're not going to cast it. But that decision would be a lot easier to make if it's impossible to cast it anyway, so can we just, you know, dwell in the realm of impossibility?" Willow gave him an imploring look, one that asked for support without comprehension, and he made the internal choice to give it.
He was saved from further baffling discussion by Father Tom's entrance. Giles inconspicuously slipped Willow's notebook beneath another book before the priest could see the cover, and Willow flashed him a grateful smile. She turned to Father Tom as he sat down with them. "Hi! How goes the life of slayin' and prayin'?"

Father Tom gave a good-natured chuckle and then paused with his chin in his hand. Giles suspected that he was trying to make up his mind about whether he wanted to speak openly in front of both of them. There was too much of that going around, Giles thought. Too many secrets, not enough cooperation.

"You're right," said Father Tom suddenly, and Giles nearly cursed out loud. He had actually forgotten that he was dealing with a mind reader. How stupid could he be?

"Oh, not stupid at all," the priest replied. "People do it all the time. It's not part of anyone's nature to guard their thoughts. Unfortunately, it's not part of mine to speak openly. But there's little reason for this to be secret anyway." He smiled disarmingly at Willow. "Let's cooperate."

Willow, who of course didn't know what had brought that little speech on, replied simply, "Sure, let's do that."

"Daemonis has been poisoned." He paused to let that sink in, then continued. "I wasn't able to speak directly with the one who accomplished it, but I did learn that she is one Sister Florence, of a Franciscan convent in Michigan. Very devout, but not completely in touch with the world outside her community, so she didn't think to send word to the rest of us. I learned a bit about the compound she used, but mystical poisons are not my area of expertise." He took a small folded piece of paper and handed it to Giles. "See if you can make anything of this?"

Giles took a look at the note. It had a Latin name for the poison, and a short list of effects it was supposed to have on vampires. "Shouldn't be difficult," he said. "Rather a relief to have something substantial to be able to look up, for once."

Father Tom stood up. "Right, my thoughts exactly. Unfortunately I can't stay. This diocese seems to be woefully short of members of my order, and whenever one of us ends up here there's a thousand tasks they have for us." He seemed about to leave it at that, but then he hesitated and spoke reluctantly to Willow. "My child...I can't see the details of this spell you have in mind, and I don't intend to look any closer. You're remarkably good at maintaining mental privacy. But if it frightens you, then it frightens me too, and all the more so if it involves the human soul. Please handle these choices with care."

Giles expected her to be offended at that, but as soon as Father Tom left the store, she turned to him and slapped her hands down on the table. "See?" she said. "Totally have my reasons for freaking out here!"

***

Dingoes Ate My Baby had broken up after Oz panicked and took off on his solo travels, and hadn't reunited when he returned. Most everyone counted it a loss, but Oz himself seemed to take it in stride, and he had a variety of musician friends who were happy to jam with him at any time or place. At the moment he and two other guys were gathered in the space on the porch that they had chosen as a stage, strumming away at their respective instruments and singing a few lines at a time before suddenly stopping altogether and starting up an entirely different song. They had drawn a small crowd, most of whom were yelling at them to play something straight through so they could dance.

Paper lanterns decorated the yard. A couple card tables had been set up to hold chips and dip and a
vast amount of cookies. There was a keg, but Buffy had opted for soda. She was sitting with it on a chair near the porch, watching the festivities and trying to smile. The party wasn't for any specific occasion, just something that the new residents of Buffy's former home decided would be fun. She had her suspicions that it was, at least in part, for her benefit. And that made sense, didn't it? They wanted to cheer her up, they wanted to bring life back to some level of normality. Parties were good. Buffy liked parties. So why was she feeling so out of place at this one?

The absence of her mother was resonating throughout her whole being- this would have been about the time that Mom started up negotiations about how loud the music could be- but it was more than that. Ever since she had been captured, everything was different: herself, her friends, her whole life. Bringing it back to music and parties felt like pretending, and Buffy wondered who they thought they were trying to fool. Everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves, though. Buffy would have given anything to just have that carefree feeling back.

The music stopped again, and Buffy looked up to see Oz handing his guitar to another aspiring musician. He met her eyes and walked over, taking the seat next to her. It was actually a bit surprising that she had been left alone even for these few minutes; her friends seemed to have it planned out that one of them was always chatting with her, asking if she needed anything, or just being nearby. She smiled wanly and greeted Oz. She did appreciate it. And it was likely that he was getting the cheer-you-up-by-force treatment as much as she was. Days had passed since his unwitting return to lycanthropy, and hardly anyone had even spoken about it; they were all so busy with one thing or another.

After he returned the greeting he reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a plastic sandwich bag, which appeared to hold a handful of gummy candies. "I know this isn't really your thing," he said quietly, "but sometimes it helps me when I've got too much on my mind- things seem to be conspiring that way lately- and I can tell you're having a rough time of it tonight. Just a thought. If you want some."

Buffy blinked and looked closer at the candies. They were still candies, but she understood. Oz was right, it wasn't her thing. Still... "Would it make me publicly embarrass myself?"

"Probably not, but we'll be keeping an eye on you." He plucked a couple of the candies from the bag and popped them into his mouth. "And it's from a safe source. No long term effects."

She looked around the party again and realized she didn't want to be there. Well, there was more than one way to get out and dammit, wasn't it worth a try at least once? "How many should I have?"

"Not more than three," he said, handing her the bag.

She opened it and put three into her mouth at once. Noting a slightly impressed look on Oz's face, she explained, "High physical tolerance. Slayer. Might not even feel a smaller dosage." The gummies tasted like gummies, but they stuck to her teeth and she worked her mouth to get them down. "Actually I have no idea. But it seems likely."

He nodded. "It'll be a little while before it takes effect. Let me know how you feel." That was calming. Oz was calm. Oz was cool.

Twenty minutes later she was threatening his life.

***

The house on Revello Drive was unlocked, a few stray partygoers still milling about harmlessly inside. Angel went through the front door and out again the back way to get to the yard, where the
party was centralized. It was winding down and there was little noise aside from one guy on a guitar
crooning a song unfamiliar to Angel, to an audience of himself.

Yeah, all those stars drip down like butter,
And promises are sweet,
We hold out our pans with our hands to catch them
We eat them up, drink them up,
Up, up, up...

The words were faintly disturbing, for reasons he couldn't place and didn't have time to analyze. He
was momentarily concerned when he didn't see Buffy and her friends right away, and then when he
did notice them, huddling in a tight circle near the porch, he didn't know why but he felt certain that
something was wrong.

"Buffy, listen, you have to believe us," Willow was saying. "There aren't any vampires here."

Angel stepped forward, revealing himself. "Not entirely true," he said, and everyone looked over at
him. "What's going on?"

Buffy was sitting in the center of the circle with her head in her hands. When she heard him she
lurched out of her chair onto her one good foot and threw herself into his arms. "Angel," she cried,
"help me, I'm all messed up and I can't tell who's a vampire and, and I think I tried to kill Oz only I
didn't have a stake."

Angel looked around at everyone. Oz was alive and well, and definitely not a vampire, but if Buffy
was in a state like this then it was a good thing she didn't have any stakes on hand. "Everyone's
safe," he said gently, stroking her hair. "Just calm down."

"No!" She shook her head violently. "No, I can't calm down, because they're still out there and if I
can't kill them then you have to!" She pressed her face up to his chest and he could feel her hot tears
soaking through his shirt.

He cupped his hand behind her head and held it against himself, subtly covering her ears so she
wouldn't hear what he whispered to Xander, the one standing closest to him. "Magic or drugs?"

Xander whispered back the answer, and hearing it was enough to make Angel automatically shoot
him a dirty look. Was this generation still glorifying the seventies?

"Hey, it wasn't my idea," Xander complained in a louder voice.

Enough was enough. "We're going inside," he said, addressing both Buffy and the group. He lifted
her off the ground. "Where can she lie down? Might have to be all night."

"Our room," said Willow. "I mean, her room. We can sleep on the couch."

Angel nodded his thanks and carried Buffy inside. It wasn't altogether easy- she kept trying to warn
him about things which didn't exist, and nothing she said was very coherent. At the base of the stairs
she glanced into the living room, which was unoccupied at the moment, and gave a little shriek.
Angel tried to tell her there was nothing there, but she just started crying again, mumbling, "I can't do
this. I can't do this. I can't do this."

"Buffy, focus. None of what you're seeing is real. It's all going to be gone by morning." He started
going up the stairs, carefully so that Buffy's occasional shudder didn't upset his balance.

"Morning?" Her voice cracked. "I can't. I want it gone now. Make it stop."
They reached the top of the stairs and he opened her bedroom door. "I can't make it stop. It's in your bloodstream now. You just have to wait it out."

She pulled back to meet his eyes, looking completely sentient for the moment. "My bloodstream, huh?" she asked flatly.

His throat tightened, and he swiftly shut the door behind them. "Get that thought out of your head," he commanded. "I'm not going to do it."

"Please, Angel," she pleaded as he sat down with her on the bed. "Just this once. I know I shouldn't have eaten those things, it was stupid, but I don't think I can make it through the night like this." She squeezed him. "I'm so scared."

He squeezed back, but he was fighting a mounting feeling of dread. "I can't risk it. Last time I nearly killed you. Remember?"

"You were delirious. This time it'll be different. Please, I just want..." She dissolved into tears again. "...I just want to go to sleep."

He looked into her eyes and wiped some of the moisture off of her face with his thumb. She was a wreck. He knew how it worked- she wouldn't be able to sleep for hours, and if the experience was frightening her this much right now, it wasn't going to turn into a happy one until it was over. But as soon as he had started thinking about her bloodstream, he had felt a kind of buried excitement that was much, much worse than dread. Could he do it? Could he ease her mind and keep her safe at the same time?

He was sitting on the edge of the bed; she was on his lap with her legs off to one side and her head leaning on his shoulder. She trembled again, and he made up his mind. In precise movements he brushed the hair away from her neck, kissed her scar, kissed it again, and sank his fangs into it.

Buffy gave a low moan that could have been pain or pleasure. It was a familiar sound, one that Angelus had drawn from countless victims, and it had always triggered an instinct to bite harder, to increase the sensation. Instincts had to be ignored now, though. One slip in his concentration and he could drain her before he had even realized it.

He drank as slowly as he could, trying to tell himself that it was out of caution and not because he was savoring it. That was a lie and he knew it, though. This was Buffy, the best thing he had ever tasted, and the one thing which he had resolved to never taste again. The heat of her blood rushed through him in exhilarating waves. Starlight, he thought. It's like drinking the stars. Her body was pressed against him, pulsing with life, relaxing gradually as the source of her turmoil was sucked out of her. He hugged her gently and smoothed her hair to show her- and himself- that he was still in control, and she sighed contentedly. Was it possible she was enjoying this? He knew that some humans experienced a temporary ecstatic feeling when they were fed on, but he had never expected that from the Slayer herself.

When he had taken enough he pulled away quickly before he had a chance to second guess himself. Separated from her blood flow he felt cut off, isolated, but after licking the punctures once to make sure they were clean, he kept himself away from them. Slipping his arms beneath her, he lifted her off of his lap and lay her down on the bed. She was out of danger now. For him it wasn't over, but he had stopped at the right time and she was going to be okay.

She stretched out and then rolled onto her side, eyes closed. "I feel better," she murmured, and then her eyes snapped open as she heard Angel's footsteps moving away from her. "Hey! Where are you going?"
"I'll be right back," he promised as he left the room. He returned with a first aid kit and a glass of water and a thankful feeling for not having run into any of her friends while he was out there.

The holes in her neck were small and weren't bleeding; a pair of band-aids was enough to cover them. He made her drink some water, took a sip himself, and then lay down beside her, propped halfway up on the pillows. He pulled her closer to him and she rested her head on his chest. "Ooh," she said. "You're warm."

"It's your warmth. I just borrowed it."

He didn't know if she knew what he meant by that, but she turned a lazy smile on him. "Did I taste good?"

"Buffy, don't." He realized that she had no idea of what she had just put him through... or what was coming next. He had tasted the difference in her blood immediately, but it hadn't started to affect him yet.

She was too out of it to notice his terseness. "Well, I hope I tasted good." She snuggled closer. "I love you."

"I love you," he whispered back.

She was asleep by the time he started seeing things. He had been closing his eyes, feigning sleep because he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep for real, and when he opened them after an interval, he had visitors. Spike and Drusilla were standing over the bed, smiling sardonically as they stared at him and Buffy. They were dressed in modern clothes- Dru had a tight leather top that belonged on a dominatrix- and had their hands all over each other, as usual. "You're not real," Angel whispered. "Get out of here."

"How about that, love?" said Spike. "This bloke thinks we're not real."

"I knew a man who wasn't real," Drusilla replied. "He had his teeth in a pretty string around his neck, and he sang songs to me as I opened up his bones to see his heart."

"Maybe she's the one who isn't real," Spike said, looking at Buffy. "Maybe you're the one who's chained up in the crypt, and all of this fancy about swooping in and saving her was just a story you made up to make your sad self feel better." He made a move as if to prod her.

"If you touch her I'll kill you," Angel rasped. He wanted to shout, but he had a vague understanding that his voice would wake Buffy even though Spike's wouldn't, and it was all-important that Buffy stay asleep during this.

Spike laughed. "If I'm not real I can't touch her," he pointed out. "Of course, if I'm not real you can't kill me, so I s'pose I can do whatever I bloody well feel like doing."

"Marvelous," said Drusilla, referring to nothing that Angel could see. "Splendid." She threw her head back and reached into her mouth, taking hold of something inside of it. Her tongue? No, it was the hilt of a long, narrow sword, which she removed from her throat bit by bit, hand over hand. When the whole thing was out she twirled it around like a princess with a magic wand, the point of its blade narrowly missing Spike's face as well as Angel and Buffy.

"Splendid it is," Spike told her. "What can you do with that splendid thing, duckling?"

In answer, Drusilla held up the sword and began walking around the room, mincing her steps and swinging the weapon with exaggerated motions. She slashed at the walls where they met the ceiling,
and Angel soon saw that wherever she cut, a sickly light seeped into the room from whatever was outside of it. Drusilla paid no attention to it, but she worked deliberately to reach every edge of every wall: she was cutting the room out from around them. When she had made a full circle, she took Spike's hand and the two of them departed. They didn't disappear, just walked through the door, leaving Angel to wonder if they really had been hallucinations.

He couldn't wonder about it for long, though, because there was now something else that needed his attention. There was no more light coming through the cracks in the walls. Now it was blood, smooth and dark, pouring down evenly, blanketing the room from the top down. It was odd, though—he was sure it was blood, but why couldn't he smell it? Because it's not real, he reminded himself. It's just the drug, none of this is really happening.

Wasn't it? As the veil of blood crept steadily towards the floor, the walls themselves began to fade and he realized that the room was just an illusion, and the blood was washing it away. Gradually his real surroundings came clear, and as much as he tried to deny them, he had really always known he would be back again someday.

The sky was black smog, the air was red and dusty, and so very very hot. Machines clanged in every direction, and people screamed, like they always did, and there was no horizon or distant shore or an ending of any kind. The demons were there, he could feel their presence, and soon they would notice him and the pain would begin and this time it wouldn't stop, it would never, ever stop.

In sudden horror he looked down at himself. He was still lying on the bed- and Buffy was still asleep in his arms. He had brought her with him to Hell. He didn't know how, he didn't know why something beautiful like her could end up here with something vile like him, but she was here and it had to be because of him. No no no no no. Desperately he tried to think of some kind of bargaining tool, something that he could sacrifice to get her back to the world where she belonged, but he was already down in the inferno with her and there was nothing he had left. All he could do was stay still, not disturb her, keep her asleep for as long as possible because once she woke she would know where she was and they would come for her and he couldn't stop it.

So when she moved against him and he thought she was waking, he nearly cried out, but she settled again without opening her eyes and her breathing remained even. The shock of it had been enough to change the scenery, though. When he looked around himself again, Hell was gone. It was Buffy's old bedroom again. Overwhelmed, he clutched her more tightly and buried his face in her hair. It never happened. We're safe. I just have to remember what's real and what isn't. And at the moment, there was only reality, the room and the bed and his love sleeping soundly with her head on his chest. Did that mean it was over?

No such luck. The next spectacle was a visual tally of all of his victims. It started with his little sister and then his parents, and they were followed closely by a full parade of everyone he had ever killed. They came through the door, walked past without even glancing at him, and then climbed out the window one by one, and there was no way to see what happened to them after that. It went on and on. Angel recognized every one of them, even kills he hadn't thought of in years, the routine murders that he had considered only as meals. None appeared to notice him or Buffy, and none appeared to be dead or wounded. They just kept coming in, shuffling through, crawling out the window.

The last faces were the most recent ones, including the especially painful ones of some of Buffy's classmates. When they had cleared the room, one more stepped in: Jenny Calendar. He had been haunted by her visage before, the First Evil using her form to antagonize him with guilt. Was it the First this time, or was it Jenny herself? Neither, he told himself. She's not here and this isn't happening. But Jenny stepped over to the bed, smiled at him, and said, "You were born to hurt her."
She vanished. Angel hugged Buffy, like a child with a stuffed animal, and closed his eyes to wait for the night to end.

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Willow tapped uncertainly at the bedroom door. It was still early in the morning, but she had to check on them even if it meant waking them up. "Buffy? Angel? It's just me. Can I come in?"

It was Angel who answered, a muffled groan. "Yeah."

She cracked the door and slipped inside. They were both lying on top of the covers of the bed, both fully clothed, Buffy apparently asleep but looking well considering the state she'd been in last night. It was Angel whose appearance surprised Willow: he was disheveled and sallow, wearing a look of great weariness. "Just wanted to see if she- if you were both okay," she said.

"She'll be fine. Slept it off." He looked at Willow with bloodshot eyes. "Anyone else take any?"

"Just Oz, and he's used to it. I can't stand the stuff, myself. I tried it once and all I saw were these little green frogs hopping all over the floor. I just watch Oz on it and that's more than enough for me." She lingered in the doorway, trying to figure out what was wrong with the scene in front of her. Then she saw it. Two band-aids on Buffy's neck, and those had definitely not been there the night before. "Angel, did you..." Her voice dropped to an incredulous whisper. "...Did you drink her?"

He nodded weakly. "Just enough to get it out of her system."

"And into yours," she finished, comprehending. "Is that why you look so bad?"

"Hallucinogens and a past like mine...bad combination."

That wasn't hard to believe. She'd read the book, after all. This was a difficult situation to referee, but she couldn't help sympathizing. She crossed her arms. "So is this going to be another secret I'm keeping for you?"

His eyes creased in sorrow, and his voice got even quieter. "She was suffering," he said. "She was crying. I couldn't take it."

Willow crossed the room and stooped over to look at Buffy more closely. She really did look okay, breathing normally and curved comfortably around Angel. "I won't tell," she decided. "If Xander saw this he'd probably stake you."

"I'd probably let him."

Now that was a scary thought. She straightened and went to the closet, found a turtleneck shirt and showed it to Angel. "She can borrow this, it'll hide the..." She searched for a word, came up empty, and gestured at her own neck to demonstrate. "Bring her downstairs when she wakes up, okay?"

She turned to go, but Angel's voice stopped her. "Why did you let her do it, Willow?"

Her hand already on the knob, she turned her head and said over her shoulder, "She was suffering." Not wanting any further discussion, she closed the door behind her and went downstairs.

It turned out nobody was in a very good mood that morning. Anya and Xander were bickering in that tireless way they had, Oz was unwilling to leave the couch, and Giles, when he called looking for Buffy, was inordinately annoyed that nobody had told him that she wasn't going to sleep at Angel's last night. He was supposed to take her to a check-up on her broken foot, and Willow,
embarrassed that she had forgotten about it, lied and said they thought it would be easier for him to pick her up from the Summers house. She promised to make sure that Buffy would be ready in an hour, and was steeling herself to go knock on the bedroom door again when Angel shuffled down the stairs with Buffy supporting herself on his arm.

She was freshened up and wearing Willow's borrowed clothing, but Angel's condition hadn't improved much, and he readily accepted Anya's offer to drive him home in his car. He made sure Buffy could be dropped off at the mansion after her appointment, kissed the top of her head without saying anything to her, and draped a blanket over himself to protect him from the daylight.

Buffy sat with Willow at the table and watched him leave the house with Anya. "He's mad at me," she said sadly.

"'Cause you didn't Just Say No to Drugs?"

Buffy rolled her shoulders. "I guess. He didn't really say. I didn't really ask."

Willow stood up and started taking out the breakfast foods again. "Buffy, this is a really bad time for you to not be communicating well with Angel."

"I know. I know." Buffy stared vacantly at the orange juice before finally pouring some into a glass. "I'll talk to him when we get home."

***

The underground chamber felt cool and damp after the heat of the outdoors above it. Oz rushed down the stairs and punched the combination into the cage's lock, noting as he did that there was a pile of cut ropes on the floor inside. He didn't remember those being there last time, but it had been months since he had come down here. There hadn't been a reason for it. And it didn't matter if someone else had visited. He was just lucky that the combination still worked. He slammed the door behind him and slumped down to the floor, some of his urgency fading now that he was safely locked away.

It was time, though. He had to try it sooner or later, and he wanted to do it alone. So anger was the catalyst? No better time than now, then. He had been angry enough at himself, ever since he learned that his 'cure' was situationally dependent and all this time he had been putting everyone around him in danger. Last night was the last straw. Nobody had even confronted him about it yet, but they all knew. He was the one who had given Buffy the acid, he was the one responsible for the bad trip that had scared her so much. God, he thought. Nobody should ever have to see the Slayer in hysterics. He had been tripping himself at the time, but it was hard to forget being mistaken for a vampire. She seemed fine in the morning, but Oz could tell there was still something wrong. Maybe he had lied about there being no long-term effects.

How was he supposed to have known it would happen that way? He had been using the stuff since he was fifteen. It never did to him what it had done to her.

He could feel the change approaching, just as it used to on full moons. It was already starting to make more sense. The anger helped to bring it on, but now he could choose to coax it forward or hold it back. The real question was whether he could reverse the process on his own, but there wasn't any way to find that out aside from just doing it. He took his shirt off and steadied himself with a few deep breaths.

As he finished undressing he heard a deep chuckle behind him, on the other side of the bars. He whirled around to see Spike stepping out of the shadows in the back of the crypt, lighting a cigarette and staying clear of the single beam of sunlight coming through the ceiling.
"How did you get in here?" Oz asked, his voice shaking a little with the effort of suddenly having to repress the transformation.

Spike took a long drag from his cigarette. "Been here all day. Surprised your nose didn't pick me up, but I'm guessing you were a bit distracted."

"Yeah. You know, this isn't really a good time for me to talk." His skin was tingling, an especially strange feeling since the physical sensation of the acid hadn't fully worn off yet. He knew he couldn't stop the wolf from coming now, just delay it.

"I can see that. S'alright. You don't have to talk. I'm doing that." Spike strolled around the room, hardly glancing towards Oz. "I speculate there's a question you must ask yourself sometimes: 'Am I human?' Your curiosity in that department is well warranted. These days, a person's humanity seems to count for an awful lot. Just for instance, I can't harm humans. Demons? No difficulty there, but as soon as I try to rough up someone who counts as food, I get punished by my little technological Jiminy Cricket."

Oz clenched the bars of the cage as the urge to change grew stronger. He had to know what Spike was up to; no way had he waited down here all day for no reason.

"But we were talking about you, of course," the vampire continued. "Are you a human? Are you a wolf? Are you sometimes the one and sometimes the other? Well, I've got good news, mutt." He stopped pacing and stood in front of the cage, blowing a cloud of smoke at Oz before dropping the cigarette and grinding it out with his heel. "I'm going to help you answer that question."

Oz looked up at him, breathing heavily with exertion. "You can't get in here."

Spike laughed. Quick as could be, he stuck out a finger and entered the code into the keypad. "Did you think I couldn't see the numbers you hit from where I was sitting? Or is this your home now and I'm not invited?"

"Spike, I'm warning you..."

"Good. Warn me." He pushed the cage door and it swung open. "You're the first one of the Slayer's little band of do-gooders that I've got a decent shot at. I don't feel inclined to listen to warnings." As he entered the cage, he went into his vampire face and shaped it into a hideous smile. "And this time maybe I'll get paid some real money."

When Spike threw his first punch, it was at a human. By the time he had fallen to his knees, doubled over and groaning in pain, there was no longer a human in the room. There was predator. There was enemy. There was fury, savagery, a thirst for blood. There was also an open door.

The wolf did not know which excited him more.

***

Buffy hobbled into the mansion with the help of her crutches and Giles, who brought her as far as the living room and then said goodbye. Angel was shirtless and barefoot, sitting at the cold fireplace with a broadsword across his knees, which he was about to put aside before she told him she could get in and sit down without his assistance. He went back to what he was doing: sharpening the blade with long, meditative strokes. A few other weapons sat nearby; evidently he'd been at it for a while.

"How did your appointment go?" he asked quietly.

"As expected. I astonished them all with how quickly the bone was knitting. Good thing Sunnydale doctors know better than to publish anything about medical miracles." She paused, then took a deep
breath. She had to bring it up now, she couldn't spend all night waiting for him to give her some kind of sign. "I gather last night was kind of stressful for you."

The whetstone swept down the length of the blade under Angel's hand. He was as cold and blank as she had ever seen him, as if the lifelessness of his body was somehow carrying over to his mind. "It's better that it happened that way," he said. "I was starting to lose perspective about us. It could have gotten a lot more than stressful."

Buffy's heart skipped a beat. For a moment the only thing that her mind could comprehend was the rasp of the stone on the sword, maddeningly repetitive. "You're going to leave me again," she said with sudden certainty. He didn't answer right away, and she demanded, "Aren't you? It's been your plan all along, hasn't it?"

"Not all along. When Willow secured my soul I thought we had a chance. I thought it changed something."

"What didn't it change? What are we supposed to be afraid of now?" She was rapidly losing her composure. This couldn't be happening, not again. "The curse was the reason we couldn't be together!"

Angel finished another stroke and then held still. "No. The reason we can't be together is that I'm a vampire. Sometimes I forget. It's crazy, that I could actually forget, but when I'm around you..." He stared down at the sword, one hand at either end of it, and shook his head. "Last night I remembered."

"I don't care what you are. I never have. I love you."

"I care," he said tonelessly. At long last he looked up from the sword and into her eyes. "Do you really want to know about Hell?"

Buffy was struck dumb, but he wasn't waiting for a verbal response.

"Hell is the way I felt when you saved me from Faith's poison. Hell is seeing you bleed, thinking you're dead, knowing I was the one who did it. Because I'm a vampire. Because the crucial moment came when I had to control the demon in me, and I couldn't. I almost killed you, and this is when I did have a soul."

"No," Buffy stammered, "it was me, I made you do it."

Angel answered in an even voice, still holding her gaze. "And you knew, didn't you, that I would have rather died a thousand times over than endanger you. You chose my life over your own, and part of me still can't forgive you for that." His eyes dropped down to his sword again. "But I'm the one who bit. I'm the one who held on too long, when I intended to die first. You can't trust me, Buffy. And you know it."

She took a few breaths to stabilize herself, feeling that every word she said now was an enormously important choice. "I trusted you last night. You didn't lose control. You helped me."

He was silent for a moment, and she hoped that meant she had made a point. She couldn't remember the details of last night, but she knew what he had done for her and she knew it had brought them to where they were now, the one place she didn't want to be. There had to be a way to make it right.

He took the sword off of his lap, setting it down with the other weapons, and leaned his elbows on his knees. For a moment he dropped his face into his hands, then just hung his head and spoke to the floor. "I came here to help you. I can't do that if we get involved again. Please, Buffy, try to
understand. All I've ever done is stand in the way of a real relationship for you. When I go, you can...move on, find...someone..." His words were coming out with a strangled quality. "...Start forgetting," he managed finally, with more bitterness in those last two words than she could have imagined. She remembered saying them the first time she had seen him after he left town, and knowing even at the time that she would live to regret it.

"Like you will?" she asked pointedly.

His eyes snapped up and he looked at her in disbelief. She knew what he was thinking: of course not. He never would. She could almost see the words forming on his lips, but he stopped himself before saying them, seeing where she was headed. She had him on the ropes; this was more familiar ground.

"If you have to go," she forced herself to say, "you have to go. But if you're not going to be with anyone else then don't ask me to. From now on it's you or it's no one, Angel. No more Rileys. No more lying to decent men about being in love with them." She felt moisture on her face and wondered how long she had been crying. "I've lost you too many times. I can handle it once more if it's just to another city. Even if I can't see you at all anymore. But I can't handle hearing you say we're over when I know and you know we never will be."

He stayed seated at the fireplace, staring straight ahead, and Buffy longed to cross the room and be close to him. She restrained herself, kept from saying anything further, too, just held herself in the silence, waiting. At length he spoke. "Don't you want a family someday?"

"No," she said immediately and vehemently. "No family. Ever. Honestly, how can people even expect that of me? Can you imagine a pregnant Slayer? And then what, a couple of little ones just waiting to become targets for everyone who wants to hurt me? Just like Mom. They're always going to go after the ones I love. People die because I'm the Slayer. Just like Mom. What kind of horrible person would I be to bring more victims into this world, when they'll kill them, just like they did Mom..." She lost it then, sobbing brokenly into her hands, and then he was beside her and he wrapped her in his arms and she wasn't alone anymore.

After a long while, he said something in such a quiet voice that she would have missed it if they weren't so close together: "There's a prophecy." She looked up, brushing tangled hair out of her face, and he continued. "We think it's about me; it refers to a vampire with a soul. It says that after I've gone through some battles and somehow stopped an Apocalypse, I'll become human. I don't know how long it will take. I don't even know if we're interpreting it right. But there's hope."

She threaded her fingers through his, trying to process this revelation. Before she had fully succeeded, she asked, "And until then?"

"Until then, and forever after, I love you. And we'll never be over."

***

Willow was the last one to leave the house, after Xander and Anya had gone to their respective jobs and Oz said he needed some time alone and was going to take a walk. She didn't like that- she wanted him to talk to her- but sometimes the only way to work things out with him was to let him work things out by himself first, so she didn't make a fuss. She went to class as usual, feeling distracted and lonely, but turned down Tara's invitation to come over and work on some spells. Company would have been nice, but she felt like she was going to miss something if she wasn't at home waiting for it to happen.

However, she was the first one back. Xander and Anya weren't expected yet, of course, but she
wished she had at least made Oz tell her where he was going to be. She thought about ringing up Giles or even Father Tom for some advice, but didn't want to be the one to tell them what had happened last night. Visiting Buffy and Angel was out of the question. They both had her sympathy, but what they were going to do next was between the two of them.

When Xander came in, he found her cleaning up the party's mess from the house and yard, but the first thing he said was, "What's wrong?"

She paused at the dishwasher with an armload of dirty cups. "What?"

"My Willow-Has-a-Sadface sense- well, I guess that's my eyesight sense- anyway, it's tingling. Why's Willow got Sadface?"

Good old face-reading Xander. Willow let down the cups and turned to him. "Would you help me find Oz?"

They took Xander's car. Oz wasn't at the Bronze, he wasn't at the Magic Box, he wasn't at any of his usual haunts on campus. Finally Xander said reluctantly, "You think he might have locked himself up?" and Willow sighed and admitted the possibility. They walked to the cemetery to check the cage.

The sun was setting as they descended the stairs of the modified crypt. Willow got there first and screamed. Oz was sitting in the cage, human, conscious, but spattered with blood. And on the other side of the bars, slouched against the wall and covered with even more blood than Oz, was Spike. Xander scrambled down in response to her scream, and stopped short when he got there, unable to say or do anything any more than Willow was.

"Oh, lovely," muttered Spike. "Here comes the cavalry. Look, if I've awakened any more murderous rage here, can you just stake me and get it done with? I'm too embarrassed to be alive and sober at the same time."

"Embarrassed about what?" asked Xander at the same time as Willow asked Oz, "What happened? Are you okay?" She started entering the combination into the lock with fingers made unsteady with haste, before she realized that the door wasn't fully closed and thus wasn't locked.

Oz braced himself against the wall and used it to help himself stand up. "I won," he said, effectively answering all three questions without actually explaining anything. He was fully dressed, though disheveled, but for there to be this much blood, he must have gone wolf. Willow looked from him to Spike and back again, trying to figure it out.

"You won because you ran outside where I couldn't get you," complained Spike. "Playing against the bloody rules, that's what I say."

Oz ignored him and let Willow look him over for actual injuries. He had an obvious black eye starting, but nothing was broken and she didn't see anywhere that the skin was cut. A little feeling of pride welled up in her, completely against her will. She didn't want her man getting into fights, but if he was going to anyway, at least he emerged victorious. Maybe this would teach Spike to not mess with them.

"If you ran away how come you're still here?" she asked him.

"Came back," he said simply.

Spike was struggling to his feet, evidently without any of his own bones broken, though his face and body bore numerous gashes. "Came back human," he agreed. "Or I would've gone another round."
"Why did you come back?" asked Xander. "I mean, I'd understand if you wanted to finish him off, but here he is-" he pointed to Spike, on the outside of the cage, "-and there you are." He pointed to Oz, still standing inside the cage even after Willow had opened the door.

Oz answered with a question directed at Spike. "Who are you working for?"

Spike laughed. "Looks like pretty much everyone, at this point. You know, I used to be the one who had people working for me. Not actual people, most of the time, but definitely underlings. I was a harsh master. Universally hated and feared." He waved his hand vaguely at the three of them. "At least you lot haven't inspired any such emotions in me."

"You said you were getting paid for this," Oz pressed. "Who's paying you?"

Xander coughed. "I think he means to say, 'Who's not paying you,' because you are so definitely not walking the streets again after this. What's the deal? You and Daemonis are all buddy-buddy now?"

"Maybe I'm just a trophy hunter," Spike countered. "You've got to admit, the boy has a nice pelt."

Willow grabbed Oz's wrist, pulling him behind her as she stalked out of the cage and slammed its door behind them. "Shut up about his nice pelt! How could Daemonis send you here when nobody except us knew that Oz was having werewolf troubles again?"

"Oh, this is precious," Spike chuckled. "You're like a ready-made soap opera mix. All I have to do is add water. Daemonis asked me where the wolf boy likes to hide. After I told him who the werewolf is and why he was loose that one night. The Big Ugly's also interested in what you know about his scar, by the way, and he doesn't seem altogether surprised that the priest who's been hunting him is also a mind reader." He paused to look around at their astonished faces. "Riley told me, you sodding idiots. Poor fool must think I'm one of his soldiers, keeping his military secrets confidential."

Xander stared at the floor and scrubbed a hand through his hair. Willow looked sideways at him. "So who told Riley, huh?" she hissed. She didn't really blame him, though. She had always half-expected him to attempt to rekindle their friendship at some point, and he wouldn't have thought that Riley would be stupid enough to divulge anything to Spike. Nobody would. Unless Riley was trying to sabotage the Scooby Gang? No, that was a terrible thought. A bad breakup couldn't be cause enough for that.

Oz reeled a little, still weak from his fight, and Willow tightened her grip on him. "We need to get out of here," she said. "It's getting dark, we can move Spike."

Xander shook his head. "Move him where? How? Let's just lock him in the cage until we figure out what to do with him."

"Aw," said Spike with mock concern. "But you'll come back for me, right?"

Xander opened the door of the cage and gestured grandly, and Spike strolled in without a protest. "Hang on," said Oz as Xander closed the door. He rubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead. "Trying to remember how to change the combination."

It took a few tries, and Spike kept trying to find a way to peek, but finally he was locked inside and the three of them were outside the crypt. Xander took out his cellphone and dialed Giles. "Hey. Yeah, G-Man, it's Xander and, uh, we have some weirder-than-usual stuff happening, can you swing by so we can all get down with our bad selves?...Well, we could, but I don't know if you want that many of us in your place. I think we need everyone for this one...Yeah, grab him if you could...No, I mean everyone as in everyone, which incidentally includes Riley this time...For real. And also a
bleach-blond chain-smoking mystery guest...I know! That's why you need to come over! Okay. Thanks. I'll call Buffy and Angel. Bye."

Oz hung his head at Xander's last few words, and Willow cringed. "Do we really have to bother Buffy and Angel tonight?"

Xander looked at her as if she were speaking Latin again. "I'm pretty sure they want to know about this, Will." He started dialing again as they all started walking to the car.

As Xander was on the phone with Angel, Oz said privately to Willow, "Angel's gonna be pissed at me, isn't he?"

"Probably," Willow agreed. Oz didn't know that Angel had drank the acid out of Buffy, and he probably wouldn't be finding out any time soon, but everyone knew how angry Angel could get about someone scaring Buffy. "I'm pretty pissed at you, too."

Xander flipped his phone closed. "Bossy McFangersons wants us to go over there instead. Guess I'll just call Giles all over again..."

"Wait wait wait. You're not going to ask Riley to come to Angel's, are you?"

"You don't think it would be funny?" Xander shrugged as Willow gave him the reproachful look she reserved for his especially bad jokes. "Fine. We'll figure out the Riley part after we get there. You know what really irks my tater?"

Willow rolled her eyes. "Buffy's lovelife?"

"No, I was going to say...okay that was what I was going to say. Is it disloyal to wish your friends were lesbians?"
Chapter Summary

Fallout! Also the plot thickens.

Buffy had intended to spend the rest of the night curled up with Angel and not saying anything unless he asked her a direct question. It wasn't the most solid plan, but she couldn't think of anything else she felt like doing, and anyway the crux of it was about not having anyone else around. When the phone rang, Angel looked as annoyed as she felt, but both of them were always uneasy about not answering calls. The day they didn't pick it up would be the day someone needed them to save a life. So Angel got up to answer, and Buffy could tell from his side of the conversation that it was going to lead to something still more annoying.

There wasn't much that could be more annoying than an impromptu meeting with everyone, though at least Angel arranged it so that they didn't have to leave the house. He gave her an apologetic look as he hung up. Xander hadn't even told him exactly what was going on, though that was habit for most of them. Problems that needed discussion at all usually needed the discussion to be in person, or it was just too confusing.

Angel went upstairs for a shirt and Buffy stood up and tested her foot. The doctors had told her not to be putting much weight on it yet, but she suspected that they were basing their recommendations on what stage of healing they thought she should be at, and not what she actually was. It didn't hurt much anymore, and she was starting to regain some flexibility.

When the knock came she walked to the door without her crutch, slowly, but still in time to get there before Angel, who was coming back downstairs. The first visitors came in and she let out a shocked gasp. Xander and Willow looked fine, but Oz had a black eye and blood drying all over his face, hands, and hair, though none seemed to be on his clothes. He held up his hands and stepped back from her when she reached out to him. "It's okay," he said. "It's not mine."

"No," growled Angel from behind her. "It's Spike's."

Oz confirmed this with a weary nod. "Mind if I go wash Spike's blood down your sink?"

Angel pointed to the bathroom and then turned back to Buffy as Oz left the room. "You didn't tell me Spike was around." He looked at Willow and Xander, widening his accusation to include them. "Nobody did."

Buffy took a deep breath. "I just thought that if we told you...either you or him would end up dead."

Xander nodded a few times, looking pensive. Then his eyes lit up. He looked directly at Angel and said in an overly dramatic voice, "Angel, Spike is around!"

Willow and Buffy smacked him from either side at exactly the same time. "We're sorry, Angel," Willow pleaded. "But it wouldn't really have done any good, would it? I mean, it would just be one more distraction."

Angel turned abruptly and led them all into the living room, though he didn't sit down when they did,
just paced a few steps in front of them. "Anyone want to tell me why it would be a bad thing for Spike to end up dead?"

"Spike or you," Buffy reminded him, her guilt putting a little more fire into her voice than she intended. Angel gave her an expression of wounded pride. Either he didn't think that defeating Spike would pose a challenge for him, or he didn't want her to think so. Buffy wanted to tell him that her confidence was all with him, but she had fought both of them and neither had been easy enough for her to put money on a hypothetical battle.

"He got Clockwork Orange'd by the Initiative," Xander explained. "Can't do any violence anymore."

Angel paused as he considered this. "I saw you had him captive. Thanksgiving last year. I thought you would have killed him by now, whatever you were up to at the time." He shook his head. "Otherwise I would have known..."

Buffy heard Xander and Willow whispering over this- Xander asked a question and Willow answered "vampire sire thing"- so Angel probably heard more than she did. He ignored them, though, just kept waiting for more answers from Buffy.

She gave a small, self-conscious shrug. "He was harmless. I couldn't kill something harmless." "Is Oz going to tell me the same thing?"

That one hit her like a stab wound. By the time Oz had returned to them, everyone was already used to Spike being the grumpy neighborhood vampire with no means to hurt them, and since Oz went so long without a return to his werewolf side, it was easy to forget that he wasn't the garden variety human.

Spike wasn't totally harmless. Not everyone in Buffy's life was human anymore. "What happened between them?" she asked Xander and Willow, escaping Angel's very good point for a moment. "Do we need to hunt Spike down?"

"No, he's locked up," said Xander. "Oz went wolf when Spike attacked him, but he beat him down and unwolfed before we got there. He hasn't told us much more than that, but it looks like he's getting a pretty good grip on his control, so that's something."

"Locked up where?" asked Angel.

Xander looked at Buffy as if seeking permission. She didn't know what to say. She had already hidden enough from Angel; he certainly thought so, anyway. Still, the consequences of enabling a meeting between Angel and Spike...

"I don't want you to kill him," she said. The words came out in a tiny, timid voice, which wasn't at all what she had intended, but then, she wasn't sure she had intended to say them at all.

Xander and Willow were looking at her with surprise, Angel with outright shock. And, yes, hurt. He counted this a betrayal. She wondered what had made her think speaking up would be worth it. Oz reentered the room during the silence, but was doubtless immediately cognizant of the tension in the room. He sat down quietly, in a chair that didn't put him directly next to anyone else, and Buffy regrouped to explain herself.

"It's just that he and I had a deal. He helped me save the world and I let him go. I know it wasn't from good intentions or anything, but he did what was needed and I have to respect that or I can't respect myself."
Angel's initial dismay had hardened into anger. "He's evil, Buffy. Give him a chance and he'd take down everything you work so hard to build."

"He'll never get that chance. I'm not saying that all he needs is a rehab program and a shoulder to cry on. I know we can't trust him. But this is one face in the crowd of evil that is Sunnydale that we can keep neutralized without actually wreaking destruction to do it, and despite my badass rep, that's actually an attractive idea."

Angel didn't answer. She couldn't tell what he was thinking, but internally she was pleading with him, trying to project her real reasons without speaking them out loud. *It's because he saved me from you. Without him helping me I would have been dead at your hands and you would have opened the portal anyway. Spike is my reminder that evil can do good even while good is doing evil. It's too horrible to forget. Angel, Angel, please remember.*

Her mind raced on, too chaotically for her to even know if it made any sense, but she just looked down at her hands on her lap while nobody in the room said anything.

Finally Oz spoke, his voice uncertain and reluctant. "You're talking about Spike, right?" The continued silence, and probably a nod from someone, answered his question. "Did we tell you yet that he sold information on us to Daemonis?"

"That's it," Angel snarled as Buffy's heart jumped into her throat. He punctuated his words by jabbing his hand in the air, his eyes set on Buffy with a burning gaze. "You see? Not harmless. I'll take him out myself and you won't need to get his blood on your hands." He turned back to Oz. "What did he tell Daemonis?"

Oz's answer was cut off by the doorbell. Angel cast a quick glare in the direction of the door, prompting Willow to get up and answer it rather than let anyone be greeted by him. She returned with Giles, Father Tom, and Anya, who arranged themselves on the furniture still left vacant. Buffy noted that they had all the core members of their group here now, but there was no pretense of formality to their meeting. Probably every one of them was confused about one thing or another, and everyone was waiting for answers, and that was the only business they had.

"This is an uncomfortable silence," noted Anya. "Someone should say something, preferably about why we're all here."

Xander took the initiative to complete the story that they had already told Buffy and Angel, while Oz and Willow contributed additions and corrections. Everyone tried not to interrupt, but questions came up swiftly, the first being one that was first on Buffy's mind, too: how did Spike know what he knew?

It seemed to take some effort for Xander to answer; he locked eyes with Buffy first and pursed his lips, but before he could open his mouth, Willow spoke instead. "He says Riley told him."

This time Angel was too furious to even make a sound. He was leaning on the back of the couch, and Buffy thought she was the only one who could see his hands tightening on it for a second. She was too preoccupied with her own reaction to pay attention to his, though. Riley? The world's most stable former boyfriend had turned traitor? The world's most morally absolutist soldier was sharing confidences with a vampire? "This can't be right," she said, studiously avoiding looking at Angel.

"Let's get him over here and find out," Angel suggested softly.

Buffy stood up, not knowing why except that he was standing up. "No way," she said.
"I expect he would be averse to accepting such an invitation anyway," put in Giles. "And in the meantime we have other matters to resolve."

"Yeah," said Xander. "Like, how many notches on the Danger Scale is Daemonis up since yesterday?" He looked at Father Tom. "How bad is it that he knows you're a psychic?"

Father Tom folded his hands with an indifferent shrug. "It's possible that he knew already, and if not, he would have found out sooner or later. I can't read his mind, so the only danger it poses to him is what I learn from the humans who happen to see him. Now, the other secret that this Spike has divulged concerns me a bit more."

"Concerns us too," said Buffy, sitting back down. "What was it again?"

"That we've seen Daemonis's scar, and we know what it means."

Buffy, Willow, Angel, Xander, and Anya all simultaneously responded to this anti-revelation with some version of "We don't know what it means." Willow, however, followed her response with, "Some kind of poison, right?"

Giles took over from here, holding up a book he had brought along with a few papers stuffed under the cover- his style of bringing along the absolute minimum in research materials. "Ah, yes," he said. "I've recorded all the necessary information on the origins of the compound used, and the symptoms he should be, ah, should be suffering because of it. It's magical in nature, and specifically intended for vampires. In fact..." he paused here, and sure enough, the glasses came off, and sure enough, he was cleaning them as he began speaking again. "...It's a variant of the poison that Faith used on Angel before the Mayor's Ascension."

Buffy didn't care if she and Angel weren't getting along at the moment, she still had to reach up and squeeze his hand when she heard that. He rubbed her hand with his thumb in response- not a resolution to the argument, but an acknowledgment of their feelings in spite of it. She relaxed a bit, and he confided for her ears alone, "Had about enough of finding out things I've got in common with this guy."

"That stuff was hardcore," said Oz. "How come he's still walking around?"

"Because it's a much weaker variant," Giles explained. "He may be feeling some of its effects already, but they won't disable him for months. Aside from the slower rate of affliction, however, it's, ah, almost identical. It was administered in the same way, it will eventually kill him if left unchecked, and...the cure is the same."

Various sighs and swears came from throughout the room. Father Tom blinked. "I don't ask to hear the whole story, but the phrase on everyone's mind seems to be 'Blood of the Slayer.'"

"We don't like to talk about it," said Willow.

Anya's answer was a blithe contradiction of Willow's. "Xander said that Angel kind of went crazy and sucked all of Buffy's blood out, only she was the one who decided he should do it. And he was all ashamed and ran off to LA, but I'm not sure what the big deal was because hello, both still alive~"

"Anya shut up." Buffy's whole body was quivering with tension. She wished she had something to hit. "The point is that now we know what brought Daemonis to Sunnydale."

"Yes." Father Tom remained stoic, but Buffy could see that his eyes kept returning to the face of the only person in the room whose mind was locked to him. "I'm sorry, Buffy. If Sister Florence had known that her poison could have this kind of consequence, I doubt she would have used it. And I
feel very optimistic about keeping anything untoward from happening, now that we know what he's
after."

"Hold on," said Xander. "Sister Florence? There are battle nuns? Willow, you should-"

"Jewish," Willow snapped, putting a quick stop to Xander's derail.

Giles got them back on track. "We can certainly be optimistic about this. With or without our
interference, Daemonis's days are numbered if he doesn't get his hands on Buffy, and we can see to it
that that doesn't happen."

"Oh good," said Buffy acidly. "I wasn't feeling sheltered enough."

Angel's hand slid into a protective grip on her shoulder. "His days can get a little more numbered, as
I see it. He won't get his hands on her if he's dead."

"And we're all okay with killing him," Oz affirmed. He looked around. "Right?"

Buffy nodded. "You're not going to see me pull the 'harmless' card on this one. I mean, a bad guy we
can trash without any moral ambiguities getting in the way- bright side!"

She meant only to lighten the mood a little bit, but nobody laughed, and Willow actually looked like
the comment had compounded her anxiety. Buffy peered intently at her, wondering if it was best to
ask what was wrong or to wait until she could get her alone, but Willow took the matter into her own
hands and spoke up, sounding like she was about to hyperventilate with pressure. "I'm? I'm working!
On a, on a, on a spell. I'm working on a spell!"

"So," said Giles heavily. "I suppose we're ready to talk about this."

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"I noticed something when I was researching the spell to secure Angel's soul. I found out how to
remove it from his body, and I thought I saw how to get it back without the loophole, but I couldn't
seem to specify which vampire I wanted to put a soul into, and I didn't want to risk getting the wrong
one. So finally I, you know, had a little interview with the vampire, and I got the information I
needed to put the right postage on the soul, and it worked and the rest is history.

"Except it's not, because afterwards I looked into it to see why narrowing it down should be the big
hurdle. I wanted to know what would happen if I didn't specify any vampire at all. And I found out
pretty fast, the answer is nothing, 'cause me by myself doesn't have enough power for it to work, but
when I added some more power to the equation- I'm talking heavy duty spellcasters here, and lots of
them- all it means is that there aren't any limitations to the spell. We could cast it again, leave out the
part I tailored in about Angel, petition for volunteers...and it would be universal.
"Guys...we could give the souls back to all vampires."

As Willow finished speaking she tried her best to see everyone's reaction at once. She knew there
would be questions, statements of disbelief, and probably enough shouting to excuse her from the
duty of trying to understand what anyone was saying, but before all that happened, there would be
shock, and shock meant silence, and that gave her a grace period. So, reaction examination time.

Giles, who had already known all of it, gave her a reassuring nod of approval- he knew how hard it
had been for her to get all that out at once. Father Tom, who also knew a bit about her intentions,
was nonetheless deep in thought, rubbing absently at his beard. Xander was clutching his head and
staring wide-eyed at the floor, and Anya seemed more interested in him than in the news itself. Buffy
and Angel were staring at each other with matching expressions of dread. Oz, though, he stared at
Willow. He was halfway across the room from her and the last thing she'd really said to him was that she was pissed, but she knew that look. Distorted as it was by the purple bruise still spreading around his eye, that was the look that told her he was going to support her in whatever she chose, and for the moment, that was enough to keep her going.

"Pretty sure that's impossible," Anya said offhandedly.

Willow's blood boiled, but she refused to take it as a challenge. Instead she looked at Giles, hoping to pass the floor to him.

"Ah, yes, I understand it would seem so," he said. "I've certainly never heard of it being attempted before. But I've examined Willow's formula at length, and it appears completely legitimate. The question we must now address is about whether we should use this power."

Xander lifted his head from his hands. "I'm not feeling ready to address that yet. You're just going to dump something impossible in our laps and ask if we feel like trying it out?" He looked at Willow. "Isn't there some kind of scientific method to this? Are we just going to launch it from the hypothesis stage?"

"You don't understand." Willow realized that she had failed to predict how much the questions and statements of disbelief were going to frustrate her. Why couldn't everyone just not be stupid for a few minutes? "I saw the possibility before I had even cast Angel's spell. All I've been doing since then is trying to disprove it. We're way, way past hypothesis." She glanced at everyone again. Most of their expressions hadn't changed, but their attention was now with her. "So I just want to say that if this were up to me, I would say let's not do it, because it scares me and it makes the future really complicated in ways I don't want to list but which will probably be listed for me. But I can't be the one to make the decision, so...discuss."

"We have to do it."

The words had such a mechanical, hollow sound to them that Willow had to look up to be sure it was Buffy who had spoken. Buffy wasn't looking at anyone, just shaking her head slowly. "We have to," she repeated. "It's the right thing. It could save so many lives."

"And destroy so many others," Father Tom intoned. "A vampire with a soul is no longer a vessel of pure evil. It's a person, capable of good and evil, like any of us. To do this is to rework the destiny of more souls than we can count. It's playing God, in short."

Oz rubbed at the area around his black eye. Willow made a mental note to find him some salve or something for it. "What makes this playing God?" he asked, sounding genuinely curious, not confrontational. "Everyone starts out with a soul. Vampire comes along, takes it away. Wouldn't we just be putting it back where it belongs?"

"Putting the theological aspect of the issue aside," said Giles, "there are still ethical complications integral to our decision. For instance, we cannot assume that all vampires will change their behavior immediately upon, ah, becoming reacquainted with a conscience. Daemonis is proof of that. Depending on the original human nature of the individual vampire, it might even become worse, and it goes without saying that there will be an added element of unpredictability."

"Yeah, and on that note," said Xander. He looked sideways at Angel. "Is our resident expert on the matter going to weigh in any time soon?"

Angel had been listening to everyone as they spoke, wearing a dark frown but showing neither agreement nor objection to anything that was said. "Giles is right," he said shortly. "It's
"Well, that was massively helpful," Xander groused. He clapped his hands together decisively. "I say we cast the spell and then sit back and see what happens. That should make it a lot more predictable."

Willow glared. "Funny, you weren't so gung-ho about restoring souls when it was Angel's at stake."

The words were out before she'd had a chance to consider them, and suddenly she wondered if Angel knew that Xander had opposed her plan to try Miss Calendar's spell, preferring to make Buffy kill him instead. Well, it wasn't as if she could put them on any worse terms with each other than they already were.

Angel showed no reaction. "Don't count on suicides," he said. It wasn't clear if the remark was directed at Xander or all of them. "There will probably be some, but most vampires are afraid of death, even if they're miserable. It's too much to hope for all of them killing themselves off."

Buffy gave a short, cynical laugh. "How did we end up living in a world where hoping for mass suicide was overly optimistic?" She slouched against the back of the loveseat, where Angel still hovered behind her. "And I just can't wait for the way they're going to try to persuade me that it's kinder to let them keep feeding on humans than it is to take away their chance at redemption. You sure you don't have any secret mega-spells to turn all vampires human instead?"

Willow knew she wasn't serious, but she shook her head sadly anyway. "Maybe they won't want to keep feeding on humans, though."

"Yes they will." Angel's hard voice had no trace of uncertainty in it, and Willow didn't want to know why. "Doesn't mean they'll do it, but they'll still want it."

"It's the nature of the Beast," Father Tom added quietly.

"Okay," said Buffy as Anya opened her mouth, doubtless for another humiliating comment. "Who wants to adjourn and go home and talk about this later after I've had a day or two that doesn't make me want to puke?"

Giles was the first to agree. "Ultimately I believe we'll have to make this choice together, and if we do conduct a spell of this magnitude, we'll need everyone's participation in one way or another. However, nobody is expected to offer any insight before we've had a chance to think about it by ourselves. Willow?"

She shrugged. "It's not like we're on a deadline." A moment later she realized that he was treating her as the leader, waiting for her acquiescence before letting the discussion end. She wasn't at all sure that she liked that.

"Great." Buffy stood up abruptly and limped out of the room without her crutch. Angel watched her go, but apparently he could see that she didn't need or want his assistance. The limp was definitely less pronounced today, Willow thought. A moment later Buffy returned, giving everyone an odd look as if she hadn't expected that they would all still be in there waiting for her. "Just called Riley," she explained. "Left a very brief and uninformative message on his machine and don't anyone try to tell me that it wasn't my place."

Angel looked like he had just received an unwarranted chastisement. "Of course it's your place," he said.

"Right, so now that we're off the souls topic," said Oz. "How about the cranial implant topic?"
"Spike?" said Giles. "Yes, we should deal with him as soon as possible. Where have you left him?"

Willow saw Angel lean forward, almost imperceptibly, under Buffy's apprehensive gaze. She stumbled over her response to Giles. "In, in the cage. Oz's cage. Um...what are we supposed to do with him?"

"I'm sorry," said Angel coolly. "But Spike is my responsibility. I'm going right now."

Nobody except Buffy seemed to have an appropriate answer to that. She grabbed his shoulder and yanked him around to face her, cutting off her words in a low, savage voice: "Then I'm. Going. With you."

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"You're not doing him any favors, you know."

It had been a long silence for such a controversial remark to break it, and Buffy wished she were in a position to refuse to answer. Forced to lean on Angel's arm and keep to his slow pace as she was, though, it was no good ignoring him. "Who says I want to do him favors?"

"Especially if he's around when Willow's spell goes through," he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "The best thing we could do for him is kill him before he has to learn what it's like to have a soul."

Buffy plugged on, wishing they would get to the crypt just so that the walk would be over. "You talk like nothing good ever came from your curse."

"Sure, and they accidentally made a hero. If you're trying to make me believe that putting souls back into vampires is a bad idea, you shouldn't be using yourself as an example."

Angel shook his head. "I'm not. But if you're trying to make me believe that killing a vampire right now is killing a potential hero, you shouldn't be using Spike as an example."

"I'm not." Buffy paused and sighed. "I don't think I am. I'm not sure what I'm trying to make you believe."

Angel graced her with an unexpected and welcome kiss on her head. "It's confusing, isn't it? And everyone's going to think it's less confusing for me because I've gone through it. But I can't be the voice of all vampires. It took me a good century to even understand what a conscience was supposed to mean for me."

"But you never thought it meant you should die?" Aside from the way his experience influenced the choices ahead of them, she had always wondered about this. "You never considered killing yourself?"

"Oh, I did. It was just cowardice that stopped me, at first. Then guilt. Then you, but you know that part."

"Cowardice, guilt, and Buffy," she recited. "The three big lifesavers."

Angel let that one slide, and they walked a little more in silence. Buffy's anxiety was eased a little now that they'd had a conversation with a minimal amount of hostility, but she still didn't know what was going to happen when they reached Spike. The silhouette of the crypt with the cage in it loomed out of the darkness ahead of them, and she looked up to Angel's face to see if there was any mercy there.
Mercy? For Spike? Maybe it was time to figure out how she really felt about dishing out mercy for demons.

She went down the steps first, keeping one hand against the wall to balance on her one good foot. It was as dark as, well, as the grave is dark, and she had to rely on a tiny pocket flashlight as her eyes began to adjust. Spike had heard her coming and was standing with his arms crossed through the bars, smiling as if he hadn't a care in the world. "Slayer," he greeted her. "Been a while since I rated a personal visit. I'm charmed. And you're not alone."

Angel came to her side, noiseless as a cat. "You're alone," he said.

"Yet somehow, not lonely." Spike straightened out of his pose on the bars, his movements seeming sudden and disjointed in the beam from Buffy's flashlight. "So! Are we going to do this in here, or out under the stars?"

"I'm not here to fight you," Angel replied, and Buffy let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding.

Spike seemed truly surprised. "Bollocks! Do you need more incentive? You want to hear about every depraved act of violence I've committed since last time I saw you? You want to hear about the incriminating evidence I've been sharing with Daemonis? You want to hear about what your girl's been up to with her life-sized action figure while you were gone?"

Buffy took a step toward the cage. "You want to hear about how painfully obvious it is that all you've been aiming for is a shot at Angel?"

"Actually," said Angel, "you might get some mileage out of one of those. What can you tell us about Daemonis, Spike?"

"That he's lucky in cards but unlucky in love, and he dreams of one day leaving this life of evil behind so he can retire to the woods and become a lumberjack. Is that going to be enough to set me free? No, wait. You won't be doing that no matter what I tell you. Suddenly I'm not sure why I should comply with your requests."

"We could hurt you a lot if you don't," Buffy suggested.

Spike chuckled. "Right. You with your bum leg, or him who just said he isn't going to fight me?"

"She could probably beat you into oblivion with both of her feet broken," said Angel, "but how about both of us? I only mention this because I'm about to open this cage, and I don't want you giving me reasons to kill you before Buffy agrees to it."

Buffy beamed at him as he started entering the lock's combination, the new one that Oz had set on it. "That is so sweet!" Her smile faded as the door opened and Spike stepped out. "Wait, why are we doing this?"

"We're going to have to take him home with us." Angel grimaced as Buffy shined her flashlight in his face to see if he was joking. "Hey, I don't like it either, but I need to question him and besides we can't keep an eye on him if he's all the way over here. It's just for a few days." He glanced at Spike. "And you're not getting your old bedroom back, I already turned it into a studio."

"Makes no difference to me," Spike assured him. "As long as I can get a room you two have screwed in, and that's probably all of them..."

Buffy pulled back and gave him her best right hook. It was enough to knock him to the floor, and as
He scrambled back to his feet she let out a sigh of pent-up energy and said, "My God did that feel good! It has been way too long since I punched a vampire!" She turned excitedly to Angel. "I think I'm ready to start training again!"

He smiled and gave her shoulders a congratulatory one-armed hug, as if she had just won a stuffed toy at a carnival game. Spike glowered at her, full of the sheer fury that Buffy had only started seeing in him once he was forced to contain it, quivering slightly with the desire to hit her back. In a flash he spun toward Angel and hit him instead, full in the face, sending him staggering backwards.

Buffy wasn't surprised at how quickly Angel returned the punch. She knew what it was like to start operating on reflexes once a fight began. This wasn't supposed to be a fight, though, so she was relieved when he prepared for Spike's retaliation by posing to block it. "Are we good here?" she said to both of them as Spike pulled himself together for the second time. "Everyone got one in, so we're all even, right? It's...balanced."

Spike wheezed in an attempt to laugh. "No, princess, it would be balanced if he hit you."

Buffy shrugged. "Well, he's over that." She peered into the cage. "Hey, look. Ropes. You want to be tied up for the walk home?"

"Oh, you're into that?"

"So did you attend the School of Perversion, or were you actually an instructor?"

Spike grinned. "Instructor. In fact, you've just reminded me that there's a lot I know about Angel's past that you don't, and I would be more than willing to instruct you, as we'll be spending the next few days together."

Angel placed a hand on Spike's shoulder, a gesture that was just barely benign enough to keep Spike from starting another round of violence. "If you think that's ammunition," he said, "you don't know a thing about Buffy." He gave him a push in the direction of the stairs.

"And you never will," Buffy agreed cheerfully. "Plus, I'm thinking you can stay in the basement, where I don't have to see you."

"The lady of the house makes the rules," said Angel as the three of them made their exit.

Buffy's announcement that she wanted to resume training seemed to be prophetic; they were attacked by a pair of vampires on their way home. She got in one good punch before Angel steered the fight away from her, but the big surprise was that Spike didn't hesitate for a second before joining in. As Angel was staking the first vamp, Spike was kneeling over the other, pummeling him repeatedly.

"Stake!" he yelled. Angel examined the scene for a moment before tossing his stake to Spike, who dusted his opponent and stood up.

The two vampires eyed each other, Spike twirling the stake in his fingers with a knowing grin. There was a precarious moment of indecision as Spike remained there, unbound, holding a weapon. Then he flicked the stake back to Angel and put his hands in his pockets. "So. Are we there yet?"

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Angel didn't feel like talking business with Spike after they had locked him away in the basement, and Buffy maintained that she didn't feel like seeing him at all, so they decided to pretend he didn't exist for the rest of the day. There was a lot that Angel wanted to talk about- why they had spared Spike, how the universal re-ensoulment would affect their future, whether they could anticipate the
next move from Daemonis— but it was too much for words and by the next night they still weren't quite ready to get too in depth with it. He wanted to be doing something with her, though, so he suggested they start training with some Tai Chi.

There were a few simple forms that worked for her current condition, and he modified a few others to keep the weight off of her foot. She moved in serene immersion in the exercise despite his occasional interruption to offer pointers, until he told her for the second time to focus on her breathing. She stayed in the form, but opened her eyes to give him a wry look. "You don't breathe."

"I do for this," he told her. "And for you there's an actual benefit in keeping the oxygen flowing. It's all part of the..." He broke off, peering out the window. Had he seen something moving there?

Buffy stepped out of the pose and stood normally, waiting for Angel to continue. He pried his eyes away from the window and sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm the one who's not focused here. Do you mind if I go take a look around outside? There's probably nothing there, but it's been a long day, and..."

"And it helps you rest easier," she finished for him. "I know. I'm going to go give Willow a call, she's probably still in need of a shoulder." She stretched her arms over her head and then flopped them down and headed upstairs. "Let me know when you've got all the boogymen exterminated."

Angel took his keys and locked the door behind him— if he was going to be paranoid, he wasn't going to do it halfway. Outside was exactly as he had left it: clear, crisp, a few stars, no boogymen. He started a circuit around the house and was half done with it before he saw movement again. Something was headed for the front door. He quickened his pace, keeping silent, and approached the front of the house without being seen. Suddenly devoid of patience, he poised himself to intimidate as he stepped forward, taking a protective stance directly between the house and the intruder, a tall human man.

"Riley," he said. He wasn't sure if it sounded more like a threat or a greeting. He wasn't sure which one he intended.

The soldier stood his ground, stoic in the face of danger. He was dressed in civilian clothing, unarmed as far as Angel could tell, though he had on a big jacket that might be hiding something. "I came to talk to Buffy."

"She's not home."

Riley accepted the lie as easily as it had rolled out of Angel's mouth. "Fine. I'll come back later." He cut off the response Angel was about to make. "And I will keep coming back, until she answers the door or you decide to deal with me once and for all." He turned to go.

Angel stopped him verbally instead of giving in to the urge to stop him with a cuff on the head. "Maybe you should talk to me instead."

"Oh," Riley chuckled over his shoulder. "Should I? Didn't think you were much for talking. Has the throwing-people-into-walls style of communication not been working out for you?"

"Why does everyone think I want to fight them lately?" Angel took a step closer. "Look, if it would make you feel any better, we can take a few swings at each other, but I'd just as soon skip that stage and buy you a drink." That was a lie too. A really big one. Angel was dying for a little catharsis and Riley's face looked very inviting to a restless fist. But there was no way to squeeze a fair fight out of that scenario, and explaining it to Buffy was not an appealing prospect. "You are drinking age, right?"
Riley wasn't entirely as dumb as he looked; he could hear the lie and his skepticism was evident. Unfortunately, there wasn't an easy way to explain to someone like him the difference between wanting a fight and starting one. Angel sighed. Trying to build trust between the two of them wasn't going to be the right approach. "Okay, forget the drink," he said. "But you're at least going to sit down and talk to me."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want you coming back here, so I'm dealing with you once and for all." He headed toward the outdoor path to the enclosed garden, beckoning over his shoulder but not looking to see if Riley was following. After a brief pause he heard footsteps behind him.

When they entered the garden, Riley looked up and all around, studying everything around him, stone and flowers and statuary. Angel wondered if it was reflex for him to do that whenever he was in a new place, or whether he was picturing Buffy and Angel living there, comparing it to his own life. Angel sat down on a low wall; Riley sat on the same one, so they didn't have to face each other.

"You really want to hit me, don't you?" asked Angel after a while. "It's not about winning. You just want to express yourself physically." He hesitated, noting Riley's silence. "But you're not going to be the one to throw the first punch."

"No." Riley stared straight ahead. "And it looks like you're not either, so here we are."

"Guess we have something in common after all."

"Thought that was the problem in the first place."

Angel eyed him through the darkness. "Maybe in the first place. Now we have some other problems keeping me occupied. Why have you been giving information to Spike?"

Riley snapped his head around to face him, appearing both astonished and offended. "What the hell would make you think I was doing that? I've been getting information from Spike. Big difference."

"Well, today he told us he'd learned all about Daemonis's scar, and Father Tom, and Oz's lycanthropy. And then your name came up."

"And the other stuff...I assumed everyone knew who Father Tom was. I warned my men that he could read their minds. Spike might have been around. And Oz was all over the place that night. Wouldn't have been hard to put two and two together, and Spike seems to like to create chaos for us."


"I'm going to kill him," Riley vowed.

"Oh, you can't do that."
"What, because he's helpless? I didn't have you cut out as caring about that too much."

Angel shrugged. "I don't. It's just, I got there first, and he's locked in my basement. So, you can't kill him."

Riley released a heavy sigh. "You always get there first," he said with undisguised jealousy.

In a way it was sobering to hear that kind of honesty from him, but Angel couldn't help feeling a little smug, and he hoped it wasn't showing. To be on the safe side, he didn't say anything until he was sure he had his facade back under control. Both of them sat silently on the wall, listening to the crickets. Angel glanced upwards; he could see the bedroom window and the light was still on. He wondered if Buffy was still on the phone with Willow, and whether they were comforting each other at all.

Riley was the first one to speak. "You know, she said your name in bed once."

Angel turned to him in outright incredulity, and Riley raised an eyebrow and nodded. "It's true. It was near the beginning, before I knew about you." He laughed bitterly. "I took it as a compliment."

He had known that Buffy had slept with Riley, though he tried not to imagine how frequently it had happened or details of any kind. He had known, too, that Buffy had never stopped caring for him during her relationship with Riley. But somehow, this little revelation felt enormous to him.

Riley didn't show any special interest in Angel's reaction. "I'd forgotten all about it until recently," he said, and shook his head, staring down at the ground.

Was there any kind of appropriate response to this? Don't worry, Angel imagined himself saying, I'm sure she really did think you were an angel. Or, Don't worry, at least you got to touch the body of the most incredible woman you'll ever meet while the man who really loved her was keeping away from her for her own safety. He remembered how he had warned him the last time they met, saying he had good reasons to not kill him but could be swayed into questioning them. The dirty truth was that it still held. He and Riley were essentially on the same side, but if that ever changed... Angel flagged down that train of thought and brought himself back to the present. "Did you ever take her out for breakfast?"

"Uh, yeah." Riley narrowed his eyes as if expecting a trick. "A few times."

"I always thought that would be nice, to take her out to breakfast."

There was another long silence. Then Riley said, "I'm leaving California."

"Thank God." Angel decided that honesty was working pretty well for this conversation after all. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know. The army might have a mission for me overseas. Either that or I'll go back to Iowa."

Angel nodded. For the next few moments he occupied himself with trying to remember if he had ever been to Iowa. Either he had, and it looked just like every other state around it, or that was just the impression he got from what he heard about it. Well, from now on he could actively avoid it. He stood up. "Buffy's upstairs," he admitted. "I can go get her if you want to talk to her."

Riley looked bemused for a moment, then resigned. He stood up as well. "I don't think I need to. Just...tell her goodbye for me, I guess."

"I will," Angel replied, hoping that Riley could tell that it was a promise.
He led him out of the garden and back around to the front of the house. There wasn't much in the way of farewell that either of them wanted to give each other, but as Riley offered a simple nod and turned to go, Angel remembered something. "Wait, Riley."

"What?"

"Keep in touch with someone from here. Xander, or Giles...just make sure someone knows how to contact you. There might be something happening here that you need to know about."

Even Riley's inevitable look of exasperation looked tired from the emotional effort put into it. "But you're not going to tell me what's happening, right?"

Angel shrugged. "Apparently we're going to change the world. Good luck in Iowa."

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"Getting anywhere with Spike?" Willow asked casually. She sat down at the table with a mug of hot chocolate and an armload of reference materials, completely in her element. She had always been good with research, Angel recalled, but now she seemed more at home here in the Magic Box, handling Giles's occult books and swapping commentary with him and Father Tom, than she was at the Summers house.

Giles and Father Tom both looked up at Angel upon hearing the question. He had told them he would let them know as soon as he had any worthwhile information, but he couldn't blame them if they were antsy. Spike was currently their closest link to Daemonis, and with the Initiative out of the picture they and Spike were the only ones who had any kind of link to him. "Not really," said Angel. "We're still negotiating what's in it for him. Just telling him we'll let him live isn't really holding any water. He knows I'm not going to leave him in my basement forever, and he knows we're not letting him loose while they're still a chance he's going to carry tales back to Daemonis, so it's hard to find a threat I can make good on or a bribe I'm willing to offer."

There was an uncomfortable silence, which Angel didn't quite understand until Willow said timidly, "So you're not going to, like...make him hurt?"

Angel blinked. "Torture him? Are you asking me if I'm going to torture him?" He looked around at the others; the answer was clear on their faces. He sat back heavily in his chair and rubbed his temple. "No, I'm not. Especially not in my own home, and Buffy's, when he probably knows precious little if anything. If you want to see him hurt, someone else can do it." That last sentence wasn't called for, he knew, but it bothered him that all three of them could still see inflicting pain as part of his profession.

He was distracted enough as it was. He had been as honest as possible about Riley's visit, but Buffy had an unexpected reaction to it: pure guilt. She had never even officially broken up with him, she said, and owed him an apology that she couldn't give now that he had gone. Angel didn't think his feelings on the matter were going to help at all, so he had mostly held his tongue, and that just put another difficult subject of conversation between them. Now he had to leave her at home with Spike. If there were two people that Angel didn't want to think about when he thought about Buffy, Riley and Spike fit the bill.

"Right, well," said Giles, covering up the tension. "We'll have to see if we can come up with anything that will entice him to speak. In the meantime, has everyone brought some ideas on who can be petitioned to assist us in our other endeavor?"

Father Tom held up a hand. "The Church has channels of communication that I can use to call on
our defenders around the world. The question is whether they'll be willing to take part in this, and to be honest I'm still not sure that I am. All of the clergy's actions must be in line with our Lord's teachings, and oddly enough the catechism says nothing about the act of imbuing all the world's vampires with souls."

"Yes," said Giles, "Of course we're, we're not yet decided on our own actions in that regard. However we choose, though, I should like to be prepared for it. Perhaps we can ascertain their point of view beforehand? Find out if we can count on their support, if we find ourselves in need of it?"

Angel spoke up before Father Tom could. "That means letting the whole Church in on this," he said bluntly. "That's not meant to offend, Father, but I'm not sure if we want that many people- around the world, as you say- knowing about what Willow has uncovered here. Especially before we decide if we're doing it."

Willow paled; she for one certainly didn't want that. Father Tom regarded Angel with a closed-off expression, then said, "You know I can't keep secrets from the Vatican. If nothing comes of this, then it's not a secret and there's no need to bring it up, but if it does happen, I'm letting you know right now that I'm not a free agent."

"So there's that," said Willow unhappily. "And let's not any of us suggest trying to keep secrets from Father Tom, 'cause I don't think that works out too well." She sighed and removed a sheet of paper from one of her notebooks. "This is a list I made of the biggest names in English-speaking Wicca circles. I can probably expand on it, what with the universal languages of spellcasting and all, but I thought I'd start here. I'll kind of have some issues with these people too, though. Nobody's going to take me seriously until they all read my formula and double check it and mutter at each other a whole lot, so again with the going public too soon thing."

"But if we do want to go public," inquired Giles, "you can get their attention?"

"Oh yeah," Willow affirmed, recovering some of her cheeriness. "I know this one website? It'll spread like wildfire."

Angel tried to hide a wince. He had tried surfing the internet a few times and it served as a disturbing reminder of eternity. It had hardly occurred to him that modern witches were using it as an avenue to discuss the occult. Were there websites about nineteenth-century vampires, too?

Giles exhaled, seemingly matching Angel's discomfort with the topic. "It seems all of our potential contacts are shaky in one way or another. For my part, I'd like to raise the possibility of involving the Watcher's Council."

Willow and Angel both groaned, eliciting a dry chuckle from Giles. "Nobody's favorite people, I know, but they have some power at their disposal, not to mention a wealth of information found nowhere else."

"They'll try to take charge," complained Willow.

"So will everyone else," Father Tom pointed out.

Giles shuffled some papers around on the table. "Indeed, we could benefit from some less complicated allies. Angel, do you have any sources for us?"

"I called LA," he replied. "I've got my team on it. Wesley's going to call back tomorrow with a list of names and then we'll try to work it out so that the minimum amount of money is required."

"Very good," said Giles. "How is Wesley, then?"
"Doing fine. Getting to be a good person to have at your back in a fight." He thought that would interest Giles, who had suffered having Wesley at his back in a fight when it wasn't a good thing.

Willow was interested in something else. "Money, huh?" she asked.

Angel smiled. "It's a different kind of scene than you have here. Before we set up the agency I really never thought I'd be wishing for the simplicity of Sunnydale."

"Well, soon there won't be a simplicity of anywhere." She frowned. "I really don't want to do this."

"You've said so," Giles reminded her, not unkindly.

There was a part of Angel that couldn't get too troubled over the spell because he didn't really believe they'd end up doing it. The rest of him, though, was convinced that this kind of doom fit right into his life and he should have seen it coming years ago. He still needed to talk some more with Buffy about it. He could tell they had both had the same thought as soon as Willow made her announcement, but neither had brought it up yet. That night with the acid had strained something for them that wasn't fixed yet, he felt. They were getting along fine, but in a way he could still taste her blood in his mouth.

"I don't either," he said abruptly. "I've been responsible for a lot of different kinds of pain, but I've never been responsible for making someone feel the way I feel. Let alone every damned member of my species. You don't know what they're going to go through. It's torture." He looked all three of them in the eyes, making sure they knew that he was addressing all of them. "And I don't like to torture."

He stood up, gathering what little of the material on the table belonged to him. He could see the hurt in Willow's eyes, the slight nod from Father Tom. Giles he tried not to see at all. Before any of them could reply, he picked up where they didn't realize he had left off. "But that's not what this is about. This is about the people who will still be dying brutal and pointless deaths, generations from now, because we didn't want to get our hands dirty. Maybe this isn't going to lead anyone into Heaven. Maybe we have to do it anyway."

He left the store immediately, not wanting to consider any opposing viewpoints at the moment. He had considered them all already anyway. He slipped a hand into his pocket and wrapped his hand around the stake he found there, gripping it tightly. The more of his kinsmen he could kill before the spell was cast, the more merciful he could feel.

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Wesley called back the next day with a professional's punctuality, and had compiled a decent list of potential allies, all of them people and benevolent demons skilled in the use of magic. He even offered to start calling them, but Angel explained the uncertainty about when and how to involve others, as well as the uncertainty of the wisdom of doing the spell at all. Wesley sounded surprised for a moment that there was any doubt about going forward with it, but understood the need for secrecy and promised to pass it on to Cordelia and Gunn as well. Angel was relieved that they hadn't started spreading the word already- he hadn't even thought to tell them not to.

"I must say, I'm rather surprised at your optimism," said Wesley after Angel had written down the whole list, with notes by each item, and thanked him several times. "I was about to apologize for the lack of substance in most of these possibilities."

He had already apologized, actually, since after almost every name he added some kind of qualifier: "Unfortunately he's been known to back out of arrangements," or "They'll probably request some
kind of blood oath from us," or "Nobody is precisely sure if she even exists." He had correctly interpreted Angel's lack of objection to the warnings as optimism, though. At this point Angel was only looking for raw power, and those who had it were bound to have some kind of catch, so if anything this was a good sign that they were legitimate. He could scrutinize them further after the team had actually contacted some of them.

"Wes, the other leads we have right now are the Watcher's Council, the Catholic Church, and the witches of cyberspace. Believe me, this is great."

"I see your point." Wesley was about to go on, but he was interrupted on his end by Cordelia's voice and replied to her before returning to Angel.

Angel could hear their conversation clearly enough, though part of it was muffled, probably by Wesley's hand over the receiver. "Is that Angel?" asked Cordelia at first. "Did you tell him about Darletta?"

"No, I'm not going to trouble him with that now," said Wesley in the quick voice he used when trying to be firm.

Cordelia's voice rose in indignation. "Then give me the phone and I'll trouble him! Seriously, are you just going to-"

At this point their words became scrambled as they started talking over each other, and Angel had to practically shout to get Wesley's attention back. "What are you talking about?" he demanded when he finally did. "What's Darletta?"

Wesley sighed. "I should have known you could hear."

"Put Cordy on," Angel said curtly. It always had to be one or the other of them being difficult, didn't it?

"Angel?" said Cordelia a moment later. "Yeah hey it's me. Okay, so a couple weeks ago this woman shows up at the agency and says her name is DeEtta Kramer. Pause- does DeEtta ring any bells for you?"

"I'm not sure it's even a name."

"Yeah, me either. Anyway, she's all acting like she's got a case for us, but when she finds out that the Angel of Angel Investigations is not personally available, she completely loses interest and leaves before even telling us what her case is."

"Very rude," said Angel. "Did you do any investigation on her afterwards?"

"Naturally! And everything checked out- normal human married American lady. Except for one thing: recently had some business with Wolfram & Hart." She paused to let him react, which he did with an aggravated groan. "Yep, our lawyer buddies are apparently not as dormant as we thought. But that was a dead end, and we didn't hear anything else from them or from her, so we figured they were just trying to get a look at you and we let it go."

Angel thought about that for a moment. He wished that they had told him about it at the time, but he had already realized that they weren't going to give him detailed accounts of everything that happened while he was gone and that he was just going to have to live with it. He wasn't sure he would have done anything differently than they had in this case, anyway. "Go on," he said.

"Yesterday that same woman came to the agency again, only this time she was calling herself Darla."
Angel shivered. It had to be coincidence, but still...

"She was upset," Cordelia continued. "Not making a lot of sense. She said we had to find you and bring you back, and wouldn't tell us anything else no matter how many times we told her we were trying to help. Angel...wasn't Darla your sire's name?"

"Yes," he said haltingly. "But she's been dead for years. This is just one of Wolfram & Hart's mindgames. They've probably messed with some poor girl's mind in one way or another, but it's not Darla. If she comes back, offer to take her in, she can use my room. But don't tell her anything about us and don't promise her I'm coming back."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cordelia snapped. "You're never coming back?"

"No! No. I'll be back. Just not for this. They still need me down here. Buffy still needs me."

Cordelia's voice softened. "Priority number one, right? How is she?"

"Back on her feet. Starting to train again. Being hunted by an embodiment of pure evil who wants to drain her blood to heal himself." He chuckled sadly. "In other words her life is starting to get back to normal."

"Yeah, that's our girl. Tell everyone I said hi. I've got to go yell at Wesley for trying not to trouble the boss."

"Don't be mean. He's been great. Is he still planning to come down and visit?"

She laughed. "Yeah, I'm sure a couple days poring over ancient books with you and Giles is exactly the kind of vacation he needs. Gunn and I are going to rearrange all the weapons while you're both gone."

"Don't do th-"

"Bye!" Click.

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He was back in the dungeon, surrounded by ashes on the floor and darkness that human eyes couldn't penetrate. Manacles hanging from the wall before him held the pale form of a girl, kneeling with her back to him, red slashes standing out against her bare skin. Her head hung down as far as the restraints would allow, but he could see blonde hair spilling over her shoulder as she slowly turned her face to look at him.

"Hello, lover," said Darla. Her voice was languid and smoky, and she stretched against the chains in a sultry arch. "You're not going to stop now, are you? Don't I need to be punished a little more?"

"You certainly do," he replied, a smile dancing at the edge of his mouth. "I'm just considering the best way to go about it."

From the doorway to one of the deeper chambers appeared another woman, dark haired and bony, holding up her arms as if pushing invisible streamers away from her face. "Are you going to hurt Grandmummy?" she inquired in a lilting accent. "The stars are all breaking tonight, it's dreadfully noisy."

"I think I'm going to hurt both of you," he said, looking her up and down. "Get back in bed, Dru."
She laughed, a high pitched sound of delighted madness. "Oh, goody," she proclaimed, and sashayed out of the room.

He turned back to Darla, thinking about which way he wanted her. Finally he stepped forward and unlocked the manacles, intending to take a taste of her blood before bringing her to the bed to join Drusilla.

"Angel?"

He lifted his face from Darla's neck with a low growl. It was nothing but the English translation of the name Darla had given him, but nobody called him that, and the voice was neither hers nor Drusilla's.

"Hey, Angel. Wake up."

Angel's body jerked as he reached consciousness. He pulled away from Buffy for a moment, afraid to touch her, but she ran a hand through his hair and over his back, and gradually he regained the sense to separate her from the dream.

"Your turn for the nightmares, huh?" She sounded only sympathetic. If she only knew.

"Yeah. A nightmare." There wasn't really anything else he could say about it. "Sorry I woke you up."

"You didn't." She shifted herself on the pillows to a more upright position. "I've got prophecies keeping me awake."

So it had finally come up. "The Shanshu," he said.

She nodded, never taking her eyes off of him. They were engulfed in the strange kind of artificial darkness of morning sun blocked by heavy drapes, the kind of atmosphere that had meant bedtime to Angel for centuries. Buffy was probably still getting used to it, but she had been sleeping better lately than she had after first moving in. Spike's presence in the basement didn't seem to bother her at night, perhaps thanks to the two floors between them. It was a shame there had to be prophecies interrupting that progress. "If all vampires have souls," she said, "which one is the prophecy for?"

He sighed and let his head sink down on the pillow. "I don't know. Somehow I can't quite believe we'll all become human, though."

"No. Me either." She curled her fingers around his hand. "But maybe it means, like, the original vampire with a soul."

He raised an eyebrow. Didn't she remember? "In which case..." he prompted her.

"Oh. Daemonis. Ugh. Bad thought." She shuddered as if shaking it away, and tried again. "What if this is the apocalypse you're supposed to prevent? Then you would Shanshu before everyone else gets souled on the idea."

He surprised her with a passionate kiss as soon as she finished speaking. "Been too long since I heard you pun," he explained through her giggles when he broke away. "And maybe you're right. We can hope for it, anyway."

"Okay. Hopeful is helpful. I can get back to sleep if you can."

"Buffy." He stopped her with a hand on her wrist as she started settling herself back into a sleeping
position. "I know this is hard for you. I only just told you about the prophecy, and now it might be taken away from us already. And this on top of all the other consequences...I just want to say I understand if you...need some distance. Some time to think about what we're doing."

"It's okay." She kissed his cheek and nestled her head into the curve of his neck and shoulder. "I don't. I'm in for the long haul, said so before I knew there was even a chance you'd turn human someday. You're still my future. Sweet dreams."

As warmed as he was by that- no hesitation, even- he wished she had chosen different words to wish him goodnight. The images of Darla and Drusilla had not fully faded away, and he feared they would return as soon as he closed his eyes. He focused on Buffy instead, sliding his fingertips through her hair and trying to be hopeful, as she'd said. He might be human for her. There was still a chance.

What would it be like? He remembered his one day of human life (as vividly as if it had actually happened), but it had been so brief, and he had been so absorbed in Buffy's presence, that there were still aspects of it that he could only wonder about. Aging. Daily routines in the daylight. Maybe a legal identity and a last name. Or a first one. Nothing about human life was the same as it had been when he was young.

The dreams would never go away, he realized. The demon in him could die, leaving him as merely a soul and a body, and maybe he could forget the way it felt for his face to change on him every time he fought someone, forget the sudden stabs of panic whenever he felt himself approaching happiness, even forget the taste of Buffy's perfect blood, but he couldn't forget the past. That kind of punishment didn't have an expiration date. Food and sunshine and a heartbeat, all those were good, but the real reward being offered to him was mortality. An ending that would be chosen for him with no more need for sacrifice on his part. Everything else was icing...and a chance to give something back to Buffy.

"Shanshu," he whispered to her sleeping form. The word sounded like a breath. "For you, my darling."
Spirit Brothers

Chapter Summary

"I invite you in."

"It's been days."

It had been six days, to be precise. For six days Spike had been in the basement, when Angel had promised her he would be gone in just a couple. Buffy had left all the questioning to Angel, knowing he didn't want her down there, but he had dutifully relayed every conversation after having it and the truth of the matter was that Angel was doing all he could. If Spike was going to snitch they couldn't let him out, she knew that, and since she was the one who insisted on letting him live, she couldn't very well complain when Angel kept going down with a cup of blood and a resigned look on his face and coming up again with nothing.

Obviously Spike was the one to blame here, so when she opened the door to the basement for the first time since it had been made a prison, her words were pure accusation. She didn't see the vampire and didn't move from the top of the stairs. He was down there somewhere, and he had heard her, and he would show himself.

"Has it? How many, then?" He stepped into her line of vision and stood at the bottom of the stairwell looking up at her. They hadn't been binding him, though they barred the door at night, and they had even brought him some of his own clothes from his crypt, which Buffy thought was going above and beyond. He hardly looked like a prisoner at all, just Spike. "Hard to keep track from my point of view," he continued.

"Don't try tugging at my heartstrings, Spike. Nothing's going to unravel for you." She crossed her arms. "What are you holding out for?"

He smiled. "Holding out to see you, of course. I like you better than I like him, wounded as I am that it took you so long to visit, and something tells me you're going to be a better negotiator."

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me. Look, Angel is speaking for both of us in this. There's nothing I'm going to offer you that he hasn't."

"Sure about that?" Spike glared up at her. "How about a little common sense? Have you got any of that in supply, or has your other half used it up for both of you?"

Buffy laughed. "Common sense? This is you speaking?"

"Listen to me, you stubborn git. If you don't trust me, how much do you think Daemonis does? He sends me to kill one little werewolf and I end up spending the next week harbored by the enemy? And you really imagine I'm going to waltz right back to him with a new list of pointless details I've learned in my time here, and he's going to take me back with open arms. No. He sees me again and it's my own cremation." He fixed her with an intense gaze, though his voice still dripped with disdain. "Angel doesn't realize this. He thinks I'm set to stir up mischief as soon as I step out the door. But you know what I'm about. You remember I kept my end of the deal, and all I wanted was to get out of the game. And that's all I want now."
Buffy listened, but shook her head slowly at the end. "You don't want out of this game. If you did, you wouldn't be keeping secrets. You would have told Angel what you knew."

"Right, and for what? He'd still think I was too dangerous to let loose in the innocent world, and I'd still be in this pit but with no leverage to keep the splinters out of my heart. Your faith in my conniving nature is touching, doll, but look at it this way: nobody gets to be totally neutral here. For a bloke whose main interest is in saving his own skin, the smart plan is to cast his chips with the winning party."

"Flattered, Spike. Really."

"Don't take it personally. We can also just label you 'the party least likely to kill me.' I don't like you any more than I did last week, but remember I'm not so taken with the idea of doing evil for its own sake, especially since evil is such a bloody pain these days. Let me out, do your best to get rid of the lumberjack from Hell, and I won't lay a finger on your people. Human or not. In fact, I'll do my part to keep the streets free from crime."

Tired of the way she was craning her neck to look down the stairs at him, she sat down on the top step. She was still above him, but this was more comfortable. "And you'll tell us everything you know?"

He nodded seriously. "The very moment you let me out of this house, and I'll keep reporting to you if I get anything new."

"Nuh-uh. Disclosure happens first. You think I'm just going to let you go and then tell Angel about it when he gets home? It's been hard enough pleading your case as it is. And I want you to say it for his ears too, so we're waiting for him."

"Brilliant," muttered Spike. "There goes the advantage I was looking for by talking to the sensible one."

She shrugged. "I'm also the persuasive one. You've got a chance yet. But one more thing." She leaned forward onto her knees, getting just a few inches closer to Spike's level. "What did Daemonis promise you?"

He paused, lips tightening into a line as if he had no intentions of answering, but he also made an unconscious motion and rubbed the back of his neck, and that was all the answer she needed. "You really thought he could get the chip out, huh? Is he a mystical vampire surgeon? Thought he could sweet-talk the Initiative into reversing the process, maybe? No, don't even bother telling me. I knew there was only one thing you wanted, and believe me when I say I'm not sorry I'm not offering it."

"Oh, there are plenty of things I want. Nothing a girl like you would ever dream of offering a man like me." He took on his vampire face, much more slowly than the change usually happened. She wondered if it was just as easy for them to do it that way, or whether it was a trick they had to work at. "Well," he said through his sharpened smile, "maybe a man a little bit like me."

"Grow up," she requested, and stood back up, opening the door to leave.

"I also want a sodding cigarette," he shouted as she closed it neatly, without the hint of a slam. "Heartless slavedriver!"

She smiled and even chuckled to herself as she barred the door and left the basement behind. She was going to get Spike out of her house. She should have gone down there days ago.

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"You know what I like to do when I'm around this many people?" Spike asked Angel cheerfully. "I like to rank them in order of which ones I'd most like to eat. Do you do the same thing? Yeah, I bet you do!"

Buffy had turned to Angel with a raised eyebrow before she could catch herself and remember that everything Spike ever said should be ignored. Poor Angel, he'd think she was mocking him too. He was already avoiding eye contact with Spike, which was noticeable to everyone because of the way they were walking, with Spike deliberately matching Angel's stride and sticking close to him. Buffy held onto his arm on the other side and resolutely made no comment.

"Want to hear my list for this group? Right, well first one's the Slayer, of course, but that's the obvious choice, what with the power boost and all. Say, what's that feel like, anyhow? Is it sort of like when Popeye noshes a whole can of spinach?...Fine, don't answer me. Next is the witch, and then wolf boy, but only if he's not going to do any surprise transformations in the middle of it. Lord Librarian there I haven't really got any interest for, so he's at the bottom. I'm still getting a feel for the new guy, maybe right after the mutt. Want to share yours? I'm guessing you'd put the librarian a little higher, but other than that I bet it's the same as mine."

Nobody had even tried interrupting Spike as he was talking. Giles and Wesley were still a few steps behind everyone else, discussing something privately, and everyone else was pretending to scout, as if there was any chance that a vampire would attack while they were clustered in a big loud gang like this. "So," Willow hazarded at length, "we're supposed to treat him like a good guy again?"

"No," said Buffy and Angel together. "He's a bad guy being tolerated by the good guys," Buffy elaborated. "And even that much is still in the trial run period. No good guy treatment required."

Spike integrated a little bounce into his gait, reminding Buffy of how much she hated it when he was in a good mood. "Thought the trial run was the part when I told you everything I knew about Daemonis," he said. "We did that back in the mansion, remember?"

"And it did very little to inspire us with any great feeling of confidence in you," said Giles as he and Wesley rejoined the rest of them. "You're still working on that."

"Don't I know it!" Spike agreed. "And since the method you've chosen is for me to annoy your enemy so much that I haven't a chance at survival without your protection from him, well, consider Operation Piss Daemonis Off in full swing."

Buffy sighed. Operation Piss Daemonis Off had been her idea. It was nothing more than an attempt to repeat what Spike said had already happened: aggravating Daemonis enough that Spike couldn't have rejoined him even if he tried. Only this time, there were witnesses. Spike was going to prove, in front of everyone's eyes, that he was stuck with the Scoobies and dependent on their acceptance of his aid. If he satisfied that requirement, the deal was that he could go back to his crypt and come back to them with news, if he ever got any without being in Daemonis's loop.

She believed that he had spilled everything he knew so far, but there wasn't much that could help them. The poison was just barely beginning to affect Daemonis; he was slightly weakened and in some pain, but still possessed of his full mental capacity. (Spike's analysis of his current level of strength was "still stronger than me," and when asked if he was stronger than Angel too, Spike just laughed.) Soon he would begin to get desperate for his cure, no doubt, and the weaker he himself got, the more followers he would accumulate to get the job done. Spike assured them that attacks would be coming more and more frequently and would soon include more than vampires, and he was also confident that there would be someone out this very night who he could pulverize to prove his loyalty.
"Let's split up," said Wesley. He and Giles started in one direction with Spike; Buffy and Angel went in the other with Willow and Oz. The two groups were still fairly close when they stopped walking, but there were plenty of tombstones and trees to hide behind, and even Buffy's keener-than-usual night vision could lose the shapes of her friends among the midnight shadows. She and Angel slumped down against a large headstone and Willow and Oz sat nearby. It was Spike's night for action, not theirs, and all they had to do for now was sit and wait.

"Hey, Buffy." Oz wasn't typically the first to speak, and Buffy tensed herself automatically, thinking he was about to warn her about something behind her. But there was only cold stone at her back, and Oz went on to say, "Sorry about the bad trip."

She blinked a few times, needing a moment to remember that Oz was indeed the one who had given her some laced candies, and that they had indeed led to a bad trip- two bad trips, actually. Her cheeks heated a little, though he wouldn't have seen that in the darkness. It was Angel who needed an apology for that night, not her, but she couldn't tell Oz that. "It's okay," she said. "It was my own choice, not yours."

Oz nodded solemnly, and Buffy squeezed Angel's arm, hoping he would recognize some kind of transference of forgiveness between the three of them. He shifted restlessly beside her, and she knew he was giving Oz the critical stare, the lowered forehead. "Everyone made a choice," he said.

Buffy stiffened. "Something wrong with that?"

"There is if your choices end up hurting other people. Or yourself."

"Guys?" Willow broke in nervously before Buffy could get herself worked up about that. "I have these great mnemonic devices that we can use to help us study while we're out here, in case anyone is bored and doesn't want to entertain themselves by having arguments thinly veiled as philosophical hypotheses."

Buffy laughed in spite of herself. Willow the peacemaker. What would any of them do without her? "Yeah, good idea. What's that one that summarizes everything I missed in all of my classes this semester?"

"It goes like, 'Here we are in the cemetery,/ Buffy never studies and that's kind of scary-'"

Oz cut in. "Looks like Spike just found someone to bury."

They all turned to look. Spike was engaged in a vicious battle with two vampires, a male and a female. Perfect. His fighting style was more aggressive than either Angel's or Buffy's, though less fluid. In a way, Buffy was reminded of Faith. Another piece of personal flair from Spike was his constant string of taunts and boasts, finishing with a snide "Tell Daemonis thank you very much" as he planted a stake into the male's heart.

That was Angel's cue to stand up and let himself be seen. "Nice job, Spike," he called as Spike started concentrating on the female. A trained eye could tell that he wasn't actually concentrating on killing her, though. When she took a chance and made a run for it, he didn't pursue, and Angel approached, saying, "Ooh, but you let one get away."

Spike snapped his fingers with exaggerated dismay. "Shucks."

When the vampiress was safely out of range, the rest of them stood up and came together. "Well, it looks like I'm on your side now," said Spike. "Q.E.D., with God as my witness, and also all of you wankers. Can I go home now?"
Willow tilted her head curiously. "Aren't they just going to come kill you there?"

"Eh, I'll work out some home defense. Not entirely positive they know where I live, anyway, and I'd rather take my chances than get to know Angel's basement any better."

As Spike departed, Wesley came up close to talk to Angel. Even so, he kept his voice down very low, so that Buffy had to strain to hear it, and he looked over his shoulder a couple times at Spike's receding form. Buffy realized that he must have learned a lot about a vampire's sense of hearing.

"Giles and I have been debating the merits of this mass ensoulment spell," he said. "One issue that has us puzzled is the logistics of siring new vampires. Once you had recovered your soul, did you ever...?"

He cringed. Buffy did a little sympathy cringe along with him. "No," he said. "You think we need to find out what the next generation would be like? I'm not sure it's that big of a deal compared to everything else. I never even wanted to, I can't imagine why anyone would."

Buffy prodded him gently. "But remember how you can't be the voice of all vampires?"

"Point taken." He sighed. "I wish there was just one other person with a history in all this..."

He and Buffy had the same thought at the same moment; it looked like Wesley was having it too. Everyone else had gone a little ways ahead of them, which made Buffy wonder momentarily if she was still slowing them down with her sore foot. "Of course there's no way to have a rational discussion with Daemonis," Wesley said hastily. "Even if he had something to say, he'd still kill any of us on sight."

"Nah." Angel half-smiled. "Nobody with a master plan ever wants to kill me, they just want to corrupt me. Look, Wes, can you take Buffy home? I think I can make this work, but I have to hurry before Spike gets too far away."

That was more than enough for Buffy to decide to release the fury on him, but he was too quick for her- he grabbed her by the shoulders, kissed her hard on the lips, and took off running after Spike.

"It's funny," said Wesley as she stood there fuming and the group in front of them turned around to see what had happened. "Everyone talks as if Angel was once a beast, tamed by the hand of the Slayer. But he really doesn't act very tame, does he?"

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Although he had had no particular expectations about where Spike would lead him, Angel almost laughed when he beheld the secret lair of the mighty Daemonis. It was a house, a completely ordinary two-story house in a completely ordinary middle class neighborhood, separated on either side from two other ordinary houses by a few meters and some bushes. Granted, nobody had been maintaining the yard very well, but they hadn't been there long either, so it still blended in perfectly with the other homes in this suburban landscape. Angel had to hand it to him, this was creative.

It also meant he had a door to knock on, which was a nice alternative to sneaking through crypts and sewers. He ordered Spike to go back to the mansion and guard Buffy ("Sure beats guarding you," said the younger vampire), and was promptly invited in by a pair of fledgling vampires who had probably never even been in a real fight.

There were more of them inside, perched on the scant shabby furniture or leaning against the walls, but not many. The rest were probably on the streets making the most of the night, or hidden in another lair, of which Daemonis probably had several in town. Angel was just glad that nobody had
brought a victim here. He hadn't come to fight, but he wasn't about to measure his purpose against someone's life.

He was pointed toward a door at the back of the room and entered it without a second glance at the residents. It was a bedroom, but without a bed or much of anything else. No, Daemonis was definitely not living here full time. Anyone who had held power for as long as he had must be accustomed to some luxury, and wasn't going to be found in conditions like this unless he had a specific reason for it—like meeting with Angel. If there was any further proof needed that he had expected the visit, there he was, sitting in an old leather chair that faced an older and uglier empty one, the only two pieces of furniture in the room. He grinned and gestured at it as Angel came in.

Angel sat down and regarded him silently. He remembered the way he had confused Darla when he was young, because the sight of an elder vampire didn't awe him the way it was supposed to. Even as he learned to recognize and respect them, they had always just looked ugly to him. Who would want to lose access to a human visage?

"You're cheeky," said Daemonis. "I knew you would be."

Cheeky? He had been there for thirty seconds and hadn't said anything. Then he remembered. Protocol said he should be in his own vamp face, acknowledging the presence of one older than himself. "I'm rusty on the proper etiquette," he replied. "Am I supposed to threaten to kill you now, or do you go first?"

"Oh, threats are redundant at this point." Daemonis steepled his fingers, like a true classic villain. "And of course we should get to know each other a little bit first, don't you think? We're like spirit brothers. The only two who truly know."

"No." Angel wasn't in denial, he knew their shared experience tied them together in a way that no other vampires matched. But he had enough pride to resist getting fraternal about it. "You used to know. You chose to forget."

"Spare me. As if you don't try to forget every day. The guilt, the loneliness. You kept it because you didn't know there was a way out, and you're trying to condemn me because I found one when you didn't?"

"There's more to this than guilt," said Angel, sidestepping the issue of whether he had known that there was a way to lose his soul again. He hadn't, and he still didn't know how Daemonis had done it, and it might soon be relevant, but direct questions weren't going to get him very far right now. "And there doesn't even have to be loneliness. And I found that out when you didn't."

Daemonis leaned forward with another one of those sickening grins. "Are you sure?"

For a moment Angel wasn't quite sure what to make of that. Maybe each thought the other was talking about something else. But Daemonis continued speaking with the word, "Love." No, they were talking about the same thing.

"Yes, I knew love," said Daemonis. He nodded at Angel, whose surprise must have shown on his face. "With a human girl, no less. Like yours."

Angel's surprise deepened; this time he even shook his head in denial.

"I didn't always look like this, you know," Daemonis rebuked. "Once I was the very model of male perfection. Any woman might have fallen for me. One did. And I for her, of course, and for a time it was beautiful and tragic."
"Probably more tragic than beautiful, though."

"You're rather cynical for one who's still fighting the good fight. But yes, we had our difficulties. On top of everything else, it was not an era which was particularly kind to a woman having an affair, so we both knew that she at least was doomed if anyone ever found out. But I'd tell her she had to leave and she would just come back in tears the next night. We promised our undying devotion, and we raged against the unfairness of the world that kept us apart, and we made love a thousand times beneath the stars."

"Ah," said Angel, not bothering to hide his envy. "So no loophole, huh?"

Daemonis chuckled deep in his throat. "I've heard your story, you know. More tragic than beautiful, indeed, but now you have her back again. And I wonder how that must feel when you know it can't last."

There always had to be some kind of evil authority lecturing him on his relationship with Buffy, didn't there? He didn't rise to the bait- Daemonis didn't know as much of the story as he thought he did, anyway. "How did it feel for you?" he asked. "Did you watch her grow old and start feeling disgusted with her while she was cursing you for your youth?"

"Nope. Never had to. I solved the problem like a rational vampire would. I kept her."

Angel stared as comprehension set in. This was what he had come to find out, in part, but he had never expected this kind of story to go along with it. Daemonis had loved a human woman when he had a soul, and he had turned her? There was no way to escape the next thought; Daemonis had covered it succinctly with the 'spirit brothers' comment and now he could only keep drawing parallels between them. It came in a series of mental images, the same ones he had forced down so many times before because they were too sordid and too alluring: drinking from Buffy, finally taking as much as he wanted to, feeling her heartbeat slow down, ripping his skin on his own fangs for her, sending his blood down her throat, having her with him for all eternity; too much, too terrible, too never. He never would. Buffy was safe from that much, at least.

"I had my doubts, I'll give you that. 'Oh my dearest, you deserve better than darkness and blood!' That whole routine. But the one result I hadn't counted on...well, I hardly knew what a soul was until she woke up and she didn't have one and I still did." There it was. The answer.

"You never considered that? Are you serious?"

Daemonis shrugged, not seeming to notice the way the hump on his back hampered the motion. "Like I said, it was all a mystery back then. But it put some serious strains on our relationship. I still had her blind devotion, but she wanted to kill and I was squeamish about it. She had a sense of humor and I was still moping about the curse of eternal life with a conscience. She adored me, but for my soul she had only contempt, I could tell. So it had to go."

"Wow," said Angel, putting as much irony into his voice as he could attain. "That's love, alright."

"Don't go looking for me to express my regrets. My paramour and I had centuries of bliss together once I eliminated the problem between us. In fact, it was only thirty years ago that I had to leave her to the daylight- long story, still no regrets- and I freely admit I still miss her."

"You seem to be holding up well in your time of grief."

"I get by." Daemonis gazed squarely at Angel, his eyes looking more orange than yellow. "I've felt healthier than this, though. Tell me, how fast does that miracle cure start to kick in? More
importantly, is it as tasty as it looks?"

He's seen her, Angel thought. It wasn't that surprising; Daemonis obviously had a knack for lurking unseen, but Angel still felt cold upon hearing it confirmed. "The only cure that you're getting is the one that will send you to join your paramour."

Daemonis snorted. "I don't miss her that much. I have an idea: I'll tell you how to break your curse, you can get that taken care of, bring me the girl, and instead of just draining her I'll sire her too, and you two can have your happily-ever-after. How's that sound?"

This had the effect on Angel that proper protocol hadn't, and he bared his fangs as one animal to another. "I have an idea," he snarled. "I'll lock you in your own dungeon and watch that poison drive you insane if the hunger doesn't do it first..."

"Now that's not very creative," the deformed vampire chided. "Didn't you used to be a master of torture? Did that talent die in you when you realized that nothing could possibly equal your own misery? Or is punishing me with your own angst the whole purpose of this little plan you're cooking up with your human buddies?"

Angel's rage vanished instantly, replaced by sudden fear. "What plan?" He had to hear more. This could still be a bluff.

"Don't play dumb with me. I'd have killed you long before this if I wasn't so interested in what you thought you were doing. The one vampire in all the world who could understand what I went through, how hard I pushed to gain my freedom, and all you want is to take it away from me again. I even offer you the same release, and you turn it down for the sake of some toothsome wench. Not funny, Angelus. Let me put this into terms you'll understand: I do not want my soul back."

"I didn't want mine either," Angel said cautiously. "But I accepted it when it came back to me."

"Very honorable," Daemonis sneered. "Do you think the whole world will accept theirs by your example? Succeed or fail, boy, letting this spell be cast is betrayal of the worst kind, and it's going to be the end of you. This is your chance to give up on it now before that happens."

This spell, he'd said. The whole world. He knew. He knew the whole plan, or close enough to it. Angel stood up, backed away from Daemonis for a few steps, and then ran. He was dimly aware of the fledgling vampires in the other room giving him bewildered stares as he burst through it, and the door swinging open behind him as he got out into the night air. This was his chance, Daemonis had said. He could only hope that one chance was enough.

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"Thought we were leaving that door unlocked for him," Willow mentioned as they heard a rapid pounding knock from the back entrance that could only be Angel.

"I don't like leaving the doors unlocked," Anya said defensively as Giles got up to answer it. "It means untrustworthy people can come in and steal things instead of paying us money for them like customers do."

Giles ignored her this time; they'd been through it too many times already and the urgent sound to the knock made him concerned that Angel was in some kind of immediate danger. He thought he might break the lock if he had to wait another moment.

Angel was alone, but he stepped in swiftly and bolted the door behind him. "He knows," he said.
Everyone at the table heard him. "Who knows what?" asked Xander as Father Tom rose from his seat in an automatic response to Angel's dire manner.

"You saw Daemonis," said Giles. Until now he hadn't quite believed that was really Angel's intent. "What does he know?"

Angel strode further into the store, grabbing books and papers and setting them in a haphazard pile on the table. "He knows the spell. He knows he's in danger of getting his soul back again and he knows we're the ones behind it. None of this is safe here." He gestured widely at the stack he was making, which Giles now saw was compiled of everything they had used to author the final version of Willow's spell.

"What do you think he's going to do?" squeaked Willow, easily surrendering the notes she had been working on.

"I know what I would do." Angel's eyes glinted with suppressed fury. Giles could see the tactical mind of Angelus behind them, and he could feel the alarm in the room growing. Angel pointed at Willow. "I would kill you. And I would kill Giles. And I would destroy every scrap of paper that mentions a word about what you've discovered, and every book you read to lead you there, and every tool you're planning to use." He waved his hand at the table. "How much of this is strictly necessary? Can we start destroying it?"

"Not just yet," Giles barked. "What is your plan here, Angel? Are we going to abandon our progress and then hope he doesn't attempt to eliminate us anyway?"

"No," Angel's determination didn't waver, but he slowed down a little. "Just the opposite. We're taking this public, and as soon as we possibly can."

Xander stood up next to Father Tom. "Does anyone else smell a little bit of the crazy coming from him? Is it somehow not enough for Daemonis and his vamp buddies to know what we're up to, so now we have to tell the whole world? So much for group decisions!"

There was always some kind of reminder, whenever both were present, that Xander and Angel didn't like each other, but since Xander hid his contempt with jokes and Angel did his best to avoid all interaction, it was easy to forget the depths their enmity could really reach. "Shut it, kid," growled Angel. "This isn't group decision time. They could decide to make their move at any minute, and if we're still the only ones who have the secret when they do, they'll stop at nothing to keep it from going any further. You see this?" He picked up a sheaf of paper- it was a printout of the spell in its entirety, complete with diagrams and instructions, Willow's final draft. She had dutifully prepared it for distribution in the case that they chose to distribute, even though she hadn't wanted to. "Five seconds with a lighter and it's gone for good. You see your friends? They wouldn't last much longer. Then Daemonis takes a nap and goes back to hunting Buffy, if he hasn't already gotten her in the first attack." He looked from Willow to Giles as he kept speaking. "You cannot be the only ones to know how to do this. You're painting targets on yourselves."

"He's right," said Father Tom as Giles was coming to the same conclusion. "If the formula is public domain, Daemonis can't contain it and he wouldn't gain anything from attacking us."

Willow looked no less scared. "Except he knows it was our fault and he'll wanna kill us for it anyway."

"It's survival versus revenge," explained Angel. "He already wanted to kill us. With this much at stake for him, though...he'll move fast. He'll go for the threats."
Angel was staring down at the table, but gradually he lifted his eyes and met Giles's, who only realized then that he had been staring at Angel. He was thinking about a smashed computer in a school laboratory, a broken orb, and a teacher whose good intentions proved fatal. Of course Angel knew what Daemonis would do in this situation. "Willow," said Giles. "How soon can you get the spell online?"

Willow's laptop was on the table in front of her. She looked up at Giles and saw resolve. "Five minutes," she said gloomily.

"Do it."

As Willow began to open files and copy text, Angel moved away from the table and started checking outside through all the store's windows. Anya was already up and doing the same thing, Giles noticed, and probably had been ever since Angel came in. Giles picked up the printout that Angel had referred to and flipped through its pages. "I can fax this to the Watcher's Council in the meantime. Father?"

"Here's another number you can fax while you're at it," said the priest, scribbling it down and handing it to Giles. "I'll call them tomorrow and tell them what it's about."

"Light it up when you're done," called Angel from where he was standing, up by the front door. "And any other copies. And don't leave it on a disc. Or in your own files."

Xander sat back down and dropped his head into his hands. "This is insane."

"That's enough," Giles reprimanded him so that Angel wouldn't. He started feeding paper into the fax machine. "As soon as these go through we're all going to our homes, and the books are coming with us. Everyone take a few, keep them separated."

"I wanna know something," Xander persisted. "How does Daemonis know about this? I feel like I would remember that detail if it had been covered already."

"I don't know," said Angel, still holding his post at the front door but apparently making use of his keen senses to listen to the conversation at the table.

Father Tom was stacking up the books and straightening the rest of the materials. "Nobody in this store has disclosed any secrets," he assured Xander without taking his eyes off of his work.

Xander was certainly feeling dogged tonight. "Except you can't read the mind of everyone in this store, right?"

"Oh shut up Xander." That was Willow, who at the same time was typing furiously on her laptop and locked onto its faintly glowing screen. Finally she leaned back, hit the 'enter' key, and said, "Done." Somehow she made that single word sound like an apocalypse chime.

Giles still had a lot of pages to finish faxing. "Yes, perhaps you could make yourself useful instead," he said to Xander. "You know how to use this machine, yes?"

"Yeah, I met one once before the world learned they were already obsolete." Xander got up and took the pages from Giles, freeing him to approach Angel and put a little space between them and everyone else.

"We will all follow your lead in this," he said quietly to the vampire. "I don't regret that. But now I need to hear what happened tonight."

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"The sheer nerve of that man! Running off like that and you just know he's got some plan to risk his life before he gets back here, and how about that 'Take Buffy home' comment? And as if that's not protection enough, now he's got Spike all standing sentinel outside? Why doesn't he just write me a love letter that starts with the words 'You can't take care of yourself'? Oh man and you should have heard him going off earlier about making choices that get people hurt, it just could not be any clearer that he's talking about his own guilt complex, like it's not my place to make a choice about whether I want to be with him. And then he gets snippy with Oz, who's like the one male person in my life who doesn't give him the evil eye every time he sees us kissing, oh, no offense Wesley, you're the bomb, but if Angel thinks that since he's the boss in LA he can be the boss around here, he's got another thing coming. Soon as he walks in that door he's getting the time-honored Indignant Housewife Slap Across the Face, and then I'm going to sit him down and make some rules about how much he's allowed to take care of me. Damn skippy."

Buffy took a deep breath and released it, fingering the spring-loaded stake sheaths on her wrists. She was glad she hadn't loaded them, and Wesley probably was too, because with the way she had been gesticulating, she probably would have accidentally fired them by now. "These are cool," she said to Wesley, holding up one of them. "Did he make them himself?"

"I think so." Wesley sounded relieved to have something to reply to other than a longwinded rant about Angel. "He uses them fairly often, so I thought he would appreciate having them here."

"I wonder if he could make a pair for me." Even with the straps cinched as tightly as possible, they were still loose on her; Angel's hands were so much bigger than hers.

"It might be difficult to conceal them under a tank top."

Buffy had to laugh. Wesley was so much more tolerable now that he wasn't her Watcher. "Good point. I have a strict rule about using weapons that I can't coordinate with my wardrobe."

"He isn't just being overprotective, you know." Wesley's eyes were sympathetic but confident behind his glasses. "He always tries to take the harder responsibilities on himself. With all of us."

"I know," said Buffy. "I hate that. It's like he thinks he's already damned, so he might as well take the fall for everyone else, too." She looked up at Wesley, suddenly needing to share her concerns with someone else who really knew him. "But he isn't damned. The part of him that's really him, it's, it's pure. He just doesn't see that part."

There was a sound at the door, Spike's voice, Angel's voice, Spike's footsteps departing. Buffy wasted no time before striding over to the door just as Angel entered and hugging the living daylights out of him (even though living and daylights were already just about antithetical to everything that was Angel). She thought she saw Wesley from the corner of her eye, with an I-just-knew-it look on his face, probably thinking of what she had said she was going to do when Angel walked in the door. Well, she hadn't said it was the first item on her to-do list. The slap came immediately after the hug.

"Hi, Buffy." He could do that resigned voice like nobody's business, even while rubbing the redness from his cheek.

Wesley cleared his throat loudly. "So, I'll just be on my way..." He had been offered a room at the mansion, of course, but he had decided to stay with Giles, which suited Buffy at the moment. She and Angel both put off their quarrel until Wesley had left the building.

"I don't want to hear about what happened tonight yet," she told him after they'd sat down in front of the fireplace. "First I want some expressions of your eternal devotion."
He looked taken aback. "Buffy, has that ever been in doubt?"

"Well, it's been sandwiched between a lot of attempts to set me free for my own good, and those are starting to wear on me. I don't want to be set free, okay? I locked myself in your crazy selfless stationary heart, and I'm the one holding the key. Do you know how stressful it is to always have to worry that one day you're going to decide that I'm better off without you, and you're just going to vanish from my life? You could do that. You're Vanishing Guy. It's freaky."

Angel took his time before answering. "You can't ask me to put you in danger."

"You can't ask me to interpret every kind of danger as your fault. You've kind of been doing that lately, you know." Buffy let herself calm down. She'd already had enough ranting for the night.

"Have I?" He twitched a little, like a sigh without the air. "It's just been a lot of reminders lately of what I can't be for you. The prophecy, and seeing Daemonis tonight...and that normal ex of yours showing up..."

So he had seen Daemonis. Curious as she was, that still had to wait a few minutes. "You really didn't like Riley, did you?" she said gently. "It wasn't just that he was my boyfriend."

"To be honest?" He raised an eyebrow at her. "I would have rather seen you with Xander."

"Oh, wow. Huh. Give me a moment to process that one."

"Riley thought I was evil," Angel said. "Twice. And sure, he didn't know what he was looking for, but he knew how the curse worked, didn't he? When you came back from LA that time, he thought you had cheated on him, released an evil vampire into the world, did nothing about it, and came home and lied to him. You wouldn't have done any one of those things. Why would he not know that?"

Buffy gave a tiny shrug. There was always going to be a little bit of regret when she made Angel speak as openly as he was now. "He said it was because he loved me so much he couldn't think straight."

Angel scoffed. "Want to see a funny trick? I can love you and think straight at the same time. And so can Xander."

She smiled. "Thank you. That's generous."

"It's the truth. I still don't like him, and don't expect me to ever start, but I've seen enough to respect him. When you were in the hospital-" He hesitated there. Buffy waited, noting his downcast eyes and the difficulty he was having with choosing his words, and realized that he wasn't talking about the last time she'd been in the hospital. These were the signs that said he was talking about the period in which he had lacked a soul. "I...I came for you one night. I might have killed you that time if I'd gotten to your room. Xander made me leave. He was afraid, but he stood up to me, and he stopped me in the only way he could. I can't tell him that I'm grateful for that, but I am." He picked his eyes up off the floor for a moment. "And that's why Xander feels more like competition to me than Riley ever did. Because I could feel like he was there for you, even if it hurt me to know it."

"There you go again." She slid closer to him and put her head on his shoulder. "I never see any reminders of what you can't be for me. Only what you can."

"Really?"

"Really." She let some of the exasperation back into her voice. "So enough with the leaving-me-so-I-
can-have-a-normal-life deal?"

He gave her a crooked smile, and she knew she had won. "Okay, I won't do it anymore. Because you don't like it. Oh, and-" he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. ",I promise you my eternal devotion."

"This is turning into a decent night after all. Probably means it's time to ruin it by filling me in on the latest news about Team Evil." She arranged herself with her legs draped over his and his arm around her shoulders. "Okay. To business."

***

The beast lunged at her, savage and senseless, and refused to be cowed by the metal bars that kept it back. It pressed its body against them, slavering as it set its teeth on them, straining to reach its claws out as far as the bars would permit. Finally it threw back its head and howled.

Willow turned a page in her book. She was getting used to the wolf's antics, but it was annoying when he howled- the sound echoed terribly in the stone chamber. She checked her watch. He'd been canine for at least twenty minutes now, so he should be winding down.

Sure enough, the beast backed away from the bars, panting, and threw himself onto the floor in a frustrated heap. Willow stayed still, making sure not to look at him. Sometimes eye contact could get him riled up again. She had a theory that the change from wolf back to human came as much from boredom as anything else. Oz claimed that if he locked himself up when nobody was around, he could go back and forth with surprising ease, as if the wolf didn't have any good reason to remain a wolf. When Willow was watching over him, though, she was distraction enough to throw a wrench in the works, and that was the wrench that Oz wanted to work on.

A few minutes later she heard the panting subside and looked up to see that her boyfriend was back. She welcomed him with a smile. She wasn't scared of the wolf- not in these conditions, anyway- but there was always an irrational fear in the back of her mind that one of these times, he would just never turn back. He trudged back over to the bars and leaned against them, making no move to leave the cage or to get dressed. "You must be so bored," he said apologetically.

"Oh, you'll have to try harder than that to bore me," she replied. "Remember anything this time?"

He considered briefly, then shook his head. "I remember seeing you sitting there, but that's what I'm seeing right now, so it's kind of hard to tell if that's a wolf memory." He scratched his chin. "Hey, maybe you can try talking to me?"

"Sure!" She closed the book. "I can talk. I can even ramble. I can do a first-class ramble with complimentary peanuts. One ramble, coming right up."

Oz gave her a tired smile and dropped to his hands and knees for an easy transformation. Willow started rambling as soon as the fur started coming in, and didn't let his growling and attacking the bars interrupt her when the change completed. "So, Tara's coming by tomorrow to help me with this seeking spell, it's supposed to reveal any kind of magical devices or charms or demons that could have been placed in the Magic Box to eavesdrop on us. Giles thinks that if anyone heard us talking about the plan, it had to be there, since that's where most of the planning went down. Hmm...okay, looks like I've exhausted that topic already, need something else to ramble about..."

The wolf whined like a dog, as if he agreed. Then he went back to his usual display of aggression, but Willow was encouraged. "So you know how Angel got kind of pissy at you the other night over the acid trip thing? I don't think that was fair, I mean, you were apologizing! And that just got me
thinking, he's really been hovering over Buffy lately, and that's cool and all, I mean if you take away the 'forbidden' aspect of it they're the perfect couple. But I kind of miss her. We haven't had any real Scooby time in ages." Oz backed off for a moment- another good sign, but Willow had to be careful not to show she had noticed, so she kept talking. "Now she's walking on her own two feet, I thought we could all go do something, like, like bowling or dancing or ice fishing."

Suddenly Oz was human again, sitting in an awkward position on the stone floor. He shook himself vigorously. "You really think Angel would go bowling?" he asked.

"Oz!" Willow jumped to her feet in excitement. "You understood what I was saying! And you changed back so fast! And you...thought bowling was a weirder idea than ice fishing?"

"Hm." He stayed on the floor, still looking bemused. "Turns out language is really difficult. Not sure I caught the ice fishing part. But I know you said something about doing a spell, and then you were talking about going somewhere with Buffy and Angel, right?"

"Close. That actually wasn't quite where I was headed with that. I want a little Buffy-sans-Angel excursion. Is that wrong? It's not that I don't like him or anything, it's just...sometimes he kind of acts his age. And you know," she went on as Oz took a breath and started changing again, "I really don't think he would go bowling."

As the wolf paced the length of the cage and scratched at the corners looking for an escape route, Willow sat back down on the floor and rattled off a few more ideas for things they could do with Xander, Anya, and Buffy. Then she started worrying out loud about whether Angel would be offended if they tried to exclude him, and how to sell Buffy on the idea without offending her, and whether two couples and one other person meant fifth-wheel syndrome. She knew she was doing that insecurity thing like she did, but she had promised him a ramble, and it wasn't as if this was anything she wouldn't say to Oz as a human. Oz as a wolf was still kind of a good listener too, she reflected. He always kept his attention at least partially on her, but he never interrupted.

She had just leaned back to stare at the ceiling when Oz said, "So let's do something in the daylight." Willow jumped a little. His transitions were getting smoother and quieter, but that was the first time he had managed to shift without her even noticing. "Nobody needs to make excuses to exclude Angel then. And don't feel bad about it either, baby. He's got a different kind of life than the rest of us." As he spoke, he reached through the bars to grab the clothes he had left on the other side so he wouldn't run the risk of gnawing on them. Willow entered the lock's combination as he got dressed. "He'd probably welcome the chance to hang out with the grown-ups for once."

Willow smiled and kissed Oz's nose. "I believe I was promised a bubble tea if I helped you with your wolfing today."

"Then we, damsel, are bubble tea bound." As they left the crypt, he added wistfully, "Ice fishing does sound like fun."

"Ice is cool," she agreed. She took his hand as they came up into the sunlight together.

***

Nobody made any jokes about a priest, a vampire, and two Brits walking into a bar, but Giles thought one of them might after they got a few drinks into them. He even entertained the possibility that it might be himself. It had been a while since Giles walked into a bar with anyone- the Bronze didn't count, despite its alcoholic options- and it was actually something of a relief to be able to do so without his companions being carded. He made a comment to that effect as they each made a purchase at the bar and then took a table in the corner together.
"Good thing, too," Angel replied. "I've got to get Cordelia to make me a fake ID in case that ever happens."

Giles tried to imagine that situation. It could happen. Angel looked to be in his mid-to-late twenties, but there were enough bartenders in the United States trying to play it safe that it was a credit to Angel's skill at handling people that he had avoided confrontation on the issue so far.

Wesley glanced nervously at Father Tom. "Of course, it's sometimes necessary for Angel to temporarily assume an identity of some kind for the sake of his work. We would never bend the law just to get a round at a pub."

The priest didn't bat an eye. "Render unto Caesar," he said. "I've got no particular allegiance to the laws regarding the drinking age. And I'm of Irish Catholic descent."

Angel grinned broadly. "What's the difference between a Roman Catholic and an Irish Catholic?"

"About three pints," Father Tom answered promptly, and he and the vampire clinked their glasses together.

Giles blinked. He didn't know what was stranger: that the two could tolerate each other's presence at all, or that they were bonding over cultural and religious stereotypes. "So," he said. "Evidently we deem this establishment a safe place to talk about fabricating legal identification. Shall we also consider it safe enough to discuss more pressing matters?"

"Safer than that shop of yours, anyhow," said Father Tom. "For now."

That was true enough. Willow and Tara had cast a variety of spells aimed at exposing whatever unwelcome magical energy was hidden there and had succeeded only partially. Something was there, haunting the shop, and it had enough consciousness to be labeled a spirit. Once this much was established, the girls had started coming up with ideas to narrow down the possibilities of what it was, but Giles had stopped them there. Willow had already crossed so many magical barriers. If her work wasn't becoming so integral to their needs, he would have asked her to refrain from using it at all for a while. She at least listened to him when he said they had done enough for one day, though, and now they had enough information to know to keep business talk out of the Magic Box.

"But do we actually have anything to say about the pressing matters?" Wesley asked. He was getting frustrated, Giles could tell. He had pulled his weight with the responsibilities of researching, and now he wanted payoff. Well, so did they all.

"I've got news," Father Tom informed them, "but I don't know that you'll like it. I've received a response from the bishop of my diocese. He's received word from the Vatican, now that they've reviewed the documents we sent them. It looks like the Church is the first one to have come to a conclusion about participating in the spell."

"And?" Giles was curious, but impartial. It was difficult to be anything else, what with his own uncertainty about which way he wanted the road to take them.

"They- we- will have nothing to do with it. The theological debate keeps coming back to the answer that we have to err on the side of caution, and leave matters as they are. The main problem-" he paused for a swig from his glass "-is in the uncertainty of the afterlife. We believe in a Heaven and a Hell, and the possibility of other options, but we don't claim to know where any one soul ends up. We also don't make any kind of choice about who goes where, and when. That's God's decision. Humans can't take it upon ourselves to send souls to the afterlife. We can't choose to bring them back from there, either." He was looking at Angel now, not questioning him but letting the questions come as they would to everyone else's mind. "Especially since nobody really knows what happens to the
soul when a human becomes a vampire. To bring a soul out of Heaven, for instance, even if there remained no memory of being there...that would be reprehensible."

Angel’s reaction to this line of logic was unexpected. "Good for the Church, then," he said shortly. "Good for you." Giles heard no sarcasm in his voice, and inspected his face to see if he had missed it. Angel seemed to know what he was thinking (and the other two at the table seemed to be thinking the same thing), and elaborated, "They chose a stance. Everyone else keeps wavering. Sounds like they went at it through a reasonable line of thinking, and if I know anything about the institution, nobody's going to change their mind now they've set it. So good for them."

Wesley listened to him and nodded. "And it's still possible to cast the spell without their support, if our other channels come through. I don't think it would even require all of them." Then he glanced up sharply at Father Tom. "Is the Church's position one of neutrality, or can we expect actual interference from them?"

"Neutrality. They want to be kept updated on how things progress, but I'm not meant to sabotage any more than I am to contribute."

Giles thought of what that could mean, and to his surprise it gave him a brief pang. "Does this development mean you'll be returning to your home?" he asked.

Father Tom shook his head, and Giles could see that he was hiding a small smile which said he had telepathically noticed that pang and appreciated the reluctant affection behind it. "I'm here for Daemonis, not your spell. I crossed the whole country to get to him, and I'll go home when he's dead."

"You're his nemesis," mused Angel, tracing a finger around the rim of his half-empty glass. "Hunter with a personal grudge, I had one of those once. Did he kill your family?"

"He killed a few of my parishioners," said the priest casually, showing no distaste at Angel's reference to his bloody past. "Close enough."

Angel nodded. "Probably women, right?" he said. "Pretty ones, not too young not too old. Maybe kind of shy."

If Giles was perplexed by that comment, Father Tom was startled right out of his composure. "How-how did you know that?"

"Love," stated the vampire. "You can go through it and come out the other side, and it still sticks with you in one way or another. In his case, it would be a nasty way." He looked up and saw everyone around the table examining him again, and drummed his fingers on the table restively. "I talked with the guy, remember? I'm good at guessing someone's type. His was easy."

"Right, because of his romantic side." Wesley had a far-off, pensive look as he picked up the thread of conversation. Giles wondered if working closely with Angel made it easier to remember that he was inhuman, or just the opposite. "That's so...unspeakably macabre."

"He offered to sire Buffy." Angel dropped the words like a bomb, his good humor now thoroughly gone. "Offered it, like he was doing me a favor. You can't understand what it means to sire someone. The way they idolize you, especially at the beginning...it doesn't matter how much she hated you the day before. The moment she wakes up she belongs to you." Everyone was quiet as Angel's voice became increasingly harder. "And he'd do it, too. Just to wreak havoc. Just to see how much he could hurt someone before it drove her insane..."
Wesley cut in quietly. "You're not Daemonis, Angel."

Surprise flickered through Angel's eyes as he lifted them from the spot on the table where he had been staring. Then he nodded once and leaned back, the tightness about his shoulders diminishing.

Giles looked at Wesley with renewed respect. He himself would never have guessed that Angel needed to be told that he wasn't Daemonis, and he doubted even Buffy would.

"I know," Angel allowed. Now that he had broken out of his angry trance, he looked distinctly uncomfortable about the emotion he had just spilled. "I just can't get him out of my mind anymore. He killed his own lover and now he wants mine." He looked at Father Tom. "I hope you don't mind sharing your grudge."

Giles tried not to twitch when he heard Angel use the word 'lover.' He tried to tell himself that Buffy was an adult and thus none of this was his business, but some part of his mind was always keeping tabs on how her relationship with Angel was progressing, and it was certainly progressing. Even a week ago, Angel wouldn't have been likely to refer to her so naturally with possessive pronouns. "Where is Buffy tonight?" he asked. There, that was a safe thing to say. Got them off the topic of grudges, and there weren't any implications that Buffy didn't belong under Angel's care.

"With her friends. They're doing..." His brow furrowed, trying to remember. "One of those things they do. Having fun. She's safe."

Wesley smiled. "Ah, if only Cordelia were here to complain on your behalf about Buffy having fun without you."

Angel stared at him blankly. He didn't even seem to realize that his friend was teasing him. "Buffy has to have fun. With or without me. She's safe and she's having fun. What else matters?"

"Sure," said Father Tom heartily, completely out of the blue. "You can share my grudge."

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The mansion seemed especially silent tonight, but not in an ominous way. Angel knew that Buffy was upstairs, not only from the single light on up there but because, well, he knew. She was waiting for him. He had just come home and Buffy was upstairs waiting for him. Why had this not sunk in before?

He closed the door behind him quietly, locking it up as always. Nothing would get in to disturb them. Sacred space. Safe as houses. The silence remained, thick and inquisitive, and it made Angel keenly aware of everything around him. The fireplace, full of last night's ashes. The table he had staggered into when he tried to run away from Buffy and the terrible sacrifice she intended. The spot on the floor where he had landed, uncomprehending, after Hell let him go. The coat rack. The coat rack? Oh, right. He took off his coat and hung it up, still examining his surroundings. Everything was familiar. Everything was new. Even the memories were new- he was looking at each one as part of a whole, as a series of events that had brought him to where he was now, and that was a good place, and that was new. He slipped off his shoes at the bottom of the stairs and went up as part of the silence, one step at a time.

The light he had seen from downstairs was coming faintly from their bedroom, the door cracked open invitingly. He pushed it open gently and stood in the doorway for a moment. She was sitting crosslegged on the bed, writing in a book she had in front of her by the light of a single bedside lamp and a few candles, and she looked up at him and smiled. She didn't say anything, but he thought her lips formed the suggestion of his name.
"I remember this," he said, not knowing the words were coming until they were out.

She arched an eyebrow. "Remember what?"

He leaned against the doorway, taking her in. "Happiness."

"Angel." She gave him the liquid eyes, the shy smile. Not everyone got to see that smile. "What's got you all sentimental?"

"I don't really know." He snapped out of it a little and closed the door behind him before crossing the room to sit by her on the bed. She was wearing silk pajamas, purple ones with pockets and buttons, and her hair was let down to tumble over her shoulders. "I was just thinking," he said. "You even look pretty when you go to bed." He looked down at the book and pen she was still holding. "What are you doing?"

She left the compliment unanswered, but he could tell by her stifled chuckle that she remembered the first time he had said it. "Journaling," she replied. "I got out of the habit while I was off duty, but then I realized that stuff is still happening so maybe I should take some notes."

He touched the journal, felt the mass of filled pages and the streamlined blank ones. "Is this the one with the fantasy about the charming foreign exchange student Ahmed?" he asked.

"Oh man," she laughed. "We really are taking a trip down Memory Freeway tonight, aren't we? I filled up the Ahmed Hypercrush Chronicles years ago. And hid them." Her forehead creased in sudden consternation. "In my old room, where Willow and Oz live now..."

"But Willow probably heard all about it at the time anyway, right?"

"You bet she did." She shrugged calmly. "Highschool diary stuff doesn't matter. It was really only embarrassing that one time. I just can't believe you remember it."

"Yes you can."

She gave in and grinned. "Yes, I can. But props for being so suave about it at the time."

"Well, the suave part was short-lived," he reminded her. "I also recall being a little uncouth..."

"Oh, you're not referring to scaring the bejeezus out of me with your growly face and then jumping out my window, are you?" She waved a carefree hand. "Water over the bridge. And did I ever not think that that was going to be a memory I could someday look back on and laugh."

Hearing about it in those terms added a whole new dimension to the night's surreal parade of memories. He started to laugh. She started to laugh. As it ran its course they were both silent for a moment, lost in their respective thoughts and memories. Then Buffy set the diary on the bedside table and said, "We're okay, right? You're not still mad? About the acid and the...Spike and everything?"

He laid a hand on her thigh. "I was never mad. Just afraid."

"Then, are you still afraid?"

There was a lot to consider in that question. "Some," he admitted. "I don't know how to let my guard down anymore. Even- especially when I'm happy. I'm still atoning, and it gets ugly sometimes. I don't want to drag you down into that."

"You won't," she said, full of confidence. "We're going to be good this time. I do my job, you do
yours. And when it's time for you to retire from atonement, I think we'll know it."

The last of his smile fell away. "You might not be here to see it."

"I'm ready for that." Her voice had a new maturity to it, complementing the innocent wisdom she'd had for as long as he had known her. "I'm still yours."

"If you weren't so independent that would be a hard thing to hear from you. I want to give you more than I have to give," he implored, hoping it didn't break her new rule about talking about what he couldn't be for her. He had to get it out. "Buffy, I have to go back to LA sooner or later. I might have to stay there for years. For a lifetime. For your lifetime. It doesn't seem fair, making you wait for me when I might never get to you."

"I'm not waiting for you. This isn't waiting. I told you, I'm yours. No matter where you are or what you are." She leaned closer to him. "Aren't you going to tell me you're mine, too? Because this is the right moment to tell me that."

"Always."

Her smile showed that she was perfectly contented with that answer. "I miss my ring," she said, glancing down at the unadorned finger on her left hand. "I lost it after you came back to life."

"I'll get you a new one," he promised immediately. "I lost mine too." Actually, he had destroyed it when he was evil, but he saw no reason to make that distinction now.

"It wouldn't be the same," she started to object.

"Why should it be?" he countered. "We're not the same people we were back then. Doesn't mean I ever stopped loving you, but I think we both know this is much more a renewal than it is a continuation."

She went quiet, considering this, then spoke up again in her playful voice. "At least I've finally got you talking like there is a 'this' to renew or continue as we deem appropriate."

"Well, you did insist I stop trying to leave you for your own good."

"That's right," she replied with an impish grin. "Angel...I've been thinking about what you said that night you told me about your curse being fixed. About my heart being my home. I think I kind of get it now. I think I know where I am."

"And?" He felt a tug and looked down to see that she was unbuttoning his shirt.

She reached the top button and slid her warm hand up his chest and around the back of his neck, pulling his face up close to hers to whisper in his ear. "I invite you in."
Good News Bad News

Chapter Summary

I can't help what I am!

When Angel took Buffy's virginity on her seventeenth birthday, he was painstakingly gentle, taking everything one step at a time, handling her body as if it were fragile instead of superpowered. When they made love for the second time, three years later, gentleness gave way to urgency and his kisses turned into love-bites, hard enough to break the skin if he had been using his fangs. Buffy gave back as good as she got- clothes were torn, both of theirs, and she used her nails, and she made noise. As they fell asleep, exhausted and tangled in each other's limbs, she cupped his face in her hand and said, "Angel. Are you going to be here when I wake up?"

"Yes," he whispered, the pain of memory flickering across his face, "I will."

And he was. She had woken up first, for a wonder, and she got to watch him open his eyes slowly and see her looking into them. Buffy took his hands in hers, but didn't want to move or say anything yet.

She couldn't look away from him. He was here, really here and really himself, but wearing an expression she'd never seen on him before. It was full of love and affection, but innocence, too, as if his burdened centuries had fallen away over the course of the night. He was giving her a mischievous smile, one that said he had no fear at all for consequences, and he put his arm around her and traced her spine with his fingers...

"Good morning," said Buffy an hour later.

He chuckled. "Good morning." He recovered a few pillows from where they had been strewn across the bed and propped them up behind her and himself. "What would you like to do today?"

She clasped an arm around his waist. "This. The world doesn't need saving today, does it?"

"Let me check your appointment book." He reached across her to the book she had left on the night table.

"That's my diary!"

He opened it to the last filled page and started reading anyway, holding it up and to his other side so she couldn't reach when she tried to snatch it away. "Are you sure?" he teased. "It looks like it has your plans for today-"

She clambered over his chest, but he had the book at arm's length and was still attempting to read from it while at the same time laughing and fighting off her assault. Any moment now he was going to start tickling her, she knew it. Angel was being naughty! Since when was Angel naughty? "My plans for today are none of your business!...Sort of!"

"Sort of," he agreed. "It says you want to have sex with Angel all day." With this revelation he triumphantly snapped the book shut and handed it back to her.
She tried to scowl at him and couldn't hold it for more than a second before breaking back into a grin. "You could have just asked."

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"Okay," said Willow as she strode into the Magic Box, "I'm not going to take too much credit for this, because Giles is the one who basically identified the sneaky invisible eavesdropper spirit thing, but I found the name for it. And furthermore, I brought this!" She walked up to Giles and brandished a sheet of paper at him. "It's a shopping list!" she explained proudly.

Anyà looked up from the register with a spark of curiosity. "What did you name it?"

Willow blinked out of her self-satisfaction. "Huh?"

"You said you found a name for the spying demon. What did you name it? Muffin? Binky? Charles? And how do we know it's going to respond to the name you chose?"

"No," Willow clarified with utmost patience. "It's not a demon, it's a spirit, and I mean I found the name of what kind of spirit it is. 'Moisipi.' It's a Moisipi spirit. And I found out how to get rid of it," she plowed on before Anyà could ask any more annoying questions. "You can harness it easily if you can see it, but it has no form so usually that's impossible. Thus, catch-all spell for putting spirits into visible tangible shapes. Thus, me researching the spell in question. Thus, shopping list!"

Giles was frowning at the list and occasionally glancing up to search the shelves for some item he saw on it. "We have all of this here," he said finally.

Willow beamed. "I knew you would. Can we start?"

"The store is still open for another fifteen minutes."

"Aw. Can't we close early? Nobody's here."

Anyà stalked over to Giles and Willow, clearly appalled at the idea of closing early, and nabbed the list from Giles's hands. "Oh, a substantiation spell," she said after a quick look over it. "It's kind of interesting to see what spirits look like, when they don't naturally look like anything. Except if it's a violent spirit it ends up taking on a form with muscles and weapons and then it kills everyone. But this should be fine, nothing on this list is too rare or expensive..."

Xander stopped what he was doing on the other side of the store- restocking some ointments in glass jars, probably just to help Anyà- and said, "Okay, I wasn't listening to any of that until you mentioned a spirit that kills everyone. This isn't Spirit Summonin' Saturday, is it?" He dusted his hands off on his pants and joined them at the table.

"No summonin', just substantiatin'," Willow assured him. "And Moisipis are totally harmless, right Giles?"

He nodded, already holding a big book open in front of him and scrutinizing its pages. "They have no real consciousness, no drives or desires. Their existence is, ah, composed entirely of the five senses and a limited memory, which is why they're used as spies. In fact, they don't even seem to be terribly difficult to control, so if we can capture it..."

"We can bring it onto our side and use it against Daemonis!" Willow finished happily. "But first things first. If we keep talking about this too long, it'll phase back over to Vampire Central and report on us."
Xander eyed her warily. "Isn't that one of those things you're supposed to warn us about before we get started?"

She shrugged. "Well, I warned you, so now we can get started. Giles, please can we close the store?"

He sighed and went to lock the doors. The rest of them used her list to collect what they needed from the store's merchandise, and Willow instructed Xander on which herbs to mix while she set up a pattern of crystals on the table, forming a hoop which would confine the spirit to one spot. From there, it was all a cinch. The four of them sat around the table and held hands, Willow chanted the appropriate Sumerian words, and when she finished there was a tiny pop sound in the air above them. They opened their eyes and beheld what the spell had brought from its own reality to theirs.

Willow's first reaction was a squeal of delight. "It's so cute!"

"That's the Moisipi spirit?" said Xander.

"It looks like a kitty!" said Willow.

"This is just a forced representation, of course," said Giles.

"Hello, sweet kitty!" said Willow.

"Do we really have a use for this?" said Anya.

"Maybe we should call it Muffin!" said Willow.

Xander looked at Giles. "You know, she has a point. How come it's cute?"

"Well," stammered Giles, caught with a question about the occult that he didn't seem to know how to handle, "it's, it's innocent, for one thing, as it has no sense of right and wrong, so that might come forth in its appearance by showing us a...harmless animal. And also," he continued, gaining confidence, "the core of its being are its senses. The enlarged eyes and ears could represent vision and hearing, the brightness on its nose could be the sense of smell...that spread of whiskers, that would be tactile, of course..."

"Oh!" Willow piped in. "And the sense of taste is why the tip of its tongue is sticking out! Its cute little pink tongue." She leaned her elbows on the table, cupped her face in her hands, and smiled up at the Moisipi.

It was still hovering a few feet off the table, revolving slowly in every direction, its big eyes moving from face to face. The little pink tongue darted back in or licked its lips once in a while, and once it squeezed its eyes shut and opened its mouth in a huge yawn. It was definitely not afraid, but then, Giles had said that it had no drives or desires, so she supposed there wasn't really any way to make it feel emotions at all. That was quite all right; it could be adorable without them. It did look like a kitty, but not a real one. Its head was too big, its features too exaggerated, and despite its new corporeal form, it had a haziness around its edges that made it look like its ethereal self. Not to mention that it was floating in the air, of course.

Giles was the one who insisted they get back to work; Willow had almost forgotten that there was still some magic required before this business was over. For now, the Moisipi was trapped within the column of energy that they had formed with the ring of crystals on the table, but as soon as they removed the crystals the trap would dissipate and the spirit, in all probability, would go back to its original purpose of following Daemonis's orders. Giles was the one who had a spell for it in mind this time, and he looked it over with her while Xander informed Anya about why normal women
enjoyed seeing cute things.

It didn't take much to claim the spirit for their own team. Giles spoke the spell's words and addressed the floating kitty directly, and to everyone's surprise, it spoke back. The words were in a language that none of them understood, but apparently, a short conversation between the caster and the spirit was the way it was supposed to work. When the Moisipi had murmured its last little purring word, Giles started picking up the crystals, and the spirit disappeared.

Willow gave a little cry of dismay. Even Xander and Anya seemed unhappy to see it go. Giles calmed them with a raised hand and explained, "It's still here. From now on it will be able to phase in and out of the corporeal form we gave to it. And a good thing, too, because now that we've, ah, recruited it, this is going to be the place it considers home, and I'm not sure how I would be able to explain its presence to customers."

Willow perked up. "You mean we get to keep it?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Is this part of my responsibilities as an employee now?" Anya inquired. "Because I don't know how to take care of animals. Or spirits. Or animal-spirits."

Giles pulled out a pocket handkerchief and went to work on cleaning his glasses. "There isn't really any care that it needs. It's simply here. It will see and hear us, and the spell of control means that from now on, it should follow our commands. Although...I should have thought this out more thoroughly beforehand. The only ones it will obey are the four of us, because we were the four who were present when the spell was cast. It's a pity it can only be cast a single time, I should have liked to allow a few others access to this resource."

"Why?" asked Anya. "We've got the key members here. You're the store owner, I'm an invaluable employee, Xander's my boyfriend, and Willow's the spare tire."

"Anya," warned Xander as Willow's cheeks heated up with anger. "Don't call Willow a tire."

Giles turned away from them and walked a few paces around the store, looking up into the empty air. "Moisipi," he said. "Appear." The floating kitty popped back into existence. "There, that works just as it should," he said with satisfaction. "Now let's see what we can get it to tell us about Daemons."

For the next hour, they tried putting the Moisipi spirit to the question. When Buffy and Angel showed up, Giles and Xander and Anya were considering what kinds of questions would work best for future communications with it. Willow was considering names for it.

Buffy broke off in the middle of a cheerful greeting when she saw the floating spirit. She pointed to it with the hand that wasn't clinging to Angel's. "So, either you guys decided to import some magical merchandise from a Japanese toy store, or...what is that thing?"

Giles floundered with a concise but accurate answer. "It's our new, ah..."

"Toy," supplied Xander.

"Pet," suggested Anya.

"Friend!" insisted Willow.

"...Tool," finished Giles. He explained everything that had happened to bring it about, as Buffy and
Angel sat down at the table, both still watching the Moisipi drift around the room. Buffy reached out a hand to touch it, but it rolled lazily out of her reach.

"It does that," Willow said in response to Buffy's pout. "You have to tell it to come to you or it just keeps skedaddling. Oh, except it won't listen to you. Moisipi, go let Buffy and Angel pet you." The spirit drifted back over to allow Buffy to caress it, and Willow tried not to feel too enamored of her newfound power of command.

Buffy seemed just as smitten with the spirit kitty as Willow was, and she showed it by trying to convince Angel to pet its fur as she was. Their conversation soon began sounding like they were talking about something else entirely, and when Buffy urged him, "Come on, you know you want to touch it," Xander coughed loudly and developed a sudden interest in what Willow was planning on naming the thing.

Giles let out a long-suffering sigh. "I suggest we call it 'Artificially Substantiated Moisipi Spirit Which Is to Be Used for Information and Not Entertainment','" he said sternly. Willow and Buffy exchanged a smile that said they had both seen that coming. Giles couldn't put up with playful chatter for too long.

"Have you gotten any information out of it so far?" Angel apparently couldn't, either. He seemed like he was in an unusually good temper, though. He and Buffy both did, come to think of it. They were giving each other a lot of knowing smiles, letting their hands wander over each other, and just generally being affectionate. It made Willow want to keep checking the clock to see when Oz would be free.

"A bit," said Giles. "We've learned that Daemonis and his followers know that the spell has been published, which is a relief. It wouldn't have kept anyone safe if they still thought that we were the only ones with the key to it, and I wasn't sure of how to inform them without risking one of us."

"How does it tell you stuff?" Buffy wanted to know. "Does it talk?"

Willow wanted to make the kitty demonstrate, but they had already learned that it wouldn't talk unless it had something to say, and it wouldn't have anything to say unless it was new information. "Wait until you hear its voice," she said instead. "It's sooo..."

"Cute?" offered Anya. She turned to Xander. "She's going to say it's cute, I know it. She's been talking like that all night because normal women think this thing is cute, and that's why they enjoy looking at it."

"Scuse us," said Willow, pulling at Buffy's sleeve. "We're going to be normal women over here for a little while. You can all keep using the kitty for information and not entertainment."

Buffy reluctantly let herself be led away from Angel, and when Willow thought they were in a corner that was safely out of range of even vampiric hearing, she said, "You're glowing. What's up?"

Buffy looked alarmed. She patted her face and held her hands up to inspect them. "Glowing? Like, some kind of mystical glow thing? Do I need to be exorcised or something? Oh God, tell me it's not an aspect-of-the-demon kind of deal, I haven't even had any contact with any demons lately..."

"Uh, Buffy? I'm making with the metaphors. You're metaphorically glowing. I just wanted to know if you and Angel finally made it into bed."

"Oh." Buffy's face went through an amusing series of expressions, her relief blending into comprehension and then back to alarm. "How did you know that? I thought everyone thought we
had already been..."

"I think everyone else does," Willow assured her. "But you can't fool me. Anyway, I understand this probably means you're booked up for a few days, but when you have a slice of time can you plan on coming back to your old pad for a night?"

Buffy nodded, but cocked her head curiously. "Why? Is something wrong?"

"No. Get with the program, Buff. I want to eat a gallon of ice cream and talk about boys." She crossed her arms, smiling. "You're not too grown up for that now, are you?"

Both of them erupted in giggles as Buffy threw her arms around Willow in a spontaneous hug. "Never too grown up for you! It's a date. As long as I can go smother my boyfriend some more now."

Willow glanced back at the table at the same moment that Angel was checking over his shoulder for them. "Go 'head," she smirked. "I think he misses you."

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Buffy's chopsticks delved back into her Chinese takeout box as she leaned against Angel's chest and wondered how much longer he was going to be this indulgent. Usually he started biting his lip as soon as he saw her eating in bed, but tonight he was so relaxed that he had handed the food to her himself while she was sitting there. She didn't really intend to test how much she had him wrapped around her finger, but it was fun for the moment. Besides, he happened to have his phone cord wrapped around her. If he could talk on the phone in bed, it was only fair that she could eat in bed.

Living with Angel did involve some compromises of that kind. They hadn't come up right away, because her dependence on him during her recovery meant that he had been willing to allow her anything while at the same time being essentially the one who was solely in control of running the household. For a while she had felt like she was on a vacation at the mansion (which happened to have the benefit of full-time Angel access), but gradually it had become a true home and they had worked out a power balance that didn't hinge on him letting her do whatever she wanted. She was starting to see yet another side to him, one that had his own ways of doing things but could gracefully alter them to accommodate her, instead of waiting for her to accommodate him. She in turn had brought over some of her mother's favorite art, some linens with a bit more color than the ones he had, and Mr. Gordo, and the mansion was taking on some of her personality in a way that didn't stifle his. She liked it. He liked it. She fit.

"Yeah," he was saying into the receiver, "have you ever heard of a Moisipi spirit? I guess there's no way to find a picture of it, but I wish you'd been able to see it before you left." As he spoke he idly ran a lock of Buffy's hair through his fingers. "I think it'll help. We've got one up on them now...Anything new at the agency?...Uh huh." Angel steadied Buffy with one hand as he shifted his position. "Hey, Wesley, I meant to ask you. Have you heard from that Darla woman again?"

Buffy turned her head halfway to give him a suspicious glare which was blocked by her head being tucked under his chin. He hadn't mentioned anything about a Darla woman.

"No? Okay, good. They must have given up on that one...Yeah, I'm not sure what they were thinking either. Telling you that a human was my sire is like telling you that a man was your mother...Right, that too. Alright, I've got to go...Say hi to her too." He unwound the cord from Buffy and hung up.

"What's the what on Darla?" she asked, not being jealous at all.
"Nothing important," he replied. "Someone apparently thought they could convince me that she was back from the dead. And a human. And that she needed my help, I guess." His tone was casual, but she thought it sounded a little forced. He had never liked talking about Darla in any context. Whoever had tried to toy with him this way was playing a particularly nasty trick, whether or not they knew it.

Buffy stared into her lo mein. "What would you do if she really was back?"

"If she were human? Try to help her, I guess. If there was a way to help her. That kind of reincarnation is hard to even imagine."

"What if she were a vampire?"

He looped his arms around her waist, not letting the heavy topic put any space between them. "Kill her. Again. Before she got a chance to get her soul back. Right now that's all the power I've got."

Buffy finished eating and set the container aside so that she had her hands free to return his embrace. "If she were really back, and a vampire, I would kill her before you did," she told him. "Nobody should have to do something like that twice."

"Buffy." He didn't say anything more, but she could tell by his voice that he hadn't expected her to understand his feelings like that. And she didn't, not really. Vampire culture, the blood bonds between them, the way it felt to not have a soul...all of those things were too far beyond her experience to even attempt to comprehend. But she knew that a relationship that had lasted for five times as long as her own age meant something, even if it meant something that would be better off forgotten. Angel had enough emotional baggage without facing his own history over and over again.

Besides, Darla was a bitch who had messed with Buffy's boyfriend. Killing her would have been nothing short of a pleasure.

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There were ways to get home without cutting through dark alleys, and Xander and Oz knew enough about the town's dirty secrets that they might have taken advantage of any little increment of safety they could get, but it was so easy to get bored with watching your back. Plus, Xander reasoned, they both had a fair amount of experience under their belts. Oz could turn into a savage beast the moment he felt threatened, and Xander himself...he was resourceful! That was it. There had to be some reason that he was still alive after all this time.

So they took a turn down the dark alley, and Xander, being resourceful, heard the sounds of conflict ahead of them before they were spotted by anything with insidious intentions. Oz heard it too- did he have a wolf's heightened sense of hearing? Xander couldn't remember- and the two of them ducked into a wide doorway and tried to discern something from that standpoint without leaving its shelter. They could see some shadowy figures down the way which did seem to be fighting each other, but they could hear better than they could see, and what they heard was definitely Spike's voice. Xander glanced at Oz to make sure he'd noticed it too, and Oz nodded and pointed to the dumpster next to them. It took a second, but Xander saw what he was getting at: someone had thrown away some furniture, including a wooden chair with a couple of jaggedly broken legs.

Xander took a deep breath, then stepped out of the doorway. He and Oz each grabbed one of the chair-leg stakes and advanced slowly towards Spike's battle. At first they crept forward as silently as possible, but as they got closer there was no way to stay concealed, and they ended up walking right up to the dueling vampires just as it seemed Spike was getting the upper hand. There was just one other, though Xander was certain that there had been two voices besides Spike's to start with.
When Spike noticed them he rolled his eyes and muttered some curses without losing his rhythm. Oz looked at Xander and shrugged slightly. There was really no reason to jump into this. After a series of three kicks which all hit his opponent directly in the face, Spike whisked over to Xander, said, "Give me that," and grabbed the chair leg out of his hand. In a moment it clattered on the pavement of the alley as the vampire who had taken it in the heart settled around it in a layer of ashes.

"Dead vampire," said Xander. "Nifty." Oz said nothing, just looked at the chair leg in his hand and then turned and tossed it back at the dumpster.

Spike had no sarcastic comments this time, no colorful insults. "This is the third one," he said.

"Just the third?" Xander raised an eyebrow. "I thought your score would be better than that by now."

"This is the third one to tell me that we're all doomed. That you lot have cooked up something so terrible that I must be mad to be helping you. All of them are minions of Daemonis and all of them are scared out of their puny minds." Spike gave each of them a long, penetrating look, and gleaning nothing from their reactions, sighed and took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "I'm not scared," he said as he fished one out of the box and started digging in his pockets for a lighter. "You can kill us all, what of it? You can put chips in everyone else's head, I'd be pleased as punch." He got the cigarette lit and inhaled, tilting his head back to blow out the smoke in a long sigh. "And I don't really think you'll manage it either way. But you're up to something. And I'm the only one who doesn't know what it is."

"That's probably the truth," Oz confirmed.

Xander nodded. "You made your coffin now sleep in it."

"Bloody teenage brats," Spike chuckled. " Aren't you the least bit afraid I'm going to find out?"

"So what if you do?" challenged Xander. "You're neutered. And you're stuck on our side, now that Daemonis won't take you back."

"Such innocence," said Spike, taking another drag from the cigarette. " So bloody cute. If the only thing I accomplish before this is over is to make you suddenly realize how stupid you were not to kill me, I'll be perfectly content." He whirled around and strode down the alley.

"The guy could sure use some company," said Oz as they headed home.

"Maybe we should get him a Moisipi spirit," suggested Xander.

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Angel aimed a spinning kick at Buffy's midsection, but she caught his foot with both of her hands and twisted it, sending him down to the floor on his back. He planted his hands behind himself and arched his back to spring back to his feet, keeping her in his line of vision, and sidestepped her coming punch. She retaliated with a low kick, sweeping his legs out from under him and bringing him down again, but this time he caught her by the arms and took her down on top of him. Before she could react he rolled them over so he was on top, then held down one of her wrists in each of his hands and planted a firm kiss on her neck. "I win," he announced, releasing her.

Instead of answering she pushed him back onto his back and tapped her fist against his chest, right over the heart. "No, I win."

"You can't stake me now," he laughed. "I already bit you."
"You didn't hold on long enough. I broke free." She smiled smugly and 'staked' him again.

He rolled once again, pinning her. "You can't break free. I've got you in my thrall." He repeated the 'bite' kiss, nibbling her skin a little this time, deliberately tickling her. Nothing they were doing bore much resemblance to training anymore, but she was giggling uncontrollably and he decided that was more important.

"You don't have thrall!"

"Yes, I do. Comes with the package. Nowhere near the power of Dracula's, but we all have a little bit of it."

She scooted out from under him and sat up. "Wait, really? All vampires?"

He nodded. "Why do you think it's so hard for people to fight back once they're being fed on?"

"Hm." She frowned. "Because they're scared and vampires are really strong? Seriously, you need thrall on top of that?"

"Not always, but sometimes it helps." He sat next to her and folded an arm around her shoulders, looking at the scar on her neck. "Well, you've been bitten. You should know how it feels."

"Oh, are we having this conversation now?" She glanced up at him, her green eyes big and guileless.

"What conversation?"

"The one about how you bit me and I liked it."

He winced. Maybe he should have seen this coming, but he had a feeling that she had been waiting for it to come up 'naturally'- which meant she had steered him into a conversation about vampirism. Damn her craftiness. "I was actually hoping not to have that conversation...ever..."

"Then you picked the wrong girl. I do conversations." She folded her legs underneath her and looked him in the eyes. He liked the way she always did that. When she wanted to talk, she wanted to do it openly. "Look, Angel, I'm only saying this because I don't want you being wigged by the idea that you've tasted my blood. And enjoyed it. Presumably." She arched an interrogative eyebrow. "You did enjoy it, right?"

What a question. He couldn't even think of a good evasion, except that 'enjoy' wasn't exactly the right word. "There's no safe answer to that," he told her.

"Um, I beg to differ? Let me make it easier for you: if you don't tell me my blood is the best you've ever had, I'm going to be jealous and whiny and basically turn into a complete harpy. Does that delineate your choices a little?"

"Maybe...hey, did you know that harpies are real?"

"Don't change the subject!"

"Fine." He held up his hands in defeat. "If you really want to hear about this. Don't say I didn't warn you."

She smiled disarmingly and lay down on her stomach with her arms crossed in front of her. "Oh good," she said. "Story time."

He sighed and took up a meditative pose on the floor in front of her, partially out of reflex and
partially because it was the easiest way to stay comfortable. "You've probably noticed that vampires tend to go for attractive people," he began. "Not just to sire but to feed on. It's not necessarily a sexual attraction, though there's that too. There are a lot of qualities that could make someone a target. Youth, courage, intelligence, popularity...anything that a real person, with a soul and a conscience, might admire. Vampires can't admire humans, though, not in the way that you would understand it, so all of those feelings get channeled into something else."

"Bloodlust," stated Buffy.

"Yes. And it has a lot to do with what kind of person the vampire would have been drawn to as a human. Daemonis was probably a lecher in his day. Now he sees a pretty woman and he wants to drink her. An old female vampire might see a brawl in a tavern and pick out the best fighter. Everyone's got their preferences. Spike was an aesthete when he was human. Afterward he'd choose his victims based on the strength of their personality. Drusilla was...she was so innocent. She's killed a lot of children." Angel didn't try looking into Buffy's eyes at that point. He didn't think he could handle it, not until he had gotten through the worst of the explanation. "Animal blood all tastes the same. Human blood always tastes different. And you can tell, by the way someone looks, or acts, or smells, whether you want them. Sometimes, it's just hunger, and the only choice involved is what's easiest. Sometimes it's about sadism, or hate, and then none of that applies because it's just for the sake of causing pain." He hesitated. "Is this too much? Should I stop?"

Buffy's eyes were rounded with disbelief. "Spike was an aesthete?"

"Oh, you don't know the half of it." Angel relaxed a little. For a moment he had been afraid she was going to ask him what his own preferences used to be. She wasn't so insensitive, of course. He should have known that.

"I bet. So, I'm just gonna go ahead and block all thoughts of Spike's pre-undeath and Spike's anything else from my mind, and you carry on with how all this applies to us."

He paused again. Maybe this was the worst part. "My capacity to love throws everything out of order. I don't have that block that stops me from seeing people for their own worth. I can understand that someone's virtue or beauty is good for its own sake, and not just because it makes them taste better. But I still have the demon's instincts. The feelings I have towards someone- towards you- can come to me in both ways. The real way...and the vampire way. So, yes. Your blood is the best."

"But you still don't want to drink it, because you're afraid you'll hurt me." Her voice was serious; she wasn't teasing him now.

"That's about it."

She pushed herself up off the floor and into a sitting position again. "You know, it's pretty tough to hurt me. Even when you lost control, it was because I let you. And last time you didn't lose control anyway."

"What are you saying?" He was pretty sure he knew, but this wasn't the time to be making guesses.

"Okay, my turn. I said I liked it, didn't I? Want to hear about why?"

"That would be enlightening."

She slipped her hand lightly into his. "Angel, you're mysterious. And that's cool, but it's hard to be in love with you and still have so much I don't know about you. I'm not asking you to tell me the hard stuff. That wouldn't help anything anyway. But it's not the same the other way around, is it? You
"know me. You knew everything about me before I even knew what your name as a human was."

He blinked. "When did I tell you what my human name was?"

"Uh, never?"

"Oh." Well, he had walked right into that one. She was right, of course. When they had begun working together, taking those long patrolling walks, it had been her life that filled the conversation, not his. She had known even then what not to ask him about, but answered all of his questions easily and at length, and most importantly, she had never once assumed he wouldn't be interested. Any distance that his age and background would have caused between them was sealed up by the understanding that she wasn't constantly wondering how best to talk to a vampire. It meant a lot to him. It was just one of many things about her that was completely new to him.

She squeezed his hand reassuringly. "It's okay. Keep the mysteries. But there's kind of an imbalance here. You've been human, you know what that's like. And neither of us want me to find out what it's like to be a vampire, but I still want to understand you, like you understand me. And when you were drinking from me, I did. I knew what it meant to be what you are. Everything you just said about love and instincts, I got that. I was there with you."

"But that's not who I really am," he objected, his voice quiet and cautious. "That's the part of me I want to get rid of."

"I know," she said earnestly. "And I want you to. If we can bring human Angel out to play, I'll never look back. But right now the Angel I have is vampire Angel, and that's not all bad, is it? You're strong and you're hard to kill and you can make that one really sexy sound-"

"What sound?"

"The one that's like a growl except kind of more like a purr and sometimes you do it when I kiss you?"

He tried it. She shivered in momentary delight. "Yeah, see, humans can't make that sound. Now don't do it again or I won't be able to remember what I was saying. Wait, what was I saying? Oh, right. Vampire Angel. Can't we make the most of it?"

It took him a few tries before he could respond with a proper sentence. "It's hard to turn off the craving once it gets started, Buffy. That's why I don't drink any human blood."

"Maybe the cravings are just part of always denying it to yourself."

He considered that. He didn't want to just tell her she was wrong, because he wasn't certain that she was. Still... "It's dangerous," he said.

She smiled sweetly and poked him in the chest. "Not if I can kick your butt as soon as I think you're getting too into it."

"You sure you can? A few minutes ago I believe I won."

She gasped in mock offense. "That was before I knew you had thrall! I was unprepared. I demand a rematch."

Ever compliant- at least for this- he got to his feet and offered a hand to pull her up. They both took fighting stances, but before either of them moved to attack, Angel remembered one more thing he had to say. "It was Liam."
"That was your name?" She wrinkled her nose and tried it out. "Liam. Good name. But you're always going to be Angel to me."

"Even if I'm human?"

"Angel is Angel." She began to circle, but this time she was the one to put off the attack in order to say something. "Can you make that sound again?"

He laughed, made the sound, and reached for her. He was beginning to suspect that she didn't actually want to spar after all.

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Willow left the UC Sunnydale arts building to find Xander waiting by the door for her. "Oh hey!" she greeted him, pleased. "Is this a surprise ride home? I was just gonna take the bus, but I can easily be convinced to not have to wait the extra five minutes."

"Especially at night," he replied, sounding unusually somber. Maybe he was starting to get a little more cautious about the ways of the Hellmouth. To be honest, it made her a little nervous to have to wait in the dark, too. She only had a night class once a week, but it always got out so late.

He led her out to the parking lot, where she saw with some confusion that he wasn't in his own car. It was Giles's, and there was Giles in the driver's seat, and there was Father Tom riding shotgun.

"And a...surprise entourage?" asked Willow. "What's the sitch? This is a sitch happening here, right?"

"We're being extra paranoid tonight," said Xander as he and Willow ducked into the back seats. "Right Giles?"

Giles glanced at them in the rearview mirror as he started the car. "We saw a demon earlier. Nobody was hurt, and in fact it may not have even seen us, but I believe this is what Spike was referring to when he said that Daemonis would be gathering more followers as he himself grew weaker from the poison."

"Oh." Willow chewed her lip. "So are you going to send Angel after it?"

"It's the kind of demon that causes problems for Angel," said Xander.

"What kind is that?"

"The Broad Daylight kind. We saw it this afternoon."

Father Tom cleared his throat. "Of course, that's not to say that Angel can't hunt it by night. And if he fails, Giles and I can keep searching tomorrow."

Willow looked out the window as the car left the parking lot and headed towards home. There wasn't much to see, but there wasn't much she could say, either. Fighting the demons wasn't her job, not when the real fighters were around to do it, and she hadn't especially wanted to spend the night worrying about them. Her art class had actually been fun tonight. She had felt so normal.

"The demon itself shouldn't pose too much of a problem," Giles agreed. "What concerns me is its lack of discretion. And I've called Buffy and Angel and can't reach them."

"I think they were going out tonight," murmured Willow.
"Yes," said Giles. He sounded like he was gritting his teeth. "That's their prerogative." He twisted to look back at Willow for a second before getting his eyes back on the road. "Willow, that spell you used to reveal the Moisipi spirit in the Magic Box. Can you bring Tara over to your house to help you do it again?"

Willow tried to think about it and was distracted by wondering why he was asking. "Um," she said. "She doesn't need to come. I need a second person to help me, but now that I know how to do the spell, it can be anyone."

"So we're worried about eavesdroppers again?" asked Xander. "There's more to this particular sitch than you're letting on, isn't there?"

"We were careless to leave our homes unchecked in the first place," said Giles evasively. "We should have repeated the spell as soon as we discovered it."

Xander looked like he was about to take issue with that answer. Giles glared into the mirror as if he was ready for that. Father Tom opened his mouth to intervene if quarreling started in earnest. Willow screamed, because she was the first one to see the demon.

It seemed to come from nowhere, but that was a stupid thought. It was pitch black outside, so of course nobody saw it until it had stepped into the path of the headlights. For some reason the moment reminded Willow very much of Bigfoot- had she seen this in a movie or something? But unlike Bigfoot, the demon didn't run or melt back into the woods; it faced the car and roared with a mouth full of big sharp teeth. The horns on its head and shoulders cast hectic shadows over its body, and its eyes were glowing as if it had its own set of headlights pointed at them.

Giles showed the reflexes of a Slayer when he saw it. While Willow kept shrieking and Xander shouted "That's it! That's the one!", he hit the gas instead of the brake and slammed right into the demon, sending everyone in the car rocking as they rolled over its body. She turned in her seat to try to spot it from the rear window, but before anything showed up, Giles had made the fastest three-point turn she'd ever seen, and sped up once again to give it a second hit. This time there was a sickening crunch, and in the red glow of the taillights, Willow could see a large humanoid body bent in all the wrong directions. Giles stopped the car and threw the parking lights.

"We're, uh," panted Xander. "We're not getting out and exchanging numbers, are we?"

"It's dead," said Giles shortly. He opened the glovebox and found a flashlight there, and he and Father Tom left the car. Willow and Xander looked at each other for a moment, then they both shrugged and followed.

The flashlight's beam on the demon's broken form confirmed its death for everyone. It was lying in the middle of the road, though, and Giles ruled that they had to move it before another car came by-which thankfully hadn't happened yet. They were on a rather lonely road, and it also had the benefit of a ditch on one side. The four of them together managed to hurl the dead demon down there, and then cover it with a few leafy branches.

"Is that going to do it?" asked Father Tom uncertainly.

Giles nodded. "This type should decompose entirely within a few days. Once they're dead, they can't hold together outside of their home dimension."

Xander clapped his hands together. "So! This has been a blast, but I kind of want to get home and beg my girlfriend to make me a sandwich before we get our magic on."
Willow and Father Tom were already moving toward the car. Giles paused at the hood and put his
glasses back on, having just finished cleaning them, to inspect the slightly crumpled bumper. He
shook his head regretfully. "They're going to bleed me on this."

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Buffy knew she wasn't back up to full strength yet, but she also knew that most days, that wouldn't
have stopped her. She wouldn't have let Angel draw the fight away from her, as he had learned to do
so easily and without sparring her a glance. He had it under control; he always did. There was only
one vampire, and though it was clearly older and more experienced than most that crossed their
paths, it was no Angel. They traded blows rapidly, sometimes using headlong tackles and sometimes
elegant maneuvers, both showcasing fangs at each other but making no noise beyond the occasional
thud of impact, both trained fighters. There was nobody but Buffy to witness the battle, and no
reason that anyone else would happen to wander up to such a lonely place. It had been odd that they
had even run into a vampire here, but maybe he wasn't hunting. Maybe he had just wanted some
solitude too. In any case, he hadn't found it, and Angel was doing a perfectly serviceable job of
killing him without Buffy's assistance.

That wasn't the point. She was the Slayer, she didn't just stand there watching other people kill
vampires, no matter how competently they could do so. Truth be told, she wouldn't have wanted to
go solo on one of this level of strength just yet, but she could have certainly stepped in and thrown
him off balance a little. Instead she was just standing there, a passive female letting her man defend
her, watching.

Well, maybe she had her reasons, just this once. One of them, she wasn't afraid to admit, was that
Angel looked really, really hot during hand-to-hand combat. He was all lightning reflexes and
swirling black coat, and even the brow ridges seemed to add to his ferocity instead of detracting from
his good looks. It was hard to appreciate this view when she was engulfed in combat beside him.

Tonight there was a better reason to stick to observation, though, and she was just starting to unwrap
it. She was staying out of the fight because he wanted her to. He had a chance to protect her, and to
lighten her workload, without even putting himself in any real risk. Angel had been doing that for
years, she now knew, but mostly it had happened without her knowing about it at the time. To see
her facing one less enemy was valuable to him, and to step in now would be to take it away.

So she watched, and he won, and as he sidestepped a cloud of ashes and returned to her side in his
human face, she refrained from ironic applause or wry comments and just said, "My guardian
Angel." He smiled at her, accepting the praise as his reward, and wrapped his arms around her from
behind so that they both faced the view.

And what a view it was. The whole town and far beyond was visible below the bluff, lights
twinkling from a thousand different sources. Angel sat down, still holding onto her so that she was
pulled along into his lap, and she leaned back into his embrace. "I love this place," he said
contentedly.

If he noticed what an odd thing it was for someone to speak contentedly about a place where he had
once come to kill himself, he showed no sign of it. And Buffy loved the place too, she realized. It
had been too hard to be here without him, but now that he was back, she almost felt like there were
still miraculous snowflakes drifting down around them, assuring them that everything was going to
be okay.

They deserved that feeling, she thought. It was hard to get anything like a date lately, between her
training, Angel's patrolling, and everyone's fear that Daemonis was out for her blood. And then
when they pushed all that away to make time for themselves, date night ended up consisting of a visit
to her mother's grave, a coffee shop that got their orders mixed up, and now some unscheduled slayage on the bluff. Why it still felt like everything was going to be okay, she didn't know, except that it had something to do with Angel.

They kissed for a while, the kind of insatiable, prolonged kissing that they had so often engaged in when she was a teenager trying out her first steady relationship and he was a vampire reacquainting himself with human emotion. Then she rested back against him for a while, and his cool hand slipped between her jacket and shirt to rest on her heart, and then they kissed some more.

At length Angel removed his hand, now as warm as hers, from her chest and reached into his pocket. "I got you your ring," he said, offering her a small jewelry box.

It was too dark for her to see so much as the color of the box itself, but as soon as she opened it, it lit up from inside. A light-up box was not a difficult confection to procure, she knew, but it was dazzling in its own right, and necessary for her to see the difference that this claddagh ring had from the last one. It was gold instead of silver, and in the center of the heart was set a single, sparkling stone. "Angel," she breathed, twisting to look him in the face. "Is this a diamond?"

He nodded. "They didn't used to make them like this in my time. I'm mixing some traditions, but I didn't think you'd mind. Diamonds suit you. They're pretty in the sunlight." He put two fingers under her chin, bringing her gaze back to his eyes from where it had fallen, spellbound, back to the ring. "I had a whole speech planned for tonight, about what I could and couldn't give you, and what it meant for us to be together. But then I remembered that you already knew all of that, and...that you'll bite my head off if I talk about leaving you for your own good. So there's really only one question left. Will you marry me, Buffy?"

Buffy had the feeling that her mouth was hanging open, but couldn't collect herself enough to fix it. She was going to get *married*. She was going to marry Angel. They were going to be together forever and ever and nothing could come between them and it was really happening. Angel wasn't going to leave her again! He had given her a diamond! She needed one of those bridal magazines. Willow had to be the maid of honor, of course. Should they write their own vows or use the traditional ones?

"Uh, Buffy?" said Angel with just a trace of nervousness in his voice. "I could really use an answer here."

She threw her arms around him, the ring in its box clutched tightly in one hand, and kissed him hard before pulling back and replying, "Yes, yes, *duh*, yes! I will. I will marry you."

He didn't have to say anything to that. It was all evident in the way he kissed her back and the way his eyes stayed locked on her however she moved. As he took the ring from the box and slipped it onto the finger she had kept vacant for it, she looked up at him and asked, "Where's yours?"

It was in his pocket; he took it out and showed her before donning it. His was silver again, which she had to admit suited him better than gold, and it lacked the jewel in the heart, but they were still a match. "I didn't want to put it on until we were actually engaged," he explained.

She squeaked. "Angel, we're engaged!"

"Yes we are." He brushed her cheek with his newly ringed hand. "Want to go home and celebrate?"

Buffy reflected on the walk home that no matter how happy Angel got, she could probably always count on him for at least one dire warning per occasion. This time it was delivered reluctantly, in his kindest tone: "The world isn't going to accept this so easily."
"I know." She mused about it silently and then decided to share her conclusion. "I really don't care."

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Everyone was downstairs in the Summers house- they would probably never stop calling it that, thought Giles, even if there was never another Summers who lived there. When he had arrived with the others who had been in the car when they hit the demon, the first thing they had done, before answering questions, before comparing notes, was to cast the seeking spell. Nothing turned up, and now they were free to speak openly, but Willow was cleaning up her magic supplies and Anya was grilling Xander about the demon, and Giles ended up sitting at the dining room table with Father Tom and a pot of tea, comparing Willow's spellcasting discipline to those condoned by the Church. When the doorbell rang, Giles stood up mid-sentence and beat the others to answering it.

Buffy and Angel were both there, both wearing incongruous smiles and leaning on each other. He knew he shouldn't hold that against them. They hadn't even heard the news yet; there was no reason they shouldn't be cheerful tonight. Cheerfully romantic, God help them all. He beckoned them in and locked the door behind them.

"We got your message and figured we better head over," said Buffy as they followed him back into the dining room. "You sounded pretty Book of Revelations. Is it giant snakes? Zombie cyborgs? We need a rocket launcher?"

The others drifted over to the table, automatically taking seats as they greeted the new arrivals. Buffy and Angel both sat at the head, chairs pushed close together, still looking like nothing was going to spoil their shared good mood. A few days ago, Willow had made a comment about how the couple was 'glowing.' Giles had a feeling that that word would be coming up again today, but he had no patience for it now. He started by describing the incident with the demon. That got their attention.

"Everyone's okay?" said Buffy, looking them over. She got nods from all the participants, and looked back to Giles for further information.

He explained about seeing the same demon earlier in the day and what he thought it meant, and that he didn't expect there to more of that kind right away. He also let them know that the house had been checked for eavesdroppers, and that he wanted to repeat the process at the mansion as well as his own house.

Angel understood the implications in that. "You've got some news we need to keep secret."

"Yeah," put in Xander, "and the rest of us are waiting for it too. He's been all British headmaster about this, wouldn't tell us anything until we were properly secure. So now we're all up to speed, can we learn something?"

"I've been on the phone with the Watcher's Council all day," said Giles. "They called to inform me that they'll be casting the spell that Willow authored. With or without our consent."

Willow put a hand over her mouth, trying to muffle a whimper. Oz put an arm around her, but Giles saw his lips form a curse. Everyone else looked completely blank for a moment, and then Xander broke the silence with the desperately voiced word, "Jesus."

"Can they really do that?" implored Buffy. "Just by themselves?"

"They won't be doing it by themselves," Giles said coldly. "They've joined forces with a number of powerful witches who found the spell on the internet, and also with some of Angel's contacts. Given their skill at organizing business on this scale, it should be a matter of little difficulty for them to
establish a worldwide network that can be used to channel enough power to fuel the spell. They have the formula they need to complete it and they won't require our assistance for anything else."

Angel dropped his face into his hands for a second, then rubbed his eyes and lifted it again as Buffy ran a soothing hand down his back. They still didn't seem that upset. Not as much as he had expected, anyway.

Anyah tapped her finger on her lips thoughtfully. "Nobody respects us, do they?"

"No, they don't," Giles confirmed. "As far as the occult world is concerned, we're not even an institution, simply a few assorted individuals. Counting the Slayer among us adds some influence, but she's not known to work alongside anyone except for the Council itself. As a team we have no reputation and there's little reason for them to adhere to our wishes. I might have expected this to happen."

"When are they going to do it?" said Angel.

"I haven't the faintest idea."

Willow spoke up at last. "It'll take a lot of preparation. We've got some time."

"Sure," said Oz, "but time to what?"

"Time to pray about it," suggested Father Tom evenly. "If anyone is open to that idea."

Xander raised his hand. "I'm actually thinking of taking you up on that. After I have a chance to try my first idea, which is blind panic."

Anyah nodded. "I'm going to panic with Xander."

"Well I'm not," said Buffy indignantly. "Come on, guys, we can figure this out. So we've got a few extra moral dilemmas to deal with. It's out of our hands, so now we concentrate on what we can do. Remember Daemonis? It's still going to feel good to take him out, right?"

Angel smiled and kissed her temple. Willow gazed at them, almost jealously, before answering, "Yeah, uh." Obviously she had more to say, and just as obviously didn't want to. Everyone knew by now the easiest way to get her to talk, and they all stayed silent until the pressure wore her down. "So, I spent some time at the store today questioning Sippy" - despite Willow's best efforts, this was the only name that had stuck for the Moisipi spirit - "and it looks like Daemonis got his hands on a copy of the spell, and he's going to try to use it to write a counterspell."

This was news to Giles as much as the rest of them. "How likely is it that he'll succeed?"

Willow shrugged one shoulder, the corner of her mouth twisting disconsolately. "Not very. I don't think I could do it, not without more knowledge than I put in there."

"Daemonis already knows how to remove the soul from a vampire," said Angel suddenly. "He did it to himself, and he said he could do it for me. I thought the reason that he didn't want us casting the spell was that he didn't want to deal with the consequences of making it worldwide."

"Maybe..." Willow looked from Angel to Giles and back again. "Maybe it's not exactly a counterspell. Maybe he just wants to reverse it. Instead of putting souls into all the bodies that didn't have them...it could take the souls out of all the ones that did." 

"Apocalypse ahoy," announced Xander. "Oz owes me ten bucks."
Oz started digging in his wallet as Xander got a few dirty looks shot his way. Willow reached over the table to smack him, couldn't reach, and smacked the table in front of him instead. "It's still not that likely!" she insisted. "It's not the Apocalypse if he can't do it, and I don't think he can."

"And let's not forget the idea about killing him first," Buffy reminded everyone.

"So," ventured Oz in the following lull. "Anyone got any good news?"

The look that passed between Buffy and Angel at that point happened very quickly. She simply turned and looked up at him, as if in automatic response to Oz's words, and Angel's eyes widened in alarm. He shook his head almost imperceptibly, and both of them snapped their attention back to the discussion.

But the discussion wasn't really happening anymore, and Xander had evidently noticed Buffy's reaction along with Giles. "You got something, Buff?" he prodded. "'Cause I gotta tell you, I'm ready to get psyched about anything right now. Tell me they're putting Surge back on the shelves, and you'll infuse me with a new inner strength."

"Ah..." Buffy blushed. "It's nothing. I mean, I'll tell you about it later. Right now it's kind of off-topic."

Xander clearly hadn't seen all Giles had seen. When Angel had shook his head, telling Buffy no, she had hidden her hand beneath the table, but even as she did so Giles caught a glimpse of a sparkle on one of her fingers. He knew now what had transpired between them tonight, why they kept smiling through the grave news. Xander didn't. If he had, he never would have kept pressing Buffy on it.

"Don't hold out on us!" he pleaded comically, and the other young people were starting to echo him. Finally Buffy and Angel shared another look, and Giles could see that they were giving each other permission- and bracing themselves, as well they might.

Angel was the one to speak. "Buffy and I are getting married," he said, addressing everyone. Buffy smiled uncertainly and held out her hand, displaying the diamond ring.

Giles wondered if an announcement of engagement had ever produced such a varied reaction. Xander stood up and left the room without saying a word. Anya looked as if she were about to follow, but instead she moved to the head of the table to inspect Buffy's ring up close. Father Tom placed his chin in his hand and peered at the couple with extreme interest. Willow gushed, loudly and with little pause for breath. She exclaimed over the beauty of the ring, gave them her blessing in several different phrasings, tugged on Oz's sleeve repeatedly to solicit his agreement, and fired off a series of questions about the wedding plans that Buffy couldn't possibly have had time to think about yet.

Buffy did an admirable job of keeping up with Willow's thrilled chatter, her own enthusiasm clearly being ignited all over again. Giles could also see Buffy's immense gratitude towards her friend for filling up the silences that they were receiving from half the company. Willow was doing it consciously, he realized. She wasn't faking, but she was deliberately overdoing it to save Buffy and Angel from awkward confrontations, and they knew it. That's me, he remembered. She's protecting them from a confrontation with me.

With great difficulty he swallowed his misgivings and said, "Congratulations." It sounded bitter even in his own ears, but it was all he could do for now.
When it came to sorting out complex emotions, Angel's drug of choice was Buffy. Not only could he lose himself in her so quickly and easily that it was as if his troubles never existed, but she was an inspiring model of dealing with them herself. When she found something that made her happy, she threw herself into it. When things got bad, she let the pain in, experienced it fully, and moved on. Angel wanted to be able to do that.

He had tried last night to follow her example. He had matched each one of her smiles, and they were genuine, because he was truly happy. He had accepted a hug from Willow and tried not to show how odd it still felt to be hugged by anyone but Buffy, and he had shook hands with Oz and communicated an understanding that there were no more hard feelings between them. All of that was good. It was embracing happiness, like Buffy did. But he had also seen the back of Xander and felt the culmination of years of resentment, and he had exchanged a few private and forboding words with the only priest that he even knew by name, and he had met Giles's eyes and known that this wasn't over.

So the night after pledging his life to Buffy, he found himself out at night without her, walking and planning and hoping that there was still a chance to keep the happiness on top.

Angel entered the darkened store and saw Giles at the table, still busy, writing something by hand, his back to the door. Angel wasn't sure if he knew he was there, or how to announce his presence. Once lurking became a habit, it was hard to switch it off, and now he felt like a shadow, like he couldn't be noticed even if he tried. "The door was unlocked," he said.

Giles didn't turn. "I knew you'd be back sooner or later."

"I tried you at home first." He was glad he hadn't found him there, honestly. He hadn't wanted to knock on that door again, let alone go inside and face the immersion in Giles's personal life. "I didn't think you would still be here."

"This is where you can find me if you require it," said Giles, his hand flying over the page, focused on his work. "I've performed the ritual to disinvite you from my home."

Angel felt numb. He couldn't answer. There was no possible answer.

Giles looked over his shoulder, facing Angel for the first time. "Does that surprise you?"

Shouldn't it? Angel kept the hurt out of his voice, tried to keep the outrage from even beginning to enter him. "I knew you would be angry," he replied.

"Of course you did." Giles set down his pen and stood up. "It is an extremely predictable reaction. However, it seems my reactions, predictable or otherwise, are of little importance to your affairs. Or Buffy's."

Angel stayed where he was, his hands at his sides. The last thing he wanted was for Giles to see him
come undone. "I wanted to talk to you about it. If all this was happening two hundred years ago I
would have asked your permission before I even approached her." He didn't break eye contact. "But
I couldn't let you be the one thing stopping this."

"The one thing." Giles clenched his fists. "Because logic was obviously not going to stop it. Or
cautions. Or mercy."

"Mercy?" Angel repeated quietly. "I have never stopped looking for the right way to heal her.
Leaving her doesn't work. I know that now."

Giles turned abruptly, stalked around to the other side of the table. Angel followed, slowly enough to
leave some distance between them, until Giles faced him once more, seething silently. Angel recalled
that Giles's current appearance and habits were a deceptive contrast to his violently wild youth, when
he had wielded dark magic like a toy. It was lucky, thought Angel, that Ripper and Angelus had
never crossed paths. If they had there might not be a Giles today, just a vicious and sharp-tongued
British vampire. And the last thing the world needed was another one of those.

He attention was quickly brought back to the Giles of the real world, who asked with rising fury,
"And marrying her does? What can you possibly have to offer her?"

Angel was ready for this one. "Protection. I'm almost as strong as she is, and there aren't a lot of us
around who can say that. I can fight for her instead of being one more person she has to keep safe.
Security. She won't need a job if she doesn't want one. Comfort, how about a little bit of that in her
life for a change? Support. Understanding. Love, dammit. Are you not going to see this?"

It didn't matter anymore that Angel was losing his temper. Giles already had, and was speaking over
Angel's last few words, loudly so as to try to make himself heard. "Love isn't enough! A year ago
you knew that, I trusted you to know that, I trusted you not to put her in danger-

"-I'm not putting her in danger!-

"-to let her have some semblance of a normal-

"-she'll never have that-

"-life without a demon in her bed, waiting for its chance to come out again and destroy her-

"-do not ever suggest I would let that happen!" Angel roared. He was already leaning onto the table
and gripping it with white fingertips; both of them had already pounded on the wood a few times to
punctuate their speech, making it wobble and possibly splinter. Angel was putting a lot of effort into
restraining himself from vamping out, but it crossed his mind to wonder why he should bother.

Giles turned his back on him again and moved across the store, opening a cupboard up high and
snatching a bottle and two glasses out of it. "And should I also assume that you'll be able to stop it?"
he demanded as he slammed the glasses down on the table and splashed some whiskey into each
one.

"That you'll even know what could bring it about?"

They both knocked their drinks back in mirrored motions and brought the empty glasses down hard
on the table. "If you're trying to tell me I should go into exile rather than expose anyone to the
extremely slim if not impossible chance that I'm going to revert again, all you need to do is say so.
I've been down that road and it didn't do any good to anyone."

"Buffy set you off before."
"Noted and resolved." He threw in another couple words out of sheer spite. "And tested."

Giles reddened, definitely much more in anger than in embarrassment from the reference to Buffy and Angel having sex. "I mean to say her presence makes you volatile. There is something inexplicable about the link between you, and nobody can predict what happens when magic and love collide like this."

The sudden switch in tactics threw Angel off for a moment. Aside from the vague references to an even vaguer kind of danger (that Giles had to be drawing from his own instincts; no way had his books told him about this), it was a point-blank acknowledgment of the special quality of Buffy and Angel's love. Hearing that kind of artless and lopsided argument from a man of logic made Angel respect it more, not less.

"Would it make you feel any better," he said in a controlled voice, "to know that I'll be moving back to Los Angeles?"

Giles looked startled. "You mean to say you'll marry her and then live elsewhere? That's-"

"-Not very traditional?" Angel supplied. He almost smiled at the absurdity of it; he had known someone was going to make a comment like that sooner or later when they heard about the plan.

Giles almost smiled too; he got the point. Then his face settled back into its hard frown. "And hard on her. One might wonder, why go through it at all?"

"Because anything else is pretending. And there might come a day that we can seal the gap. All the gaps."

"Your prophecy, yes. Wesley told me about it." Giles took a deep breath. "Of course, assuming it is about you, and that's become a large assumption...there's no timeline to it. Buffy could be an old woman by then. She could be a hundred years dead!" His voice had gained a slight hiss; the anger was on its way back.

"Then I will watch her grow old," said Angel firmly, "and I will be there for her when she dies. And she'll be there to tell me when she needs me at her side." He tried not to add any implications to that-it still burned that he had needed to rely on Cordelia's vision to tell him that Buffy was in danger, rather than Giles or anyone in Sunnydale calling to tell him she was missing. He just hoped it would show them that keeping in touch was a good thing.

"Los Angeles isn't terribly far," Giles mused, giving no sign of whether he thought more distance would be better or worse. He started pouring out a second round of whiskey, precise and civilized about it this time. "But you won't be driving it every day. You really believe your agency requires your residence there?"

It was tempting to try to take that as a request for him to stay in Sunnydale, but Angel knew that wasn't what Giles was doing. "It's where I'm supposed to be," he said dejectedly, lifting his glass. "I can't get away from my destiny."

Giles paused with his own drink in his hand, nodding once in slow motion. "Yet you still think you can make a good husband for Buffy."

"No, I don't." Angel stared at the liquid in the bottom of his cup, then finished it off and set it down, meeting Giles's perplexed eyes. "A good husband would keep her away from things that would hurt her. A good husband would give her a life without constant threats." Again, he didn't say what he could have- that a good father would do the same. They both knew the reality of it. "He would
promise to grow old with her, and give her safe happy children, and time to do whatever she wanted to do. I can't promise her those things and if I keep her from her duty, it puts the world in peril. But nobody else can change that, either. Buffy doesn't have a good husband in her future." He raised his arms from his sides in a helpless shrug. "She has me."

"Yes," said Giles with resigned finality. "I suppose she does."

"So are you going to walk her down the aisle?" Angel asked wearily.

"Yes, I suppose I am."

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Oz won the first game of pool. Anya won the next two. Xander won zero, but he was the one who remained at the Bronze after everyone else decided to go home. Time kind of stopped once he was alone, and he didn't know how long he had been there, playing against himself, glaring at each ball as if he could intimidate it into the pocket, when Angel showed up. He materialized out of the shadows just as he used to when the gang was in high school, never expected, never unexpected. He was the person if-you-can-call-him-that who Xander least wanted to see, so he did his best to ignore him until it was obvious that he was standing right at the pool table waiting to be acknowledged.

"Buffy's not here," said Xander shortly, setting up his next shot.

"I know where Buffy is." Angel took a pool cue from the wall and examined it. "I came to talk to you."

"Maybe you could assume I don't want to hear it, and save your breath."

Angel shrugged, twirling the cue in his hands. "Got no breath to waste. Listen, kid, I'm going to be up front with you here. I've had you making my life more difficult since the moment Buffy met you."

"Don't be so sure of that." Angel started moving around the table as he spoke, not even facing Xander. "Now I didn't come to this town to hassle you. I came to help the Slayer, balance out my own karma a little, maybe save a life here and there. And I'm pretty sure I did, and I'm pretty sure one of those lives was yours. But for you that wasn't enough. For you it was always 'vampire.' 'Cursed.' And let's face it, 'the one Buffy chose.'"

That was enough. It had been enough as soon as Angel opened his mouth, of course, but now he was going too far. "If you think this is all about some teenage jealousy shit, then you're even more of a-

Suddenly Angel had rounded the table and was right in front of him, one end of the pool cue on the floor and one pointed slightly at Xander. "Not done yet," he warned. "Whatever your reasons, you've tried to get rid of me. You've tried to come between me and Buffy. And, you being unable to do those things, ordinarily I'd just ignore it. But you won't let up, you won't accept me here, and it's bothering my fiancee. I'm officially tired of you, Xander. I've decided there's only one way to resolve this."

That was enough. It had been enough as soon as Angel opened his mouth, of course, but now he was going too far. "If you think this is all about some teenage jealousy shit, then you're even more of a-

By the time he finished speaking he was standing close enough to use his height, looking down on Xander and holding the cue like a hunting rifle. Xander even thought he saw a flash of gold in his eyes, the demon's influence coming through for the briefest moment as a reminder that it still lived. "Are you threatening me?" asked Xander incredulously.
Angel smiled. Could have been an innocent smile. Could have been a sarcastic smile. Could have been a demon's smile, and Buffy was the only one who ever seemed to know how to tell. "I want you to be my best man," he said.

Xander was still stupefied by the implication that Angel would actually try to threaten him, and this changed the source of the feeling but did nothing to lessen it. Best man? How long was it traditional to wait after attempting to kill someone before you asked him to be a witness at your wedding? Did it change anything if you had also attempted to kill the bride-to-be? Maybe he should write to Dear Abby.

Before he could make this suggestion out loud, someone in the club screamed. Xander and Angel both whipped around to see where the sound had come from; it was near closing time and there were few people left. Xander's eyes registered the appearance of a few men who hadn't been there minutes earlier, just before he saw that the scream had come from the bartender herself, who was now being cornered behind the bar by one of the new arrivals. He was sporting a fanged grin, and as he reached for the bartender, the faces of all his companions did the morph, and as one they rushed the pool table.

Xander hit the floor, allowing one of them to trip over his own body before he jumped back up, having successfully dodged the head-on attack. He turned back to the fray in time to see Angel snap the pool cue in his hands and toss half of it his way. Xander caught it from the air, congratulating himself smugly, and let Angel deal with his three assailants while he leaped up onto the bar. He didn't even have to break too many glasses, just ran two steps forward and threw himself down behind the bar, where the mirrored wall was reflecting a scared woman being attacked by nothing. Xander crashed into the nothing feet-first, sending him down to the floor on his face and freeing the bartender, who was bleeding from the neck but quite alive. From there it was easy to stab the stunned vampire in the back with the jagged end of the broken stick, and he even had a second or two to catch his breath.

"You okay?" he asked the woman he had just saved. *Ha! I just saved a chick, thought his id. Go me!*

"Yeah," she stammered as Xander found a clean dish towel and placed it on her neck. "I, uh. I've seen this before. Never, phew, never thought it would happen to me though."

He gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Happens to the best of us. Uh, hang tight there, okay?"

The sounds of Angel's fight with the other three vampires had lessened slightly, and when Xander vaulted back over the bar he saw that it was because there was one less of them. Angel was standing on the pool table, grappling with one vampire and somehow managing to send a few kicks at the other one to keep him from joining them on the higher ground. Xander grabbed his half of the pool cue and charged the closer one.

Buffy *had* chosen Angel. And that didn't matter in the same way it used to, because Xander had Anya and wouldn't have traded if it had been freely offered to him, but at the time, yeah, it stung. Angel practically had 'bad news' written all over him, along with a few iterations of 'no future,' and maybe a big stamp of 'YES he's dangerous, dammit' right on that oversized forehead of his. But Buffy wanted him anyway, and even more than it had hurt Xander to know that he came in second to a dead guy, it had hurt to find out that there was this side to Buffy he could never have expected. He knew the drill: tall, dark, mysterious...those were qualities that attracted the girls. But Buffy wasn't shallow. She'd look for something beyond that. What was it? Years later, Xander was still no closer to understanding what drew her to Angel, and it was hard, not understanding your friends.

He got his opponent turned around and focused on him. No fancy karate moves for Xander, but he
did get in a decent slug on the vamp's jaw. Not enough to knock him down, unfortunately. He was showing his teeth and probably about to use them. Angel seemed to have just put a boot in the other one's face, for it was now a few feet away from the pool table and trying to pick itself up.

And then, why did everyone always just seem to pretend that evil Angel had never existed? They were the same person, Giles had explained it all, it wasn't just good twin switching places with evil twin. Angel himself didn't even talk about his bad side like it was dead and gone and someone else. He knew. That's what the whole atonement gig was about. Someone should just come out and ask him, "Gee, Angel, why all the atonement if it wasn't really you doing those bad things?" Then they'd get it.

Angel hopped down from the pool table in pursuit of his opponent. Xander remembered suddenly that he had a cross under his shirt, and kicked the vampire in the gut to give himself enough time to reach under his collar and yank the tool off of his neck. When the vampire lunged at him again, he hit him in the face with the cross and held it there, driving the vamp back with the pain.

There was no hope of helping the Slayer pick her boyfriends. Xander knew what he was: a Slayerette. Buffy jumped into trouble, and Xander jumped in after her to help get the trouble squared away. Lather, rinse, repeat. And it wasn't so bad, really.

The vampire was struggling to get past the cross and its power, but Xander gathered up his strength and pushed forward again, sending his opponent back one more step- right into Angel's stake. Angel and Xander stood face to face as the third party vanished from between them. Angel tossed his half of the broken pool cue back onto the green and dusted his hands together, the sounds of it seeming louder than usual in the stillness that engulfed the Bronze now that the troublemakers were gone. "So what do you say?" he asked, as if there hadn't been any interruption.

Xander eyed him, seeing the good-looking man in his twenties that had so intrigued Buffy, seeing the murderer who had terrorized her. He nodded once, slowly, keeping his eyes locked on Angel's. "For Buffy," he replied. "Not for you."

"That's all I'm asking."

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It wasn't difficult to find the place that Father Tom had specified, and it wasn't surprising that it was a church. There were plenty of churches in Sunnydale, but they always stood out to Angel, especially the Catholic ones. They were so constant, so drenched in history, and, depending on your perspective, so imposing. He sighed as he pushed the large wooden doors open and entered the building.

He was anathema here, and he could feel it. The sensation of being in a church wasn't exactly physical, like the pain of holy items, but it was very real, and actually much harder to bear than it had been before he regained his soul. It usually manifested as paranoia, the sense of being watched and hated, the dread that came with being powerless. It was subtle, but tough to ignore unless he was concentrating on something else, and sometimes he couldn't do that. It didn't help that the crosses were so large and omnipresent, either, and then there was the holy water by the doors, and the always concealed, yet still powerful Eucharistic bread and wine, the body of Christ itself. He gritted his teeth and shut it all out. He was here to see a priest, he was going to have to play on the priest’s terms.

For a moment he thought Father Tom was late. The doors had been unlocked, but the only light that he could see was coming from the offertory candles and the one by the tabernacle. Then he saw a faint line of light from behind a closed door at the back of the church, and as he approached, the door
swung open and the priest beckoned him in. Angel saw with relief that it wasn't a room with a specific sacred purpose; those were harder for him. This one was just white painted walls and some chairs. He didn't take one, and Father Tom, who had donned a cassock for the occasion, wasn't sitting either.

He looked sympathetic without being remorseful. "It's been a long time since you were in a place of worship, hasn't it?" he greeted Angel.

Angel felt the sensation of invisible eyes on him spike for an instant. He nodded. "And the last few times, it wasn't to pray."

"Was it ever?"

The question was put forth so directly that Angel started paying attention— at least enough for the church's influence to diminish. "I was raised in the tradition," he objected. "I wasn't the most devout, but..." He floundered. "There's no way for someone like me to get back in the faith's good graces anyway. Just being here is...if I pick up a Bible, it burns me. I can only imagine what happens if I swallow a communion wafer."

"You die horribly," said Father Tom. "Don't ask me how I know."

"I...definitely won't. All I'm saying is that I didn't choose to take God out of my life. It was out of my hands the moment I was turned, and getting my soul back didn't change that."

"So that girl, she became your God."

Angel smiled. Father Tom could be shrewd, and he liked that. He had known telepaths who seemed to grow lazy, relying on their ability to read thoughts and forgetting how to read faces, or body language, or the layers behind the words people chose to express themselves. But this man, faced with Angel's locked mind, was reading him anyway. "What do you expect?" he answered. "She was life and death. She showed me mercy and justice. Meaning. Sacrifice. Forgiveness. What else is religion looking for?" He glanced toward the tabernacle— the door was still open— and added casually, "She also gave up her blood for me to drink."

"And a very brave act that was," said the priest in a level tone. "In the spirit of he who did it first. Yet with all her sacrifice and forgiveness, you continue seeking something beyond what she can give you."

"Absolution," said Angel without hesitation. "I still need that. Buffy isn't a god. I've learned that much, at least. But I love her."

Father Tom nodded slowly. "Or you wouldn't be here now, I know." He stepped out of the little white room, beckoning Angel to follow him. "I don't need to tell you that your situation is unique. What that means here, though, is that there are no rules written to cover it, and I'm relying on my faith to let me know what kind of exceptions I can make for you. Some of the customary parts of the process are simply impossible in your case. Others, though..." He stopped at the end of the center aisle, and turned to Angel as he stopped behind him. "You were raised in the tradition. You'll need that now."

He started walking up the aisle, Angel close behind. The altar was dead center in front of them, the crucifix looming over it. "You're willing to do what it takes," Father Tom stated.

"Yes."

Before they reached the front of the church, Father Tom turned and guided them between the pews.
Angel winced involuntarily, seeing at last where they were going. "You know how this works?" said the priest.

"I doubt it's changed much."

They stopped in front of a matched pair of narrow, ornately carved wooden doors. Father Tom paused with his hand on one of them. "This isn't punishment, Angel," he said. "Not everyone understands that. Whatever you take from it, remember that what God asks of us, he asks it only to bring us closer to him."

"I can feel God right now," said Angel through clenched jaws, "and he doesn't want me."

"Let him decide." Father Tom disappeared behind the door.

Angel squared his shoulders and resolutely entered the other booth. He noticed as he did so that he deliberately brought Buffy to mind when he needed extra strength of will. Maybe he was still praying to her, in a way. He sat down, and drawing up memories older than the walls around him, made the sign of the cross.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been two hundred and forty-six years since my last confession..."

***

Buffy leaned forward to look Angel in the face, upside-down as his position with his head in her lap made him look. "And you told him?" she asked, still not quite believing. "Like, everything?"

"Not yet." He looked up at her, his eyes all dark and innocent. "It was getting late, so we decided to split it into two parts. I'm going back tomorrow to confess everything I committed when I did have a soul."

"Geez. Angel. That is...that is dedicated."

"What else would I be?"

She brushed her fingers through his hair and smiled down at him. Dedicated was the right word, indeed. "You just seem a little too chill for someone who basically just lived his worst nightmare."

His voice remained calm, even a little dreamy. "That wasn't my worst nightmare."

"Oh." That right there was one of those things she wasn't going to ask him about. No sane person wanted to look in on the greatest fears of someone who had spent a hundred years in Hell.

"And it wasn't all bad," Angel continued. "I got some work done. Found out where Giles keeps his secret stash. And I made sure we're getting married."

She doubled over to land an awkward kiss on his mouth. "That you did."

There was silence as she traced a path along the lines of his face with her fingertip, his eyes closed and his lips still wearing a small smile. "So," she said eventually, "should we set a date?"

"As soon as possible. I don't want to miss our chance." That was a sad way to look at it, but he was right. If they didn't get it done before he got called back to LA, it could be a long time before the opportunity opened up again.

"Good. I mean, it won't take too long to plan. We don't have to do the standard Big American
Wedding Fuss, with the embossed invitations and the predictable DJ and the frilly white dress and all...

His eyes snapped open at the last part. "You're getting a dress," he said in a tone that allowed no disagreement.

"Oh, well, it's really not a big...okay yeah I do want a dress. But I'm just saying, it's going to be small and private anyway, so we don't have to go overboard. I mean, I don't even really want to have to plan seating arrangements, and does a cake even make sense? And..."

"We're getting a cake," he cut in. "A white one with little people on the top. And everyone's going to have some. And we're doing that ridiculous tradition of freezing a piece and eating it on our first anniversary. Buffy, we only get to do this once. Tell me what you want and we'll make it happen that way."

She kissed him again. It wasn't as if she had spent every moment since her childhood planning her dream wedding, but of course she had preferences. Maybe marrying a vampire didn't have to get in the way of that. "Well, it still has to be small. Only people who know who we are. I don't want to spend the night doing the masquerade."

"What about your father?"

Even the thought of her father coming up in this context felt strange, but of course it had occurred to her too. "I think I'm just going to have to call him in a couple months and tell him I eloped. Not the ideal, but he kind of brought it on himself."

Angel frowned. "I'm not sure I like that. Am I ever going to meet him?"

Even the thought of her father coming up in this context felt strange, but of course it had occurred to her too. "I think I'm just going to have to call him in a couple months and tell him I eloped. Not the ideal, but he kind of brought it on himself."

"But he's going to be my father-in-law, isn't he?" Angel asked patiently. "I'm not your secret boyfriend anymore. I don't want to hide from everyone."

She hesitated, fighting the instinct to dish out a comeback. What the comeback could be, though, she wasn't sure. If Angel was tired of being hidden, she was just as tired of hiding him, but old habits died hard. In fact, she still wasn't quite used to this new Angel, who wasn't a secret made flesh and didn't instantly do whatever she told him to do. This was better, no doubt, but lately their relationship seemed counterintuitive at times. "Sorry I snapped at you," she said slowly. "He is, um, he is technically going to be your father-in-law. But inviting him to the wedding is...and I mean, for the stuff that really matters, it's Giles who..."

"I know." He reached behind himself to squeeze her hand. "Okay. The Mr. Summers issue can wait. We'll keep the wedding personal."

"You're being so amazing about this. Everything you've done already, I don't know how to match it."

He looked up at her with a kinked grin. "You're not supposed to match it, you're supposed to enjoy it. But you do owe me one favor."

"What's that?"

"Helping me explain to Wesley why he's not my best man."
"...Maybe you've been a little too amazing."

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"But you still get to have a honeymoon, right? You have to have a honeymoon." Willow made the statement as a personal demand. She could just picture Giles telling Buffy and Angel that it was too dangerous for them to go away together right after their wedding, and she had intentions of taking it up with him herself if that was the case. Honeymoons were important, dammit.

Fortunately, Buffy nodded in response, digging her spoon deeper into the cardboard bucket of ice cream. "Just for a few days. There's a place a couple hours down the coast where you can get a cabin on the beach. It's nice. We'll have our own little rustic-fest."

Willow was on her belly on the bed, propped up on her elbows, but she sat up to reclaim the ice cream and poke around for a chunk of fudge. "The beach is good. Aw, but you can't sunbathe together. What are you going to do all day?" She looked up to see Buffy giving her the universal look of 'duh' and replied to it with an eloquent "Oh." Then she leaned forward and put on a low conspiratorial tone.

"Okay, so now that you've got some experience in the area and he doesn't turn evil afterwards...is it good?"

Buffy smirked and lifted her eyebrows as she slid her spoon out of her mouth. "Oh yeah. Angel was a sexual deviant for a good hundred years of his life. He knows what he's doing."

That wasn't the kind of answer that Willow was quite prepared to celebrate. She tried to imagine Oz using techniques he had picked up during a century of evil, and it didn't even make enough sense for her to figure out if she would have liked it. "Doesn't that ever feel kind of...weird?"

Buffy shrugged, apparently not taking insult from the question any more than Willow had meant any. "The way I see it, the problem with most guys who have a lot of experience is that you can't really trust them to be faithful to you. And with Angel, well...virtuosity isn't going to get in the way of devotion, so, lucky me. The only annoying thing is that when he thinks about it, he goes to his guilty place and gets all distant like he doesn't want to soil the holy grounds with his presence or something. So I have to keep him distracted."

"Bet you're pretty good at that," Willow teased.

"I'm learning. Okay, so I did mine, now let's hear about the secret lives of Ozophiles."

Willow felt her cheeks blushing, but Buffy's forthrightness was contagious and she had a thing or two to brag about herself. It was like playing Anywhere But Here, except with real life instead of fantasies. "He has this sound he makes, I think it's got to be a werewolf thing because humans totally can't growl like that."

Buffy dropped her spoon into the empty container and interrupted with a miniature shriek of excitement. "Oz can growl too? Oh my God, you're kidding! Does it sound kind of like- grrr, rrrrr...okay I can't do it but-"

"Yeah I can't do it either, but it's kind of like, mrrrrf."

"I totally know what you mean!"

A few mimicked growls later, there was a knock on the bedroom door and both of them stiffened in alarm, an impulse they had yet to unlearn from the days when parents might be checking up on them. Willow thought about her mother catching her and her best friend in the act of attempting the sexy
growl that vampires and werewolves made in bed, and giggled. Buffy followed suit as the knock was followed by Anya's voice.

"Willow? Buffy?" She sounded tentative, the way she acted when she really did want to fit in with the born-and-raised humans. "Can I come into this room and gossip about having sex with our boyfriends? I brought my own ice cream. I promise I won't suggest any good ways to exact retribution."

Willow met Buffy's eyes with a slight grin. "If we open that door," she said under her breath, "we're going to learn things about Xander we never wanted to know."

Buffy swung her legs off the bed and stood up. "Things I never wanted to know, anyway," she corrected her, and reached for the doorknob.

Anya's admittance to the bedroom coincided with a pillow bouncing off of Buffy's head. The ex-demon looked at both of them with concern, holding up her ice cream like a talisman. "Are pillows part of this?" she asked. "I can go get one..."

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The wolf set his nose to the ground and regained the trail he was following. It wasn't the trail of edible prey, but he wasn't hungry, so that didn't matter. What mattered was that he knew he was tracking an enemy, but something kept reminding him that when he found it, he still wasn't supposed to tear it apart. He had no memory of anything that could convince him of this, just a strong feeling that it was true, and it left him annoyed and impatient.

There were animals in these woods, quick rabbits and agile squirrels, and even without the hunger to accompany it, there was still an urge to abandon his current quest in favor of one that would leave his predatory instincts satisfied. He knew there was a time that there wouldn't have even been a question about it, but the past had little meaning to him. He only knew that he was becoming progressively more conscious of shapeless scentless things like duty and friendship and possibility, and he wasn't at all sure that it had come to him out of his own choice.

The scent of his quarry grew stronger, and he instinctively drew back, knowing that getting any closer would put him in danger of being seen. He remembered that he wasn't supposed to be seen. Why did he care? Who was controlling him? It didn't matter now. There were too many to fight anyway.

He was near a lake. He didn't know the place by a name but by the way it felt to his senses, the way he felt when he knew he couldn't get lost. That wasn't enough right now, though; he had to be able to find his way back here later, when he was...different, so that he could show...someone. Even if he didn't know why. He trotted down to the water and found there a flat wooden path that reached right into the lake and let him stand over it. Humans had built it, and some human part of him was telling him that it was a dock and those pale bobbing things beneath it were little boats, but he didn't like the feeling of exposure it gave him and he returned to the water's edge. He let his paws be dampened in it and lapped some of it up. A frog swam under his nose, and he snapped at it and leaped forward, making a loud splash.

The night had been fairly still before being broken by that sound, and the wolf was immediately aware that it had drawn the attention of his enemies. At least one had left its cover and was moving closer to him. It wasn't quick enough to be a threat, but he still had to leave the lake, and he whirled and ran. Running felt good; he kept it up for much longer than he needed to, though he knew where he was headed and didn't stray from his path, even when it brought him out of the cover of the trees. At last he stepped reluctantly into the territory of humans, a sandy patch of land with metal and
plastic constructs at every corner. There was even a solitary human there, one who sparked recognition in the wolf instead of a desire to attack.

"Oz," said the human. "Change back."

The wolf didn't move. It bothered him that he could understand the words, and that he felt compelled to obey. He lifted his lips over his teeth, not in a snarl, but a slight warning.

"Come on, buddy," the human persisted. His voice was cautious but calm. "Don't get wild thing on me now."

Oz stumbled a little as he shifted into his human form. This one seemed to have taken more out of him than it usually did. All that compromise between his two natures was a burden.

Xander breathed a sigh of relief, subtle but not lost on Oz, and tossed him a backpack. "Find anything?"

"Yeah." Oz opened the bag and found a pair of his own jeans, a shirt, boxers, and shoes underneath the rest. He got dressed as he kept talking. "They've got a base at the lake. That one on the east end of town, I think it's called Silver Lake. At least twenty vamps nearby that I could smell. There must be some kind of shelter nearby." With the rest of the clothes on his body, he dug through the bag to find some socks, but Xander had apparently forgotten that detail. Oz didn't mention it, just slipped the shoes onto his bare feet. He was still a little wet from the lake anyway.

"Nice job." Xander started walking and Oz followed, glad to be leaving the playground. As a meeting place it was the best local compromise between safe and secluded, but it was creepy at night, even without the wolf's wariness toward signs of human life. The swings all rocked in the breeze like they had ghosts astride them, and Oz could still scent the children who had played there all day. He hoped they had left the place without incident and gone back to their boring, secure houses, and that they didn't know yet that vampires were real.

"You look tired," remarked Xander. "How did it feel to be free?"

Oz considered the question as they hit the sidewalk. "Free," he said, and left it at that. It wasn't that he wanted to hide anything from Xander, there just wasn't much about the experience that he could explain to someone who hadn't lived it. "Everyone else still out?"

"Just Giles and Angel, over by Daemonis's flophouse on Walnut Street. Though I wouldn't be surprised if they stumbled on a few more lairs they had to map out before they came back to meet us."

"Like, overworking as a way to relieve stress?" Oz shook his head. "I never understood that."

Xander chuckled. "Me either, but it kind of gives me a happy to think about Angel spending all night teetering on the brink of the famed Wrath of Giles."

Oz eyed him curiously through the half-light of the street lamps. "How 'bout the Wrath of Xander? Alive and well?"

"Any way to see me in a tux." If Xander had more to say about his grudging acceptance of Buffy and Angel's engagement, and Oz was sure he did, he kept it well concealed. "Not sure if she knows how wedding parties work, though. She probably thinks she's automatically the maid of honor so she can be opposite me. Of course, that slot's your girl, so you and Anya are gonna have to commiserate."
"You didn't hear?" Oz inquired. "Anya's a bridesmaid. I'm a groomsman. Everyone who's invited has a part."

"Oh." Xander scratched his head. "I feel less special now. On the bright side, now we're in this together and you can help me with the best man duties. I gotta confess I'm not really keen on making a speech."

"Nobody's keen on you making a speech, man. Let's keep it simple." Oz squinted into the night air and spotted the house up ahead. He wanted in. He was as tired as he looked, and he still had to sketch out some kind of map while his memories of the night still made sense.

***

Someone had known they were coming. Daemonis's suburban refuge was without any kind of guard, and they hadn't run into any vampires at all on the way there, either. Giles mentioned this to Angel as they approached the front door, and Angel agreed but seemed unconcerned. "They were here recently," he said. "If they come back, it means they're short on housing. If they don't, it narrows down the search."

He knocked, which startled Giles, but on second thought he couldn't see any reason not to do so. There probably wasn't anyone inside anyway, and they were prepared for it if there was. Angel had his spring-loaded stake sheaths under his sleeves, and Giles was wearing his best sword- not something he usually took with him anywhere, but they weren't expecting to see anyone who would require an explanation, and it felt better to be armed.

When there came no answer, Angel kicked the door down, not just open but right off its hinges. Giles gave the indoors a quick look, but his eyes were drawn back down to the door. "Do you always do that without checking if it's unlocked first?"

Angel blinked and bent down to grasp the knob. "This one was locked," he said sheepishly as he straightened. Giles sighed and walked inside with him.

As soon as they had entered the first room, a voice rang out from the one behind it. "Don't shoot! Or stab, or bite, or anything! I surrender!"

"Show yourself," called Angel, his stern voice offset with an amused smile that he hid when the demon came out with his hands up. He was short and blue-skinned, dressed in shabby sportswear and not a threatening sight, but Giles identified his type immediately and knew this wasn't going to end with all three of them unharmed.

"Alright," started the demon. He lowered his hands, then seemed to realize that nobody had allowed that yet and put them back up, then realized that nobody had told him to keep them up, either, and lowered them again, albeit hesitantly. "I got a message for you. And this isn't any 'kill the messenger' thing, right? Just gonna say my piece and go, right?"

"We'll see," said Angel in that same cocky 'bad cop' voice. "After we hear the message."

Giles, who hadn't signed up to be the good cop, gave Angel a long look. He had no doubt that either one of them could have handled this alone, but since they were together they had to work that way. Did Buffy ever have this problem when she worked with her lover? Giles couldn't imagine her allowing herself to be reduced to a sidekick like this.

Angel noticed Giles's silent rebuke and cast him a glance that might have been apologetic. The demon didn't seem to sense anything wrong between the two of them, though he did address Angel
directly, ignoring Giles. "Frater Daemonis says the offer still stands," he said. "Says you'll know what he means. You can, uh, be free or whatever."

This changed things for Giles; he no longer wanted a part in the discussion, though he wanted very much to hear what was going to happen next. Angel raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms before answering. "Or what?"

"Huh? Or what what?"

"What's he going to do if I say no? I do know what he means, but there's got to be some kind of threat attached to this if he expects me to listen."

The demon looked perturbed, making Giles wonder if that question wasn't part of what he had been told to expect. It seemed unlikely. They were dealing with a trickster of some kind, and even his apparent emotional reactions couldn't be trusted. "He, uh...if you say no, he's gonna kill you."

"That's it?" Angel probed.

"Yeah, he's gonna kill you."

"But he isn't going to take my soul without my permission? That's awfully polite of him."

"Well," muttered the demon, "he respects you, okay?"

"Or he just can't do it without my cooperation."

"Yes he can. He can do it to anyone. It's just, uh..."

"Spit it out," said Angel. "I'm already bored."

The demon threw his hands in the air. "It takes some travel, okay? He's not in any condition to travel right now, much less take you with him."

Angel nodded with a satisfied smirk. "Now we're getting somewhere. Tell me where he's hiding and we can get even further."

"Nuh uh. I carried the message, now I'm gonna carry your answer back to him. That was the deal."

Giles spoke up quietly. "We didn't agree to any deal. And it seems that if you don't return to him with an answer, he'll find it very plain that the answer was no."

The demon let out a long, resigned breath. He left a short silence, full of resentment, and then finished it by turning to Giles and shooting at him.

This was where a Watcher's encyclopedic knowledge of demons came in handy. This variety's weapon was a limited supply of sharp bony projectiles that came out of its wrists, and Giles had been holding himself ready for such an attack as soon as the conversation began. He dodged the bones while at the same time holding his sword to block his face and heart, and that plus a little luck was enough to leave him unscathed.

His clean escape clearly astounded the demon, who had but a second to gape at him before he was forced to contend with an attack himself. Angel needed only to take two steps forward, grab the demon's head firmly in both hands, and twist. There was a loud, nauseating crunch, and then the little blue demon was in a heap on the floor. Giles remembered the unnatural angle of Jenny's neck when he had found her in his bed, and shut his eyes to quell his sudden desire to vomit.
"Sorry," said Angel, master of the unintentionally ironic apology. "I didn't know he could do that, or I would have killed him sooner. You alright?"

"Fine. Let's go."

***

Angel watched Buffy dress, noting each article of clothing she chose and how it served the dual purpose of free movement and the appearance of a normal girl. Her battle outfits differed only subtly from the ones she wore in the daytime, but he could always tell. She piled her hair on top of her head, fastened it in place with a pair of carved sticks, and thumbed through her jewelry for a cross. When she turned to him he recognized the one she had chosen as his first gift to her, and smiled as she put it on. "Ready to go?" she asked.

They were quiet for the first part of the walk, but Buffy was practically crackling with energy. It was her first night back on patrol, and of course it was only occurring now that Sunnydale's entire population of vampires had the fear of Daemonis struck into them; by now they'd have orders to bring him Buffy soon or face the consequences. Angel suspected that if they saw any vampires at all, they'd be smart ones, with a strategy. He didn't know if that scared Buffy, but it scared him. Not that either of them were going to talk about fear.

When they reached the first cemetery she startled him by dashing forward and turning a cartwheel, then wiping the dew off of her hands and falling back into step with him. He chuckled quietly and landed an affectionate touch on her back. He liked seeing her employ her own ways of releasing tension.

"I can't believe the plan is finally coming together," was the first thing she said. "It's really going to happen."

He made a sound of agreement. "It's a good thing you put Willow in charge of the cake, I don't think anyone else would have the tenacity to get one on such short notice. Even for the reservations on the cabin we were cutting it a little close..." He trailed off as he saw the amused expression on Buffy's face. "What?"

"Major fan of Willow's cake-obtaining skills right here, but I was talking about the attack on Daemonis."

"Oh." He stalled by scanning the area for signs of enemies. It wasn't his fault if he was preoccupied with wedding preparations. Modern American economics made them more complicated than he had expected.

"Well, of course, I was thinking about how we'll have him out of the way and then we'll celebrate. Logical progression."

"Angel, there has never in the history of weddingdom been a woman who complained that her fiance was putting too much thought into it. That was a slip you don't have to cover up." She tensed suddenly and pointed up ahead. "Ooh! There's something!"

It was a single vampire, and not one with a strategy, unless his strategy was to let Buffy make short work of him. Angel didn't have to lift a finger, or even really have a chance to help, she was so quick. In minutes she had dished out a dozen solid blows and just as many quips, and Angel felt an unexpectedly enormous wave of relief rush through him as she administered the stake. She was back on her game. She could take care of herself without him here. At the same time, it highlighted the unpleasant reality of his situation, that her recovery meant one less excuse for him to stay. He gazed at her with longing, some part of his mind telling him that he should pin her against a tree and take
her, now, because every moment they weren't touching was wasted time, but he and Buffy were nothing if not dutiful and right now they were at work.

"The thing is," said Buffy, checking herself for ashes, "Oz might have found us their base of operations, but we don't know for sure if Daemonis is parked there. And Sippy only tells us about what happens in that one house where you saw him, and apparently they've abandoned it already. What happens if we make our move and he just slips through our fingers anyway?"

"Well," said Angel slowly as they resumed their circuit of the cemetery, "I don't want to underestimate him, but it seems like the most important thing is to take all the minions out. He's already weak and he's just going to get weaker. He won't be capable of much on his own."

"Including magic?" Buffy frowned. "I know Willow said he's probably chasing a lost cause with the ensoulment reversal spell, but thinking about it happening makes my stomach do the tango."

"Especially magic," he assured her. "Think about how many helpers the Watcher's Council had to enlist before they could get started on the original one. It's not going to be a one-man job." Angel himself wasn't worried that it would happen, but problems always arose where they were least expected, and he wanted to have something to back up his words for Buffy's sake, too. "There's some information on it at the Magic Box. We're not that far- do you still have the key?"

She pulled her keyring out of her pocket and jingled it. "I should just make you a copy," she said, but he shook his head.

"Giles didn't offer me one. Still got some issues there. I'll leave well enough alone."

She didn't look happy about that, but she had apparently chosen the path of neutrality when it came to him and Giles, so she left the topic alone as they walked to the store. It was odd being there without Giles, but Buffy seemed perfectly comfortable, even raiding the drawer where they kept some candy for customers with children. Angel had spent more time there than she had lately, but he supposed that her bond with Giles made a difference in how much it felt like home.

Angel felt guilty just opening up an accordion folder, but he knew these files belonged to all of them. "Aha," he said as he laid it out in front of her. "Willow found this. 'Without the joint power of many savants, such a spell requires a sacrifice which few can conceive. The body must die while the mind still comprehends, but in the end there is nothing left of the one who makes the sacrifice, for he belongs to the one who accepts it.'"

"Who's the one who accepts it?" she said around the butterscotch in her mouth.

He tapped the tabletop pensively. "Probably depends on your intentions. If it were our side, bringing all the souls back, I'd say it's the Powers That Be. If Daemonis cast it to remove all souls, though, it would be whatever evil counterpart he can contact. But all I'm seeing here is that the price is death, and he's not going to give up his life for this. Believe me, he wouldn't. There's no such thing as giving yourself up for the greater evil, even if some greater power actually wanted a sacrifice that was already undead."

She reread the passage a few times, looking grave, then asked, "Is there anyone who would give up their life for this?"

He sighed. Believing that this wasn't going to happen didn't make it a pleasant subject of conversation. "Me. Maybe. If he somehow managed to cast his spell, and if for some reason it was only humans who were affected and I was the last one left who had a soul, then I would try it. But I can't see any way it's possible. Can you?"
She shook her head, hesitantly at first and then more firmly. "No. You're right. All he's doing is keeping himself busy with a fool's errand, and that's more win for us. Okay, I do feel better about this. Though I still wish we could see what he's up to right now." She leaned her elbows on the table and let her gaze wander, stopping near the ceiling. "Awwww," she said.

Angel looked blankly at her, then followed her line of vision. The Moisipi spirit was hovering mindlessly, as was its wont. Giles or Anya had apparently only told it not to appear during store hours, though he had no idea why it would choose to show up on its own. Buffy smiled and reached up to it, making little cooing sounds. Angel wondered if he should get her a cat. She might get lonely in the mansion by herself.

"Wish we could just send it over to the new lair while we're here," said Buffy. "Seems a bit obnoxious that it obeys almost everyone except the fighters. Wounds my dignity." She reached out again, but the spirit wouldn't approach her hand. She stuck her lip out at it. "Maybe there's a way to get around that. Where's the manual?"

It seemed to Angel that this was something that could wait until the next day, but he had nowhere to be and it was nice to get off of the apocalyptic talk. He scanned the bookshelf and pulled out a heavy volume with *Demons and Spirits K-N* on the spine, setting it down in front of her with a thump. She gave it a doleful look—Buffy never did like researching, however much she wanted to know its results—but cracked it open and started flipping through the M section.

Angel selected another book for himself, though he knew most of them that mentioned Moisipis at all were just going to have the same few lines of information. His mind soon started wandering to wedding plans again. This was getting ridiculous. If Cordelia ever found out that he was spending this much brain power on weighing the pros and cons of buying a new tuxedo, she'd never let him hear the end of it.

"Moggr, M'Ohsú, Mohra...Moisipi!" Buffy placed a triumphant finger on the page she had just reached, then flipped back one. "Hey, Mohra. Isn't that the one that attacked you that time in LA? Sure looks like it."

His whole body tensed and he resisted the impulse to snatch the book away from her. "Yes," he said in the most emotionless tone he could summon.

"Hm. 'Veins run with the blood of eternity.' Wonder what that means."

"Regenerative properties." He wasn't going to lie to Buffy, not this time. If she asked, well, that was it. Of course, she wasn't going to ask a question like 'Did you become human and then turn back the clock so you could keep fighting instead of being with me,' so that left a lot of wiggle room. Tough choices.

"Oh, now that's downright handy. Wouldn't mind a few regenerative-blood-flowing veins myself. Just think, you make a slip, you lose an arm, and then before you even have time to miss it, your arm's growing back, and I'm sure it would seem pretty gross the first time, but I'd pony up for that, and there's something you're not telling me, isn't there?"

He blinked. "Yes."

Her voice lost its playfulness, and she sized him up like dinner, which was a terrible analogy because humans didn't eat vampires and it put bad thoughts in his head. "Secrets again," she said. "Is it about me or about something you did in the past that makes you feel shitty these days?"

"You- well, a little of both." His eyes ventured up from the table enough to see into hers. "It's
"I know that." Irritation played on her face. "That's why I didn't ask. So you think you're ever going to tell me this one? Someday?"

Off the hook. He was awash in mixed shame and gratitude. "Yes. Someday." He paused, then added meekly, "Is that okay?"

"God, Angel. C'mere." Even as she said it, she was coming to him, moving around the table to straddle him on his chair, her face just centimeters from his. "Yes, that's okay. And forget this Moisipi stuff, it can wait 'til tomorrow." Her mouth found his, and his arms tightened around her, and her cross fell into his collar and burned him but he didn't care.

Her hands were making their way up his back underneath his shirt when she suddenly jerked back and looked around herself. "Whoa, hey. We're, ah, we're still in the magic shop, aren't we? I think there's a line somewhere that I'm about to stumble over. On the other side of it is the land of Never Look Giles in the Eye Again."

"A forbidding land," he muttered as he set her on her feet and straightened his clothes. "Fraught with dangers. And you know that spirit would be watching."

Buffy's eyes widened. "Sippy," she said to the floating feline, "if you ever obey a single command from me, let this be the one. Please don't report this." She grabbed Angel's hand and led him to the door. "'Kay. Workday's over."

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Buffy had been feeling extraordinarily fond of everyone. The hardest parts of introducing them all to the idea of her being married to Angel were done with, and they were getting serious about a plan to bring the fight to Daemones, and if anyone wasn't getting along, they were at least hiding it well. She remembered how many times in the past she had come through an especially frightening battle and felt her gratitude for being alive express itself in an outpouring of love for her friends and family. As her return to full strength finally approached, she supposed she was feeling a magnified, slower version of that gratitude to match the extended recovery time.

In any case, lately she always welcomed the sound of someone opening the door downstairs. In the mansion, it meant Angel, and here in her old home, it meant one of many people who had access without knocking, and they were coming home safe from whatever they had been doing. Tonight, though, when they heard someone at the door for the third time, everyone looked at each other with confusion.

"Father Tom said he was taking the night off," said Giles, and Oz added, "It's one in the morning." Nobody got up.

The door burst open anyway. We have to start locking it behind us, thought Buffy inanely. As if that would have stopped Spike when he wanted to get in. Time for a little disinvitation ritual, maybe.

Spike had blind fury painted all over his face- and something underlying it that looked like fear. His question came in a shout that could have woken the neighbors, his accent buried in the unrestrained force of it: "What did you DO to me?"

He was looking at Buffy, at Angel, at Giles, at Willow, but not really at any of them because whatever was wrong, he didn't seem to know who he was really blaming except that it had to be one of them. It took Buffy a second to figure out whether he was right or not; the shock of seeing him in
such a panic overshadowed her ability to reason out what had happened to him. Physically, he looked fine. There was only one thing it could be.

She asked anyway. Someone had to. "What's wrong, Spike?"

"That's what I want to know!" His voice barely even decreased in volume. He pointed to his head—not the back, where his chip was placed, but at his temple, his brain. "What's going on here? Why does it all seem so sodding different? Why do I care?"

Everyone understood now, Buffy saw as she looked around at them. She slid her hand into Angel's, who was sitting next to her on the couch, and he squeezed it but then let go and stood up. "Because your eyes are opened," he said slowly. "Because it is different. You have a choice now."

"Go back to the hell you came from," Spike spat back. "I've had enough of guidance from you. I'm here to find out which one of you decided to play this trick and what you thought you were thinking. I can't hurt you but it's not just me this time. Is it? You did this to every sodding one of us, didn't you?"

There was a brief but cavernous silence, and then Giles began, "It wasn't anyone here-"

But Willow spoke at the same time, and though she was much more quiet than Giles, she was the one who drew Spike's attention and halted Giles's explanation. "I'm sorry," she said.

Spike's face turned vampiric for the first time since he had entered. "Sorry. For. What?"

"This isn't your fault," Xander told Willow angrily, but she raised her hand in a call for peace as Spike gave Xander instructions on how to shut his bloody mouth. Buffy had a few things she wanted to say herself, but it looked like they were going to have to take turns this time.

"I know it's not my fault," said Willow. "But I'm sorry anyway. All of us got caught up in something we didn't really understand, and now you're caught up in it too, and even though I pretty much hate you it sucks and I'm sorry." She lifted her eyes from her hands, folded demurely in her lap, and gazed up at Spike's disfigured features without fear. "You have a soul now. Like Angel. Like all of us. Learn to live with it. That's what we have to do."

Spike lost his game face. He turned away from all of them and put his arms and forehead to the wall, saying nothing. Some part of him, Buffy mused, must have already known that the change he felt within himself was a soul, but there was a difference between feeling it and hearing it confirmed. She herself was still struggling with the unfamiliar sensation of feeling sorry for Spike. She stood up and stepped forward, but didn't come too close to him and didn't place herself next to Angel, either. This time she was speaking independently.

"We don't have to hate each other anymore," she said. "There are a lot of ways you can help us, and we can, well, tolerate you. It hurts, but it's freedom. Angel knows what you're going through, and-"

He rounded on her, fire burning in his pale blue eyes, daring her to continue. "Bugger that. If I never see another one of your faces it'll be the greatest respite that I can even hope for now that you've pissed all over the natural order and left me as a bloody obscenity. If you try to find me I swear to all that's unholy I will find a way to kill again." He stormed outside, slamming the door behind him.

"Hostile 17 becomes Repentance Candidate Number One," said Xander into the following reverberations. "Not feeling like his example bodes well for the rest of them."

Angel stared at the door for a moment, then turned back to the room. "He still has a chance," he said. Was that hope or regret in his voice? "He could have a change of heart. Maybe after a little time..."
"The least of our problems," Giles cut in curtly. "If it happened to him it happened to all of them, and
the rest can still kill. Daemonis will be furious, and his minions all the more dangerous for it. We
must eliminate him at the earliest opportunity."

"Death to the vampires, newfound souls and all," sighed Buffy. "This is the world we live in now."
"This is the place."

Oz gestured around himself, at the lake, the dark woods around it, the complete tranquility that the naked eye could see. Angel could sense more than tranquility, though, and it was clear that Oz could too. The scent of vampires on the air was just as heavy as he had said it would be. They had already made a full circuit around the lake and found no shelter, so Angel guessed that the lair was underground and the entrance was concealed somehow. It was fortunate that they had brought the full crew, even though Angel was the only one who was going to actually break and enter.

Willow stepped forward with a little sprig of something in her hand, and when Angel gave her the nod, she rubbed it to powder in her hands like a chef with fresh spices and spoke a few Sumerian words. In a moment they could all see a few veins of light in the air, all of them flowing in one direction.

The group followed the glowing lines to a spot hidden underneath the dock, up in the crevice where the wooden planks met the steep angle of the bank. The directional lights disappeared as soon as they got there, but the beam of a flashlight showed that there was indeed a large trapdoor down there, though it was shielded by some brush as well as the dock, and probably couldn't be found by anyone who wasn't looking for it. Angel thanked Willow and let her bask in everyone's praise for a moment, and then said, "Well, here goes."

"You're really sure about this?" asked Buffy, as he'd known she would. He couldn't blame her: he was essentially walking into the lion's den, and he couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't be seen, or that he could fight his way out if needed. But with all of Daemonis's troops so freshly affected by the ensoulment spell, they'd be confused and vulnerable if they were even down there, and Angel had convinced everyone that this was the safest time for him to visit. And he did need to visit. Aside from the necessity of knowing exactly where Daemonis was, Giles had discovered that the Moisipi spirit couldn't be adjusted to spy on a new location unless someone spoke the redirection spell from the place itself.

"I can do it, Buffy. Don't worry."

"And you're not going to scuffle?" she persisted. Her first suggestion, of course, had been that she accompany him, but that would have made it all the more difficult to stay hidden. He also didn't want to Daemonis's cure to get that close to him. Giles had thought of that too, and subsequently convinced Buffy to stay out of the lair for everyone's sake, for which Angel was grateful.

He shook his head, smiling. "In and out, I promise. No bravado." He kissed her forehead and raised his voice to address everyone. "I need Buffy and Willow guarding the entrance here," he said. If there was going to be any commotion, it would probably happen there, and between the two of them they could handle most types of surprises. "Everyone else is on lookout duty. Spread out a little, but keep within shouting distance of each other." This time he didn't bother to check his commanding tone. Tonight at least, he was the one in charge. He knelt down on the dock and studied the door,
then heard Buffy smother a laugh and looked back up at her. "What?"

"You're trying to figure out how to get in there without getting your feet wet, aren't you?"
Her amusement spread to the other girls, though they tried to hide it too. Angel scowled. "It's going
to ruin my shoes."

There really wasn't another way, though. The water came right up to the bottom of the door, and he
couldn't get down to it without sliding down the muddy bank. He sighed and took his shoes off and
hung them over his shoulder. The girls laughed again, but he reasoned that wet shoes were squeaky
and loud, so this was really a safety precaution. No help for the mud on his clothes, but at least he got
to the hatch easily enough and opened it up to find a long staircase.

"Good luck," called Father Tom as Angel put his shoes back on over his wet feet and started down
the steps.

"You too," he replied, hoping none of them would need any luck.

The stairs went on downwards for far too long. What had this place been originally? Maybe it was
one of the few hidden constructions that was actually built by vampires, under the woods for ages
and still unknown to the humans of Sunnydale. Halfway down the stairs, the darkness became a
pitch-black that even his eyes couldn't fully adjust to, but as he neared the bottom he saw a faint light
coming from the adjacent halls and rooms. Electric light. How they'd managed that one, he might
never know.

He maintained complete silence now that he was actually inside the lair, and held still to listen
carefully for any kind of motion. There was none, which didn't necessarily mean that there weren't
residents hiding out at some distance from him, but it did mean that there wasn't a crowd. He relaxed
a little, feeling more confident about his odds of getting out without fighting once the time came. For
now, though, he had some serious snooping to do.

There were many doors and passageways that he bypassed without checking, just because he could
tell that nobody was in there and that wasn't the kind of information he needed. He gave a few of the
larger rooms a cursory glance, though, and found some of them lavishly decorated while some had
little more than a cot. It brought up memories that made him feel both amused and grim- the pecking
order always mattered so much in a nest this size.

He chose one of the rooms randomly to cast the spell. It was simple, composed almost entirely of
reading out loud from a few pages, but time consuming. Though he kept his ears open the entire
time, it was still unnerving to be standing there for so long, speaking to no one. At least there was no
minimum required volume, so he kept it at a near-whisper. At the end there was a little puff in the air
which quickly vanished. He didn't know if that meant it had worked, but he knew there wasn't more
he could expect. He moved on. He could already tell where he was headed, in a way, because the
tunnels were set up so that the corridors all ran parallel and appeared to join at their ends, where he
expected to find a 'throne room,' or at least something big and haughty enough for a master vampire
to call it home.

Not a single vampire showed up before he reached the oversized wooden door at the rear center of
the lair. Maybe they had killed themselves after all. Maybe they had just run away, like Spike. In any
case, there was only one who interested Angel at the moment, and despite his promise not to scuffle,
he didn't think Buffy would mind if he just staked the bastard in his bed. He checked the sheaths on
his wrists and swung the door open, revealing one old, powerful vampire sitting in a chair right in
front of him.

"Dear boy," said Darla with a coquettish smile that turned into her vampiric face even as it formed.
"How did I know I'd find you in this town again?"

Angel stood rooted to the spot, trying to make his mouth work, trying even harder to make his brain work. It was her. It looked like her and it smelled like her and it sounded like her. But her was impossible. There was no her. "You're dead," he said hoarsely.

She shrugged one diffident shoulder and melted back out of her game face. "So were you. Things change. I didn't expect it to surprise you that much, honestly. Didn't your pals back in LA tell you I dropped by? You'd think at least one of them knew how to take a message."

And they had, he remembered, only he hadn't believed them because Darla was supposed to be dead, and because... "They said you were human."

"Actually," she smirked, "funny story. I was human. Tried to get you to fix it for me. Hell, I would have settled for a nice pat on the shoulder and some encouraging words about second chances. But you were just too busy to track down. Oh, well. It all worked out in the end."

Guilt ripped through his heart. The wrong place at the wrong time once again, when maybe, just maybe he could have saved Darla. He almost whispered an apology, but he knew how that would end. He couldn't let her perceive any weakness in him now, or she would take it as a cue to finish him off, and this wasn't supposed to end down here. "When?" he murmured instead.

Her eyebrows knit together for a second in vexation. "'When'? Both of us have died and been reborn since the last time we saw each other, and you're more interested in knowing about the timing of when I was sired again?" Then she understood. "Ah. You want to know if it was before or after the white hats put all the souls back in everyone. Makes a lot of difference, doesn't it?" She paused, drawing it out, trying to bait him into asking again. When he didn't, she conceded. "Four days ago."

Four days. The spell had been five days ago, so it hadn't affected her. Somehow she had found a vampire who had only had his soul for a day, and was willing to turn someone already. It was a disgusting thought. Darla's new sire had to be one driven insane by the shock. Either that, or...

"Daemonis," growled Angel. "That's why you're here, isn't it? It was him."

"Don't be ridiculous. Drink the blood of a poisoned vampire? Doesn't that sound a little counterproductive to you?" She sighed. "I'm here to say hello, of course. And because Daemonis is actually the most sensible person I've found since everyone gained their souls and lost their minds. He knows how to deal. We make good partners."

"Maybe," said Angel. "But he's dying. And you're the only one of your kind, now. You're the only soulless vampire there is."

She narrowed her eyes and toyed with a strand of hair falling across her face, making her look both angry and flirtatious. That was Darla to the core. She never made him regret whatever he had done to upset her, but she did make him pay for it. "Not for long," she replied. "Daemonis told me the secret. I know where to go and what to do to get the soul removed from any one of our kind. Not everyone deserves it, of course, but I've picked out a few choice candidates. And I can put you on the top of the list."

He shook his head. When would she learn? "You've tried to take me back before, Darla. It didn't work then, it's not going to work now. Get out of this place and I might be able to spare you."

"My my, Angelus, you could really be putting me in danger with that suggestion if I happened to be stupid enough to trust you. But at least I'm not going to return the insult by telling you to trust me."
We'll save that step for after things have changed a bit."

"Changed?" He tried to sound menacing, though with Darla that was a joke. "If you're talking about
the big hoodoo Daemonis is working on, forget about it. He's playing you." And that was very likely
the truth, though there didn't seem to be a way for Darla to make the necessary sacrifice any more
than Daemonis could.

"A real woman doesn't give anyone a chance to play her," she replied smoothly. "She takes matters
into her own hands. For example, all those poor young vampires with their brand new consciences
all tormented, they needed a strong leader. Someone to tell them what to do. Someone who knows
what it's like to have a soul, and preferably not some old master moaning in his bed with a poisoned
wound. Again," she shrugged, "it could have been you. But instead it's me. And I promise I'm going
to make those little soldiers shine."

"What good are they to you?" he demanded. As if things weren't bad enough for the hapless army
that Daemonis had assembled. They deserved a quick and painless death, not Darla's manipulation.
Suddenly he flinched, realizing what he'd been missing. "Where are they?"

She leaned back in her chair with a coy smile. "The Slayer's right outside, isn't she?"

He said nothing, but he swore to himself that if both of them lived for long enough to make it
relevant, he was going to learn how to lie to Darla. Her expression showed that he had already given
her all the answer she needed.

"I'd love to hear more about what the hell possessed you. What you thought you could get out of that
little hussy that you couldn't get from me. But we'll have time for that later."

Angel thought he heard a faint sound coming from outside of the hatch. He couldn't identify it, and
he might have even been imagining it, but it didn't matter at this point. "I have to go," he said lamely.

She didn't rise or move to stop him. "You know I can kill you any time I want, right?"

There was a sound again; it wasn't his imagination. It was a scream. "Yes," he said sincerely, "I
know."

"You're my pride and joy, Angelus. Better go help them out. I have an invalid to take care of now."
Darla finally got out of her chair, but only to turn her back on him. He didn't wait to see where she
was going.

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Willow found a stump to sit on, but it was moist all over and soaked right through the seat of her
skirt, and she stood up again and paced a few steps. It hadn't been raining, but the very air around
them was damp from the lake's condensation, not to mention the ground and the vegetation. Buffy
saw the mishap and gave her a sympathetic look: You win some, you lose some. She was pacing too,
but she made it look purposeful, like she was...well, on guard. Willow reminded herself that she was
on guard too, and had to keep an eye out for intruders.

Of course, she would be able to take the job a lot more seriously once everyone spread out like they
were supposed to. This many eyes in one spot probably meant that Willow's weren't going to be the
ones that spotted the danger. So far they were still all gathered near the dock in pairs and groups,
talking in hushed tones and gesturing at different places around the lake. Overthinking the lookout
placement, for sure.

"What are we supposed to do if a vampire attacks us?" she blurted out.
Six pairs of eyes swiveled towards her, all of them looking at least a little bit like they thought she was crazy. "Kill it?" suggested Buffy. And Xander, at the same time and almost in the same tone of voice. And Father Tom.

Hearing it from the priest, especially, almost made Willow feel betrayed instead of just embarrassed. "Just like that?" she pressed. "When we know it's got a soul? When it could be redeemed and turn into a good person?"

It wasn't as if they hadn't had this conversation, and many other variations on it, since the mass ensoulment spell had gone through. But Willow was never really satisfied with anyone's answers, especially since they all seemed to think it was a foregone conclusion that vampires were going to die by their own hands, ensouled or not. They weren't exactly being callous about it, they just had had this grim kind of acceptance about them. Well, except for Anya. Her acceptance of it wasn't all that grim.

"Willow," started Father Tom. The kindness in his voice didn't stop him from sounding condescending in her ears. "Vampires are people who have already died. A soul in an undead body can only be trapped there, and killing them means releasing the souls to go back where they belong. It's sad, but it's no sin."

"I didn't ask about sin," she snapped. "I just want to know why the rest of us get to keep falling and getting forgiven over and over again, but the vampires just get slain offhand."

More than one of them seemed about to answer that one, but Father Tom was at the wheel and intent on Willow. "It's too much of a risk," he said. "How could we allow them all the time to learn compassion, when they might keep taking innocent lives in the process? Now I know you're thinking about Angel."

"Of course I'm thinking about Angel!" Willow exploded. "Stop reading my mind! Not everyone appreciates that, you know? Why aren't you thinking about Angel?" She made sure not to look at Buffy as she said that last part, but she knew it was going to hurt her friend anyway. She couldn't help it. She didn't understand. "You could have used that same argument and killed him the day before he decided to start helping our side, and then where would we be?"

"Probably the same place as we would be if someone had killed him the day before he was cursed with a soul," said Father Tom. "But could you have blamed them? There was no way to predict what was going to happen. It's not worth jeopardizing everyone's safety for the sake of one who could be put at peace forever with a stake to the heart."

"Hey," said Buffy, far more gently than Willow would have expected from her at this point in the conversation. "You know there's not a lot that could make me willingly give up Angel. But if I had to choose between having him here with me now, and turning back time so that he was never made a vampire-" she spread out her hands and sighed. "Too many people died. I can't balance my own happiness against that. And happiness for him has been a mess from day one anyway."

Willow frowned. "You really think killing a vampire with a soul would put it at peace? End its torment or whatever?"

Father Tom and Buffy glanced at each other. Willow couldn't tell if they were both looking for help in explaining the same thing, or whether they were worried about each other's reactions. "Yes," said the priest, and Buffy nodded, though she looked uncomfortable.

"Then why don't you kill Angel?" said Willow to Father Tom. There it was. If she got one good answer to that question, she could let it be.
He considered it fully, his hand tugging at his beard. Willow noticed for the first time that Giles was standing behind her, quite close in the darkness. She wondered what he thought about the discussion, but guessed she might never find out. She turned her eyes to Buffy, who still didn't look mad, just expectant, as she waited for the priest to answer.

"Because I don't have to," he said at last. "Because we can trust him. If he chooses redemption on earth over peace in death, it saves all of us from taking on the duty of killing. I for one don't want any more of that than strictly necessary."

It must be hard, Willow realized, for the priest to face this kind of change in his mission. As hard as it was for Buffy, maybe, though without the whole 'Chosen' thing to weigh it down. She felt moved to say something that she could be sure would put things right between herself and their God-fearing ally, but then there was something else demanding her attention and it took her a moment to figure out what it was. When she did, her insides clenched. This was definitely important enough to change the subject.

"Okay," she said, "guys? I don't mean to scare anyone, but I cast a spell to work as an alarm on the other side of the lake. It's supposed to kind of ping me if any vampires get too close, and I've never done this one so I'm not entirely sure how it should feel if it does, but, well...ping." She shivered and stared across the still water. There was nothing to see, but it was so dark...

"You're right," said Oz soberly. "I can smell them now. Shit." He looked at Buffy and Giles for help. "There are a lot of them."

Buffy was in battle mode instantly. "Everyone stay close to the dock. If they're headed for the hatch we can pick them off with the crossbows until they're in staking distance. Willow, as soon as I start fighting, I need you to get everyone else into any kind of protective shell that you can conjure. Angel should be out by then to help me. Oz, cut loose. Father- what are you doing?"

The priest was removing the stiff white plastic strip from the clerical collar he always wore, making it look like he was wearing a normal black shirt. "Falsifying," he said as he stashed the plastic in his coat pocket. "And it's best if you don't call me Father during this."

"Um, alright," she said uncertainly. "Xander, Anya, stay away from the vamps if you can but see if you can keep us armed. If we run out of stakes, some of these branches should work." Those were desperate measures, Willow realized. Buffy must be preparing herself for the worst. And just how many vampires were there?

Giles apparently had the same thoughts in mind. "Buffy, this could get out of hand. If we leave now we might not have to engage."

"Without Angel?" She made it sound a challenge. "We can't go down and get him or they might trap us at the door. Look, these are a new kind of vamp, and maybe all they want is a handshake and a passport stamp, and if that's the case I am the willingest of willing to cut a deal, but if they want my blood, I want to see how hard they're going to fight for it. Anyone who wants to can leave, but I don't think we'd be any safer running through these woods in the dark."

"I'm in!" Willow told her, even though she was sure Buffy already knew that.

"I'm in!" echoed Xander, never to be upstaged in the loyalty department.

Buffy gave them a grateful smile, and then everyone saw movement on the opposite bank, and as one they peered intently at the first few vampires making themselves visible. "So," said Xander in the interlude, "you think they come in peace?"
Anya went to the very edge of the dock and leaned out to see as far as she could. "I think so!" she exclaimed. "It looks like they're going to have an orgy."

"What?" Willow crowded to the end of the platform with everyone else, trying to avoid jostling anyone and sending them over. She could see that some of the vampires were removing their shoes and shirts, but Anya's radical interpretation was proven wrong as soon as the first one waded into the water, dived forward, and disappeared under it. The rest were following suit. Willow felt herself at the edge of panic. Vampires didn't even need to come up for air; there would be no way at all to shoot them before they emerged on this side, all of them ready to attack Buffy at once. They definitely did not come in peace.

Oz made a sound deep in his throat, a low rumble that got louder and more aggressive even as his face remained human. Buffy shot him a glare. "Don't change yet!" she commanded. "Wait until they're in reach!" He obeyed, though Willow noted his slow, hard breathing and tense posture and knew what he was feeling. Fight or flight, and he was more than ready for a fight.

"Everyone just stay calm," Buffy started, but broke off as she saw Father Tom on one side of the dock, untying a sailor's knot that held one of the little rowboats there. "Fa- Tom, what are you doing?"

In answer, he tossed his crossbow into the boat, jumped in it himself, and pushed off with an oar. "Getting a bit closer. Don't be afraid, my child."

"You can't go out there!" Buffy was clearly infuriated, but the boat had already drifted far away enough that she couldn't bring him back by force. "You're our sniper! You have to stay on the dock!"

"I can't shoot from the dock. These weapons don't have the range." His voice grew proportionately louder as the boat gained more distance from them. "You can't take them all yourself. You know that." Anything further he had to say was taken by the water. He turned away from them and took up the oars, rowing himself closer to the center of the lake.

Willow trembled, no less appalled than Buffy was. "How can he do this?" she whispered to Oz. "They'll drown him. He's a sitting duck out there." She wished that she was the one who was psychic instead of Father Tom, so she would have some idea of whether this was suicide or just stupidity. Maybe he thought he could give up his life to save them; she wouldn't have put it past him, but even his death would do little to help them now. His crossbow was no defense at all against underwater attackers.

Oz just shook his head, having no answers for her, maybe mourning Father Tom already. There were at least ten vampires in the water now, and more of them poured out of the woods, some stopping to strip some of their clothes off, some just barreling straight into the lake, seeming more like zombies than vampires. In minutes they would be close enough to seize the rowboat and topple it. Giles stared out into the water and said something incoherent, his voice hopeless. Buffy shed her outer layer of clothing and loaded a crossbow with tears in her eyes. They couldn't even see the swimming vampires or know how close they were to Father Tom. Where was Angel? What were they going to do when the fight reached them? Willow wrapped her hand around a stake and thought, I know you can hear me and I do not forgive you for this. But thank you for everything.

A feral snarl erupted beside her. Oz completed the change in seconds, shook his torn-up clothes off, and launched himself off the dock and into the water. His pointed ears above the surface showed his location as he paddled toward the vampires, but Willow's heart was gripped in terror. Was she going to lose him too?
The werewolf's sudden appearance seemed to stir everyone else into action too, though most of it was useless. Xander and Anya hugged tightly, Giles opened a bag and spilled out all kinds of vicious weapons, and Buffy shouted, "Come back! Don't do it!" All of the vampires were swimming now. Father Tom was leaning over the side of his boat with his fingers touching the water, and he was saying or chanting some words that nobody could hear. By now he was far enough out that the image of him was small and blurry, but Willow could see a face come up beside him, a pale hand grip the little boat's stern. Willow lost it. "They're going to kill him," she screamed.

She refused to shut her eyes, telling herself the least she could do was watch the boat capsize, but it never did. Instead, the vampire holding onto it suddenly reared up out of the water, screaming, and the white skin turned red. The still surface surrounding the boat was broken by a dozen other faces coming up, skin boiling off of them even as they did so, gasping as if for air. Willow looked back at the one by the boat: it was already gone, just ashes sprinkling the air and settling down to sink. The others clawed frantically at each other, lunging for the shore or the boat or just trying to propel themselves into the air to get away, but none were near enough and escape was impossible. For the few seconds they had left, their insane flailing churned up the water and almost concealed them from sight, and then it was another slow shower of ashes as they died one by one.

The brevity of the entire scene was the only break that the voyeurs got from the agonizing sound of the screams. Willow dropped to her knees, holding her ears, and saw Anya do the same. Oz-wolf had turned tail and was swimming rapidly back to the dock. And Father Tom was still sitting in his little boat, silent and unseeing and probably deep in prayer.

Xander kept staring out at the water after even the ashes were gone. "Holy..."

"Water," finished Buffy faintly, her gaze running parallel to his. "Angel!"

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Angel knew something was wrong before he even reached the top of the stairs. The air had been heavy with moisture when he went down, but now it stung him, and it was getting worse as he got closer to the door. Part of him wanted to turn around and run back down where it was safe, deal with Darla if he had to, anything to stay away from the poisoned air. But there had been screams.

As he stuck his head out of the hatch he instinctively inhaled- he was so used to relying on his sense of smell to tell him what was wrong that sometimes he might as well have been breathing. Instead of finding comprehension, though, he felt his dead lungs fill with searing pain, threatening to eat him from the inside out. He coughed violently, trying to expel it, but the thick treacherous fog was in his nose and mouth already, and burning his eyes so badly that he could barely keep them open. Holy water. It was the only thing that could feel this way, but how? No time to think about it. He had to get out before he was well and truly disabled.

The water under the door, which had been an inconvenience on the way in, was now a genuine hazard. He tried to cling to the bank and climb up the slope instead of wading out, but even the mud hurt and his feet slipped almost immediately. For a few seconds he was submerged up to his ankles, and he roared in pain, his hands scrabbling desperately for purchase in the scanty plants and roots on the bank. His vision was getting worse and he had no way to protect his face, but he could hear footsteps pounding on the wooden dock above him. Buffy cried out his name, and he tried and failed to call back to her.

For one mad instant he was afraid she was being consumed by the holy water too, but then her lithe little body slid down beside him and he heard her splash deliberately into the water. Knee-deep and bracing herself against the floor of the lake, she shoved her shoulder under his foot and heaved him up before he had a chance to understand what she was doing. Finally he reached a dry rock to hang
onto, then a sturdy tree root, and then he felt hands taking hold of him and pulling him onto the dock in a limp burning heap. Was it Giles? Father Tom? Both of them? None of his senses were working right. Buffy hoisted herself up right behind him and snatched something from the supplies to cover his face. It was dry, and soft, and smelled like her: the cardigan she had been wearing earlier over her tank top. At least he knew that much. She knotted the sleeves behind his head, blocking off his vision entirely but keeping any more of the stuff from entering his eyes or nasal passage.

Everyone was talking at once, adding to the confusion that Angel was already wrestling. He remembered that he had heard screams, and tried to listen for any voice that was missing, since nobody seemed like they were saying anything that could explain what had happened. The air still stung, and he knew he wasn't at his full mental capacity. Buffy's voice cut through all that, serious and urgent, her Slayer voice. "Angel, we have to get you out of here. Nod if you understand me." He did. "Good. Do you think you can run?" He hesitated, but nodded again. "We just have to get beyond the fog. Go where I guide you. Don't slow down and don't try to talk."

He wouldn't have disobeyed for the world. She pulled him to his feet, placed his arm around her shoulders, and somehow forced him to lean some of his weight on her tiny frame. Then she started running, and he ignored his body's protests, especially the ones from his dunked feet, and ran with her. Blindfolded as he was, he had to trust her at every step, keeping full speed while having no idea of where he was or what obstacles lay ahead. That wasn't a problem. Buffy was the wise one. Following her had always been easy, it was kicking the habit that caused difficulty.

When she finally let them stop, he didn't know where he was but he could feel the change in the air. No more holy water. His skin still felt raw from all the exposure, though, worse in some places than others. It didn't matter. He was intact, and that meant he was going to heal. When Buffy eased him out of their mad dash and removed the covering from his face, he did more than stop, he collapsed. She gave a little mew of concern as she caught him- she was always there to catch him, even if she didn't know it- and he tried to say something or kiss her hand to tell her he'd be alright. He didn't know if he succeeded. Oblivion closed in before he could even open his eyes to take a look at her.

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Before opening his eyes, Angel went through a short checklist of questions. Was it possible to open his eyes? Yes, he thought so. Was he in a safe place? He felt clean and comfortable, and if that didn't count as safe, he had some very considerate enemies. And who was there beside him, touching his hand so gently?

"Buffy," he said, his voice raw but recognizable in his own ears. His throat and lungs hadn't been eaten away after all. He pried his eyelids apart. It didn't hurt, but it felt like they had been glued together.

"Angel." She leaned over the bed- their bed- so he could see her face. She was smiling, not showing any fear at all, though he sensed some anxiety. With her one free hand she removed the headphones she had been wearing, and he heard some lyrics of the music she had been listening to before she turned it off:

_I only wish that I could hear you whisper down-_  
Mr. Fisher moved to a less peculiar town.  
He gathered up his loved ones and he brought them all around  
To say goodbye- nice try.

The song was familiar in a way he didn't like, but he attempted a smile of his own. Images of the night before flashed through his mind in dizzying patterns, but that just made seeing her here with him even better. "Am I in trouble?" he asked.
"Lucky for you, I am *way* too relieved to start chewing you out for almost dying." She brushed his cheek lightly. "How do you feel?"

He'd been better. Patches of skin on different places all over his body were still getting a burning sensation, especially his hands and feet. He had evidently healed a lot as he slept, though, and waking up in these conditions eased his mind considerably. "Tolerable," he said. "How do I look?"

"Atrocious," she answered easily, still smiling. "Like hell on a stick. It's a good thing you can't look in the mirror, or you'd scream like a schoolgirl."

He held up one of his hands to look at it. The skin was red and peeling, but it was the same effect that holy water had always given him before, just more widespread. It would fade off soon. "Well, if you're insulting me to my face, I guess that means you don't think I need to see a preacher. I'll take that as good news."

Her expression darkened. "You're going to be alright. I think there's a preacher I need to have a talk with, though."

"Don't be too hard on him. He was just-" Angel stopped and thought about what he was saying. "Did he really turn the whole lake into holy water?"

She nodded. "It's funny, you never really think about where that stuff comes from, do you?"

He asked for more details, and she filled him in on everything that had happened while he was down in the lair. It dawned on him that Daemonis and Darla now had barely any army to speak of, and that was a refreshing thought even though he couldn't seem to erase the chills he got from imagining death by submersion in holy water. When Buffy finished speaking and wanted to hear his side, he hesitated, collecting his memories and wondering how many times he would have to explain the new complication before everyone had the story. Well, Buffy should hear it first, anyway.

"Darla's alive," he began, and built the rest of the account around that. He wanted to give her some kind of reasoning behind it, some way that it would make sense for Darla to reappear on this world as a human and then get turned back into a vampire, but the best he could do was to speculate that Wolfram & Hart had something to do with it.

"You know, I rode past their building in LA about a million times," she mused after she had shaken off some of her shock about Darla's return. "I almost feel like I should be suddenly remembering that it always gave me a tingle in my spine or a sense of dread or something, but I never gave it a second glance. Evil shouldn't be able to hide itself so easily."

He agreed, stroking her hand with his thumb. He suddenly noticed how tightly he'd been gripping it, and eased up. She responded by leaning over again and kissing his lips, chastely but sweetly. "Ah," he said when his mouth was free, "so I don't look too atrocious to kiss?"

"I'd say you're tolerable." She moved from the wooden chair she had been sitting on to the bed itself, settling on the edge next to Angel's hip. "As long as you promise to be a good patient while you're recovering."

He grunted. "I'm already recovered. I'm just going to be itchy for a couple days, that doesn't make me a patient." He started to rise, to show her.

Wrong answer. Buffy planted a hand in the middle of his chest and pushed him back down, firmly enough that resistance was probably futile. She took it personally when she was discouraged from taking care of him the way she wanted to. "Bed rest or medicine," she said with a stony glare. "If I
had my way it would be both, but you're so damned stubborn I'm going to let you pick one."

"You have medicine for this?"

"I'm full of it, actually."

It was his turn to glare. "No. I don't need it."

She crossed her arms. "Way to make me feel wanted. At least I'm being respectful about it. I could have just fed it to you while you were sleeping."

"I would know."

"Don't tempt me to find out. You'll have to fall asleep again sometime."

He took the threat with mixed anger and longing. "Buffy, I think I've been through enough lately," he snapped.

She sighed and stood up. "Fine," she said, heading for the door.

He was instantly repentant. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have- I'll be good. Bed rest. Don't go."

The smile she turned on him as she paused with her hand on the doorknob was amused, but as loving as he'd ever seen. He could swear that she had deliberately drawn the exact reaction she wanted from him, but he would let that go. "Relax," she said. "I'm just going to heat up some pig's blood for you. But if you're not cleared up by Saturday we're having this talk again. I have wedding pictures to think about."

He mulled over that until she returned with a warm mug in her hands. He had long since lost his reluctance to drink blood in front of her; in fact, he often saved it for when she was eating so that she wasn't always taking her meals alone. She had never shown any squeamishness about it, though she was perhaps a little too nervous about spilling it and causing stains.

"You need anything else?" she asked as she set the mug down on the bedside table. For a moment he was too busy studying her to answer. She was dressed in 'home' clothes: sweatpants and one of his white undershirts, which her dark bra showed through easily. Her hair was falling over her eyes and her face was as unblemished as a child's and serene as a grandmother's. She quirked an eyebrow at him. "No? Yes?"


For a moment she looked like she was going to object on the grounds that she wasn't prepared for a portrait, but then she smiled again and brought him the tools he wanted. He had three pages full of her before he even remembered to take a sip of the blood.

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Giles expressed his approval as Buffy carefully removed the plastic covering from her prize and held it up. "It's a beautiful dress," he told her. "You'll be a perfectly lovely bride." It wasn't a lie. She had chosen one with a traditional cut and a flowing train, mostly satin and completely shining white. Nothing made the reality of an approaching wedding more clear than looking at a wedding dress.

She held it up to her chest for a moment, looking down at it with admiration, and then got it wrapped up again and stashed it in one of the mansion's lesser-used downstairs closets. "Could you take it
over to Revello Drive when you leave? Angel isn't supposed to see it yet."

"Of course." He sat down with her in the living room, glad to have a few minutes alone with her for a change. Lately when he looked at her he felt an inexplicable feeling of sadness well up in him, and he couldn't tell if that was part of the routine for letting go of one's little girl, or whether there was some extra element of fear in it because of the groom. She was upset about something too, underneath her excitement, and he wanted to hear about it. "How is Angel?" he inquired.

"His feet hurt. He won't say it, but..." She shrugged, not needing to finish the sentence. "He's better than he was, though, so I'm letting him out of bed." She pulled her legs up under her and took a pillow into her lap, toying with its frills. "Giles, I know for you this is..."

He wanted to prompt her. He wanted her to be able to say it while looking him in the eye, but mostly he just wanted her to say it. He had to wait for it, though. It had to be her words, not his.

She took a deep breath and finally looked up at him. "Are you disappointed in me?"

Not quite the words he had expected. He was genuinely taken aback. It wasn't as if he had never been disappointed in Buffy, but those occasions were always short-lived, as time and again, she showed him that she made her choices with clarity and was prepared to take full responsibility for their consequences. Telling her that he was proud of her always seemed like stating the obvious. "No," he said, relying on the simplicity of the answer to convey its sincerity. "I'm happy for you."

He bit back the qualifier he wanted to add: *But be careful.*

Her relief was tangible. "Thank you. I really needed- thank you. I've never felt better about doing something, I mean, I'm psyched in places I didn't know I had, it's just...what would my mother be saying to me right now?"

She asked the question as if she really expected him to know, and the sadness hit him again in a wave. He had grieved for Joyce alongside Buffy, not only for her sake but for his own. Joyce was a strong woman, compassionate...and beautiful, though the only time he had really allowed himself to recognize that was during a relapse to his teenage years. It was too late for regrets now. But a young woman getting married without her mother at her side was wrong all over. "Probably quite a bit," he replied. "Mothers always seem to have a great deal of information to impart before such occasions."

Buffy hugged the pillow to her chest. "She would accept Angel, right? Eventually, at least. She could learn to love him?"

"I can't answer that. But I remember the way she smiled when she saw you were happy."

It was a remarkably similar smile to the one that Buffy gave him then. He returned it, knowing quite well what Joyce had been feeling when she looked at her daughter like that.

Slow footsteps on the stairs ended their private talk. Buffy got up to give Angel a shoulder, and the two of them returned to the living room and settled on the couch, Buffy looking him over as if it had been days since she had checked his condition instead of under an hour. The sight of Angel's red and flaking face and hands was a little shocking to Giles, just because it was so odd to see a vampire with any kind of affliction except for a combat wound. Otherwise, though, Angel was acting normally, just being especially careful about putting pressure on his bare feet, which looked worse than his hands.

"You're feeling better?" Giles asked him.

Angel nodded. "A little bit hydrophobic, but otherwise none the worse for wear."
Before Giles could attempt to advance the conversation, Buffy smacked her forehead and said, "Good God, I've had Giles here for like twenty minutes and haven't offered him any tea. You'd think I would have learned something about The Care and Feeding of Your British Guy by now. Giles, curb your withdrawal symptoms, I'll be right back."

Giles watched her leave the room. "She's certainly gained a domestic side, hasn't she?"

Angel looked alarmed. "I didn't do that," he said. "She just..." He left the thought unfinished as he saw that Giles wasn't serious, and chuckled reluctantly.

"So," said Giles, ready for business, "tell me about Darla."

"Darla." Angel's eyes lost focus; doubtless he was sifting through two hundred years of memories to find the information that mattered. "She's the one in control now, whatever her relationship with Daemonis was in the first place. And she said he didn't sire her, so there might be someone else in the equation. But whoever it was, she's just as likely to have left him behind or killed him already."

Giles heard the discomfort in Angel's voice when he talked about Darla, but that was all the more reason for him to be blunt about it, to get to the point. "What does she want?"

"What any vampire wants. Power. Blood. Mayhem." Angel paused, then amended, "Any vampire without a soul, that is, so I guess that just leaves her. It's hard getting used to that."

"Even for you?" Giles wondered. Instead he said, "But her presence here suggests she was looking for something, possibly you. Does that seem likely?"

"Yes," said Angel. "Probably for revenge. Or she thinks she can bring me back into the fold. One way or another, she made it pretty clear that she wants me."

Buffy reentered the room with three mugs, teabag strings dangling from each one. Giles made a mental note to supply her with some proper china. "Are we talking about me or Darla?" she asked as she set everything down and returned to Angel's side. "Darla, right? Darla wants you. Well, you know what I have to say about that?"

"I'd wager we can guess," Giles assured her. "Be kind enough to refrain from supplying me with any mental imagery. But, Angel. You've said that the, the "Powers That Be" have made a practice of sending you warnings through Cordelia's visions. I would have thought that this occurrence would be one to, ah, merit some divine guidance. She hasn't seen anything lately that pertains to you, or to Sunnydale?"

"Cordy hasn't been getting visions at all," Angel revealed. "I'd like to think that means that there hasn't been any demonic activity that needs attention, but the agency is still busy. Every day, it sounds like. My time here is running out."

Buffy pouted, but quietly. Giles was glad to see that she wasn't going to try to negotiate against Angel's departure. He didn't quite trust Angel to be able to stand up to that.

"And in the meantime," concluded Giles, "you don't expect to be receiving any knowledge on Daemonis's next move."

"I don't think we need any. There's no way he can get out through that hatch, not with the holy water blocking it. Darla could probably get out, but I doubt she could get back and forth enough to bring him food. That lair's a deathtrap now."

"How do we find Darla, then?" asked Buffy. "The personals don't have an abbreviation for 'single
Angel turned to her, ran his fingers through her hair, looked into her eyes. There was something vaguely terrible about his eroded skin, but he didn't try to hide it and Buffy didn't flinch. "I say we let her find us," he said. "Or try to. Leave it be for a few days, and when we come back we can deal with her."

Giles noted that Angel was saying 'deal with her' instead of 'kill her', only slightly before he noted the words 'come back.' "Then you're still intending to take your trip?"

"What else are we supposed to do, Giles?" Buffy sounded much more defensive than she had to be; she had probably been holding herself ready for an objection. "Just sit around town waiting for her to call? Angel's on borrowed time here. Darla isn't."

"And my team is going to stay here while we're gone," Angel put in smoothly. "Just in case Sunnydale needs any protection."

Giles leaned back in his seat and looked the mismatched couple over. "Obliged," he said, "though we're not generally the ones who attract trouble."

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The three people currently employed by Angel Investigations arrived with plenty of time to spare. The current residents of the Summers house had invited everyone to spend the evening before the wedding there, and the crowd grew steadily as everyone took them up on it. Buffy had already been there most of the day, fine-tuning plans with Willow, when there was a knock on the door and she leaped up to answer it. She was excited to see Angel's friends- actually, she was excited about just about anything that happened today- and she wanted to be the first one to greet them.

Cordelia and Wesley she welcomed with hugs, spontaneously deciding to forget the worst parts of her history with both of them. At least until Cordy did something annoying, anyway. Charles Gunn made her entire hand disappear in one of his, showed her a huge grin of white teeth, and pretended to be shocked that Angel had convinced a girl this pretty to marry him. It wasn't hard to like him on sight.

"Thanks for coming early," said Buffy to Cordelia as the two of them looked over the props for tomorrow. "If everyone wasn't helping so much this whole thing would just fall apart in my hands and I would end up getting married in the graveyard wearing sneakers and a ponytail."

"My pleasure, honor, and God-given duty. I know Willow's a genius and all, but you are not going to trust her with your hair and makeup."

Xander wandered over from the kitchen. "You're doing her hair and makeup, huh? Don't they have professional bimbos for that?" He cringed under the glares from both of them and held up his hands in surrender, one of them holding a bow-tie. "Just kidding! I'm all friendliness and helpfulness for Buffy's day of blissfulness. Look, bow-tie! I just didn't know you were, uh, talented at hair and makeup?"

Willow and Anya noticed Xander's outburst and drifted over, as Cordy rolled her eyes at him. "Have we met? I'm Cordelia." She turned back to Buffy and resumed her business tone. "Now, let's talk honeymoon outfit. Do you have some lingerie he hasn't seen before, or do we need to squeeze in a bachelorette party after all?"

"No bacheloretting tonight, please," said Buffy, but not quickly enough to prevent Xander from
snickering, "I'm hoping for both! For Angel's sake, of course."

Anya gave her boyfriend a disapproving look. "This is girl talk, I learned all about it from Buffy and Willow, and you're not allowed to be here." She turned to Buffy. "Lace is sexy, but it leaves these imprints on your skin if you take too long getting it off."

Willow jumped into the conversation, doubtless attempting to come to Buffy's rescue. "She can pick out her lingerie herself! Besides, I'm sure Angel thinks she's beautiful no matter what she wears. He's a gentleman, he's not just all about...boobies and tush."

"No," Xander agreed, "he's more of a neck man, isn't he?"

Buffy had a retort on her tongue, but then stopped to think about it. Angel did like to kiss and touch her neck a lot. Not that that meant anything.

She escaped the lingerie talk by finding Gunn again. He and Wesley were trying to put together a game of Texas Hold 'Em, and had already recruited Oz and Giles and were working on Father Tom. "I'm not sure you understand the concept of a vow of poverty," the priest was telling them politely. "It doesn't mesh so well with gambling."

"Hey," said Buffy, tapping on Gunn's shoulder (which she could barely reach), "are you still up for being the DJ? I kind of forgot to talk to anyone else about it."

"All taken care of," he promised, shuffling a deck of cards in his hands. "Nobody could agree on a style, so we're gonna take turns. I even picked up some matrimony tunes."

Well, that was a relief. Everyone's musical tastes were too varied for her to figure out what would be appropriate for all of them. She wasn't even sure who had put on the music that was playing right now, just that it was boisterous and soulful and not in English.

Wesley looked over his shoulder at them from his place at the table. "And I found some Manilow for Angel."

"Manilow?" Buffy pulled a chair out and got closer to Wesley. "Are you serious? Angel likes classical and opera and stuff."

"Oh, you haven't heard this one? At the karaoke bar it's legendary. You see, the host there can--" he paused, noting her avid stare. "Am I running the risk of planting doubts in the mind of the bride-to-be?"

He wasn't, but the doorbell rang before she got to hear the full story of how many songs Angel had butchered in public. There had to be a way to get him to sing for her. Her mind was deep in analysis of the problem when she opened the door for the man himself, looking all the more handsome now that there was no trace of the holy water's effects on his face. He smiled, but his expression quickly turned suspicious. "Why are you laughing?"

The only way she could think of to dodge the question was to kiss him on the lips and change the subject. "You want wine? We have lots. Only, Willow and I were the ones who picked them out and we were mostly just going for the labels we thought were the prettiest. Tasted fine to me, but what do I know." She led him into the kitchen and took a pair of wineglasses from the cupboard, almost fumbling one. "Whoops. Already had a few glasses myself."

He had been listening to her babble with an amused half-smile. "I can tell."

"Pff. I could still take you out with my eyes closed and you know it. Red or white? Wine is like Jell-
O. It has colors instead of flavors."

His expression didn't exactly change, but it gained a surprising intensity over the amusement. "Red is my favorite flavor."

That sent a shiver down her spine, and she wasn't sure why. She was about to see what she could do to keep that predatory look on his face when his team noticed him and all came over at once to slap his back and catch up with him. Buffy let him be led from the room and poured a glass of red for both of them. Following an impulse she pricked her fingertip on a kitchen knife and squeezed a drop of blood into his glass. She bandaged her finger while still holding her wine, so she wouldn't forget which one was hers. Then she put Angel's into his hand as he was telling Wesley about the holy lake, gave him another quick kiss, and slipped out of the room again and back into the kitchen.

"Who do you think is taller?" said Willow as she went for the bottle of white. "Gunn or Riley?"

Buffy twitched. "No clue. Hey, I'm going to add one more item to the list of things nobody is allowed to talk about tomorrow, okay?"

Willow nodded. "So it's Daemonis, Darla, being chained up in a dungeon, vampires having souls, and Riley?"

"So far." Buffy tried not to show that she was trying to watch Angel through the doorway. Angel was very distracting. He hadn't even tasted the wine yet; he was totally involved in his conversation with Wesley.

"That is so okay with me," said Willow. "Oh! I keep forgetting to make sure Oz shined his shoes."

She scurried away, leaving Buffy alone in the kitchen.

Angel finally took a sip from his glass. Buffy watched him turn swiftly toward the wall, reflexively blocking his face with his arm for one brief moment. He said something to Wesley and Gunn, excusing himself, and then stalked into the kitchen, openly displaying that predatory look that Buffy had been so eager to prolong. He loomed over her and silently pointed to his wineglass. Buffy gave him a guilty smile and held up her bandaged finger.

"Don't do that," he warned.

"Sorry." She blushed under his gaze. "I just thought, it was such a tiny little drop..."

"It's enough. From you, it's enough. Look, Buffy, if you're so intent on trying this, we can talk about it. But don't play tricks on me."

"Can I blame the wine?" She shook her head ruefully before he could answer. "Nah. Behold the melodrama that is Buffy's failed attempt at flirtation. I'll work on that."

He looked down at his glass. "If you get any better at it than this, I fear for us all."

She suddenly thought she could understand why he had reacted so strongly. Doing this to him was more than flirtation. It was intimate enough that she should have been blushing even before he confronted her. "Do you want to pour it out?" she asked humbly.

He shook his head, never breaking eye contact, and took another sip as she watched.

She bit her lip and lowered her voice to a near-whisper. "What does it feel like?"

His eyes burned through her. "It feels like I'm undressing you right here in front of everyone."
Buffy could imagine that she was turning as red as the wine. She tried to occupy her face with her own drink, but she couldn't look away from Angel and he certainly wasn't looking away from her. It was lucky, she reflected, that they had both learned such self-restraint during their period of imposed chastity. It was also lucky that they were about to spend a weekend alone together.

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Xander joined the table where he'd heard that there was going to be poker, but the guy who he'd heard was setting it up was talking to Cordelia while shuffling the cards and peeking into the kitchen at the engaged couple. "They doing something in there?"

"Oh," Cordelia said breezily, "Buffy and Angel have this thing where they just stare at each other. I'm sure they're fine."

Xander nodded his way into the conversation. "As fine as they ever are. Probably means trouble is brewing for tomorrow." He stuck out his hand. "Charles Gunn, right? I'm Xander. I've known Buffy since she moved to Sunnydale, I don't have any special powers, and I can't stand the sight of your boss. Oh, and I'm the best man."

Gunn gave him a peculiar look, but took his hand and shook it all the same. "Good to meet you." He gestured between Xander and Cordelia. "So, you two went to school together?"

"Yeah," said Xander. "I'm sure we talked a couple times, I just don't really remember it."

"He was kind of beneath my notice," said Cordelia. "No offense, Xander. I was just really popular."

"None taken. Boy, Sunnydale High, those were the days."

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world. Except I would."

"Hey, weren't we supposed to play cards?"

"My kingdom for a distraction. I'm starting to have memories." Cordy rubbed her forehead. "Sure beats having visions, though. Hey," she continued in a sudden change of tone, looking at Xander, "what did you mean by trouble brewing for tomorrow? What kind of an attitude is that?"

He shrugged. "Well, let's stack up the evidence. There's the annual Buffy Birthday Disaster, a few other holidays gone notably wrong, a general history of bad luck for all of us, and supposedly Angel's vampire mom is on the hunt now. Honestly I can't quite believe that we still have the childlike naivete to keep planning celebrations and assuming they're going to happen with any kind of normality."

Cordelia backed down from her offense. "Okay," she said. "I thought you were talking about trouble, like one of them was going to leave the other one at the altar. Demons crashing the party, that's different."

Gunn cleared his throat. "Uh, how much of this is serious and how much of it is just trash talk between two old friends who hardly noticed each other in high school? Because I need to know if I should bring my axe to the ceremony."

"Don't be silly," said Cordelia. "That axe doesn't match your jacket at all."

Giles appeared before anyone could try to answer that. "There will be no crashing the party," he said firmly. "By demons or anything else. Buffy and Angel need just one evening in a small church to perform a simple ritual, and all of us will be there to ensure that it happens. Nothing at all will go
wrong tomorrow."
Wedding Album

Chapter Summary

Went there!

It was easy to tell when Angel was asleep. For as long as he lay awake beside her, he would keep moving in some small way: stroking her hand, rubbing his cheek against her hair, pressing his body to hers. Sometimes he even breathed, making his chest rise and fall a little too evenly, but it was otherwise indistinguishable from genuine human respiration. She knew it was for her benefit; he wasn't the fidgety type. She usually fell asleep before he did, but when she didn't, she would find herself in the most static embrace a woman had ever known. He must have known that his stillness was unsettling, so he sent her to sleep every night with those little repeated motions that seemed to whisper, Still here. Still here. Still here.

He had been undead for so long that she would have been surprised that he remained so conscious of the differences of his body, but there were other signs that he thought about it more than he let on. Sometimes as Buffy was drifting off she would feel his fingertips touching her lightly in a series of different spots: first her lips, then her neck, then her heart, then her stomach or side, and finally he would feel her wrist and then leave his hand clasped around hers. It confused her at first, but the second time he did it, all in the same sequence, she realized that he was seeking her signs of life, her breath and pulse. He couldn't have actually feared for her health; his senses would have told him immediately if something was wrong, even if she had been in any danger. He just wanted to experience her vitality. She never mentioned it. She didn't even know if he knew he was doing it. If Angel was going to have an obsession, this one was okay with her.

He was asleep now, though, or faking it well. He had gone to bed much later than her, probably making some kind of preparation he couldn't in the daylight, though she also had a hunch that the guys had convinced him to let them take him out. In any case she had fully intended to wake up before him and sneak away; he wasn't supposed to see her yet today.

Cordelia met her downstairs, ready to take her to the Summers house and get things rolling. In the car she was full of questions, unsolicited advice, and stories about Angel from the last year. Buffy answered the questions and took the advice with the requisite grain of salt, but hearing about the escapades of Angel Investigations mostly just made her feel lonely. She knew that Angel was happier now that he had a life and a job and friends of his own, and she wasn't selfish enough to want to wish them back to a time when he belonged solely to her, but it was weird that other people—other humans—really knew him. And soon he'd be going back, and Cordelia would be spending more time with Buffy's husband than Buffy was. It made her picture the old Cordelia, the one who had lived for attracting the attention of whatever hot stylish guy she could find. Evidence said that that girl was gone, but in Buffy's mind she could see her sitting on Angel's lap on the front desk of some big faceless hotel, smugly announcing, "Looks like I won after all." It wasn't fair to any of them, and all Buffy wanted was to stop thinking it.

"Who are you dating now, Cordelia?" she asked abruptly.

"Hm?" Cordy broke off from a story about an underground demon fighting ring to consider the question.
"Oh. No one. The lifestyle has a tendency to get in the way of anything beyond the bad pick-up line stage. Although you always seemed to manage it pretty well. Got any cast-offs you could point me toward?"

"Well, unfortunately the best of them decided to leave the- I just realized you're kidding." Buffy looked for a smirk as confirmation, found it, and grinned back at her. "What about Wesley? After the eyes you two were making at each other at the end of senior year, everyone thought for sure something was going to happen there."

Cordelia tilted her head and fused a nod with a shrug. "But it didn't. I don't know. It just didn't. Maybe we just met each other during the wrong parts of our metamorphoses." She caught Buffy's surprised look and added, "What? I can't be philosophical?"

After that there was no more talk about Cordelia's love life. It was, as she pointed out, really not the appropriate day for that.

There were almost as many people at the house as there had been the night before; Wesley and Gunn were staying at the mansion, but everyone else apparently found it easier to prepare themselves and each other in the same place. Willow greeted Buffy at the door with an excited squeal and hug and Buffy returned it, but she herself felt completely relaxed. Getting married was going to be a breeze. Her friends were supporting her, her lines were easy, and there was going to be a delicious reward at the end. There also wasn't much hurry. It was still late morning, and the wedding, for obvious reasons, wasn't taking place until sundown.

"We're surprising you with an exquisite and tremendous brunch," Xander informed her. "But it's not done yet, so sit down and get ready to act surprised."

Buffy complied, and Cordelia went off and conferred with Anya for a moment and then returned with some nail files and small bottles and proceeded to give Buffy a 'poor man's manicure.' She chattered as she worked, but Willow stole the show when she walked over to the couch carrying a beautiful blown glass flower. "This is a gift from Tara. She couldn't make it, but she said this would lift your spirits when you couldn't be with your true love." She ran a finger along the contours of the blue-violet petals. "I think she meant it literally. There's a charm on it, I just can't quite describe how it works. Here, hold it."

The glass felt cool and smooth in her hand, which was reminder enough of Angel's body, but the charm's effect was evident as well. "This is...it's amazing! Feels like..." She beamed at Willow, lost for words.

Willow understood, though. "Feels like Angel, right? It works for me, too, only I can feel Oz."

"I wish she were here," Buffy murmured. Tara had been the only one to actually receive an invitation, as neither Buffy nor Angel had regular communication with her. It was sad that she was also going to be the only one who couldn't come. Buffy resolved right then to become closer friends with her. "I already owe her a lot. Without that spell she helped you with, this might not even be happening."

Anya asked to hold the flower, and then seemed reluctant to let it go, twirling it in her fingers and gazing at it with uncharacteristic softness in her eyes. Cordelia was offered a turn, but declined it with a resigned smile that made Buffy's heart ache for her. Before long, though, they decided to try it on the guys, and seeing Xander and Oz getting all bashful and affectionate with their girls had everyone cheery again.

Father Tom emerged from the kitchen holding a full coffeepot. He and Giles were the only ones left
working on brunch, Buffy realized, but she couldn't get up to help. Cordelia was still working on one of her hands and everyone had insisted that she let them wait on her anyway. "Cream and sugar, Buffy?" asked the priest.

"I like my coffee like I like my men: cursed by gypsies and clinically dead."

Father Tom looked down at the coffeepot in his hand, then back up at Buffy. "So, cream and sugar...?"

"Uh, yeah. Both." Buffy followed him with her eyes. Her life was full of mysterious people, but this one was mysterious in such an strangely mundane way, and today he was going to be the key participant in a relationship that otherwise included only her and Angel. As soon as Cordelia released her from the manicure, she got up to interfere with the cooking.

"Is the lake going to be holy water forever?" she asked, leaning against the counter and sipping her sweet creamy coffee. Just right.

He raised an eyebrow as he inserted some bread into the toaster. "No. Water is in a constant state of flux, so the blessed content will become more and more diluted until it's gone. I don't know how long it will take, though. You'd have to consult a science book for that."

"Or consult a Giles. He's better than science books because he does the reading for you and then tells you the answers." She glanced at Giles, assuming a long-suffering sigh was coming in response to the remark, but he was busy at the stove and hadn't heard her, so she turned her attention back to Father Tom. "Could you turn the whole ocean into holy water?"

"I wouldn't attempt it. It's a blessing that's misused too much as it is."

She nodded. "I can imagine. Probably kind of a touchy thing to be using as a weapon." She stirred her coffee and dropped the spoon into the sink. "Did Noah take two vampires on the Ark?"

"I sincerely doubt it," he chuckled. "You're in rare form today."

"It's a rare day. What did you give Angel as penance?"

His hand halted on the door of the cupboard where he was searching for dishes. "Ah, now the interrogation reaches its purpose."

"Hey, I might not be Catholic but I do watch movies. At the end of the confession the priest always tells the sinner to say three Hail Marys or something. And I have this odd feeling that Angel didn't get the three Hail Marys treatment." She frowned, thinking about all that Father Tom had learned about Angel that she didn't know. Things that Willow knew too, from that ancient book that was back in the glass case at the mansion even now. Maybe she should just bite the bullet and crack the book, but no, that wasn't how it worked with them.

Father Tom gave her a steady look. "Did the movies tell you that I'm not at liberty to discuss this?"

"But I'm not asking you to divulge his confessions. I just want to be sure." She took a deep breath. "He's a survivor. But if he thinks he has to, he'll take on too much, and if I'm going to help him with that I need to know what's happening. I mean, it's part of being his wife, right?"

"So is trusting him. Do you remember when I first met you and Angel?" He waited for her nod, then went on, "My order is dedicated to destroying vampires. I knew from your thoughts that he had a soul, but with what I knew about Daemonis, that meant little to me. All I understood was that you loved him, and you trusted him, and you knew what you were doing. So I trusted you, and I didn't
shoot. And today I'm going to unite you and your vampire for the same reason. From you I have evidence that your love is pure. From him, I'm taking a lot on faith, confessions or not."

"Well," she ventured, "most priests don't even get the psychic evidence from half of the couple, right?"

"True. And many marriages end badly, even without your special circumstances to hinder them."

She thought about that for a moment. It was possible that the appearance of this particular priest in their lives at this time was lucky in more ways than she had realized. Without his telepathic ability, he might not have had the conviction to preside for them. "So you're saying I need to take a lot on faith, too?"

"Until you find a way to read his mind, and at that point, I hope you write me about it, because I'd love to hear." Father Tom washed his hands under the faucet and dried them on a dishtowel, then paused, meeting her eyes. "Angel's penance was chosen long before I met him. I didn't want to add to it, and I didn't need to."

Buffy didn't verbalize her thanks, but he was a psychic, and he answered anyway. "You're welcome. And look at this, your breakfast is finished."

Her gaggle of bridesmaids entered the kitchen to tell her the same thing, with the additional announcement that after eating, it was time for getting dressed and ready. "And then it's No Boys Allowed, capeesh?" said Cordelia.

Father Tom smiled and dipped his head as he went for his hat. "I'll see you at the church, Buffy," he said, and she gave him a little wave and grin.

She was ready.

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It was the same church in which he had confessed, but the change in intentions made it feel different for Angel, and he noticed for the first time that it was named St. Patrick's. It couldn't hurt to have the patron saint of Ireland watching over them. He was even able to appreciate the artwork a little bit, especially the stained glass windows. They couldn't cast their colorful patterns without sunlight coming through them, of course, but at least they didn't feature crosses too often.

"Angel, you're pacing," said Wesley. "She's not late, you know. We're early."

Angel hadn't noticed he was pacing, but he stopped doing it when Wesley spoke up. Then he shrugged and kept walking. It had probably been a bad idea to come early.

Gunn returned from the bathroom downstairs, grinning broadly. "Just had to check myself out in the mirror again. Damn, we look good. Sorry you gotta wait on the pictures to see for yourself, Angel man."

The comment made Angel wonder, not for the first time, if he was certain that he trusted his friends to tell him if he had something on his face. He could just imagine Buffy taking one look at him as she walked down the aisle and busting out in laughter.

"Why the pacing?" Gunn wanted to know.

"He's brooding," Wesley replied in Angel's stead.
Angel glowered. "I'm not brooding."

"Say what?" Gunn demanded. "Now? You're not getting cold feet, are you? Colder than usual, I mean?"

"Knock it off. I'm not getting cold feet and I'm not brooding."

They persisted, though. Wesley's voice actually held some real concern. "Is the church affecting you? We have time to slip outside for a bit."

"No, the church feels fine."

"Something else, then?"

Angel sighed. "It's just, I had this dream once..."

The sound of the heavy wooden doors of the church's main entrance interrupted his thought, but that was fine because the thought stopped mattering instantly. It wasn't Buffy yet, but anyone's arrival now meant that she would soon be on her way. Conversation in any capacity suddenly seemed a nuisance.

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No pictures were taken during the ceremony. There wasn't anyone to take them anyway, since everyone present was in the wedding party and the ritual took place with all of them arranged in a crescent between the altar and the pews. Oz concentrated on using the time to create mental pictures instead, feeling it was important to keep the day alive in his memory. He had never seen all of them together like this, so solemn and single-minded, and he wagered that he never would again.

He memorized the scent, too. Over the wood and stone and incense of the church there was the unified aroma of many humans and one vampire, and their mixed emotions hidden in the reverent hush. Love, mostly. Oz didn't know why he could smell love, but he had come to recognize it, in its various incarnations, along with the more chemically evident emotions. Those were represented here too, both joy and sadness, and the most subtle of all, fear. That one came from more than one person and its source was unidentifiable, but, Oz noted, both Buffy and Angel were free of it. They said their vows clearly, honed on each other like birds of prey, and kissed with unmitigated passion when Father Tom pronounced them married.

Until that point everyone had put on a good facade of being an actual congregation, but as the couple left the altar and walked down the aisle together, their collective formality fell apart and the rest of the procession was all laughter and horseplay. Willow had gone through a spasm of panic the night before when she realized that she had neglected to buy birdseed to throw when they got outside, so Oz had calmed her by searching the cupboards for some kind of substitute, and Buffy and Angel ended up being pelted with Rice Krispies. Angel's look of utter confusion as he peered at a handful of the cereal made Oz remember that photography was now permissible, and he grabbed the camera before they made their way down to the reception hall. (It was actually just a large multi-purpose room beneath the church, but some severe decorating power and Willow's magic touch made it a very impressive large multi-purpose room.)

For an amateur with a camera that probably wasn't heavy enough to be of real quality, he thought he did a pretty good job as the primary photographer. He started off by getting the posed ones before everyone got too unruly for them: Buffy and Angel by themselves, with Father Tom, with Xander and Willow, on down through all combinations until Father Tom took a turn with the camera so that they could get one with the whole wedding party together.
Then Oz took it back for the fun ones. He got Xander and Anya trying out a swing dance move that had Anya up in the air ("That shot will never come out," she said). He got Wesley and Gunn in what looked like an eating competition ("There is no possibility of you getting a decent picture out of this," said Wesley). He got Buffy's hand resting on top of Angel's, both displaying the narrow bands they now wore beneath the claddagh rings ("Too close," said Buffy, "it'll be all blurry").

He made sure to keep taking pictures of the newlyweds all night long, whether they were aware of him doing it, or whether they were too absorbed in each other to notice anything else. When they fed each other cake he was behind the lens right in front of them, close enough to hear Buffy telling Angel, "It's good, trust me." He was operating in stealth mode for a few truly epic kisses, though, so he could surprise them with that once they got developed. He caught an excellent shot of Buffy jumping into Angel's arms and wrapping her legs around his waist, big puffy skirt and all, which Oz thought was the cutest thing he had ever seen from a girl who wasn't Willow.

Of course he got a few good ones of Willow by herself, breathless and radiant in her shiny blue dress. He also passed off the camera for a while so he could dance with her, and then took it back from Cordelia so she could dance with Wesley, then Gunn, then Xander, then Angel. Oz got snapshots of her with each of her partners, along with every other pair on the floor. Giles dancing with Buffy, sharing fond words with each other as they spun in a simple but elegant waltz. Willow dancing with Xander in a silly improvised tango. Gunn breakdancing by himself to enormous cheering, after he swore he would never do it no matter how much they begged. And Buffy dancing with Angel, resting her head on his chest, her eyes closed in quiet ecstasy.

After all of the obvious memories were collected, Oz started getting creative. "Why are you taking a picture of the door?" Father Tom asked curiously from behind him.

"Oh, well I'm going to caption it. 'This is the entry which was not busted at any point by marauding demons.' Thought that might be something uplifting to add to the album."

"I see. Marauding demons were a concern, were they?"

Oz shook his head firmly. "No, no. Definitely not. Maybe. Depends on who you ask." He glanced over at Buffy. "Hey, she's throwing the bouquet. I gotta get this."

One picture of Buffy executing a perfect toss behind her back. One picture of the bunch of flowers landing neatly in Cordelia's hands. And then, one picture of Cordy handing it graciously to Anya, who required a few seconds to process her shock and then ran right over to Xander with an animated explanation on her lips.

Oz watched the way the tradition went down, said, "Hm," and then went to put an arm around Willow just in case she was disappointed. It was kind of hard to tell. The first thing she said was, "I never catch anything," but from her tone she might as well have been bothered about her lack of catching ability, and not the bouquet's symbol. He decided to take the safest route and kissed her hard right there on the dance floor. She responded in kind, and he found himself holding out the camera at arm's length until someone- he couldn't see who- relieved him of it.

Partying until the sun came up wasn't an option, since Buffy and Angel had to be at their destination by dawn and they had a two hour drive ahead of them. Besides, they were obviously getting anxious to be on their way. Xander noticed it too: "We better chase them out of here," he said, out of their earshot. "Don't want to delay the Slayer and her catch when they're ready for their marital coffin."

Angel took charge of their exit by scooping up Buffy into his arms and carrying her out the door. "This wasn't the plan!" she squealed, squirming and kicking her dainty little feet in an obviously fabricated attempt to escape, but he just laughed and kept his grip until he reached the convertible
and set her down in the passenger's seat. As the car pulled out it was accompanied by a shower of brightly sparkling lights, which was unexpected for everyone but Willow, and even she admitted later on that it had been a spontaneous spell that she hadn't really known she could do.

Oz stood with her outside for a few minutes after Buffy and Angel were gone. Her hairstyle had come undone, and he was pointlessly trying to put a few stray locks back in place when he heard her sniffling. He turned her around to face him, and she leaned her head into his shoulder. "I did all I could," she said in a muffled voice. "But I can't give them what they really want. I can't make him human. I can't get them out of the fighting life."

"Willow." He stroked her hair and set a kiss on her forehead. "They're happy. Didn't you see how happy they are? Buffy couldn't ask for a better friend than you."

There was a brief silence before she spoke again. "I think I need some more cake."

"I think so too. Fortunately, last I saw there was a whole bottom tier left. Let's go in."

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Before leaving the reception, Willow realized to her annoyance that she had forgotten the formula for the spell that would turn off the magical decorations. She couldn't very well leave them there in a place that would be public again the next day; she and Oz would have to make a stop at the Magic Box before they went home, to look it up. It wasn't that big of a deal, though, and her emotional overload had settled into contented exhaustion, so the two of them changed clothes quickly and went to get their errand over with.

"Hi, Sippy," said Willow as she flicked on one of the lights so she could find the right book. "What's new?"

The feline spirit stared down at her with eyes like baseballs. "Much," it said.

Willow froze. Oz did a doubletake, surprised to hear the infantile, echoing sound of Sippy's voice. "That's weird," he said. "I've never heard it speak before. Kinda cute."

"That's not the point!" Willow exclaimed. "It doesn't talk unless it has to tell us something we haven't heard before. This could be bad." She took a deep breath. "Sippy, report."

The cute voice that Sippy used by default was gone. Instead it answered in a woman's voice, soft but irritated and subtly menacing, clearly a direct quote from the voice's real owner. "She has visions, she was Angelus's seer. We need her."

Sippy's power was based in all of the senses; it could report not only what it had heard but what it had seen and felt as well, and sure enough, visuals began to appear in the air before them. The one who had spoken was a small blond woman in a tight dress, and she was standing beside a bed where a huge, disfigured vampire lay staring at her with glassy orange eyes.

"Darla," Willow whispered, heart thumping.

"And Daemonis," Oz added. It was, as far as Willow knew, the first time either of them had seen the master vampire, but he was unmistakable. She wanted to ask a million questions about what this could mean, but Sippy hadn't paused the show for them and she knew this was their only chance to pay attention and learn what they could.

"And the other?" Daemonis wheezed in reply to Darla.
"We need him too. He helps to control her. Just let me handle this. The Slayer is at full strength again and she's always with Angelus, I can't just step in and take her. The spell is the key." She smiled. 
"And it's fun. Have you ever seen a human without a soul? Lambs to the slaughter. We'll need to set up farms for them, but let's not think too far ahead just yet."

"This spell could kill me. Forgive me if I'm not enthused."

The image showed Darla glaring down at the sick vampire and gesturing in annoyance. "It won't kill you. It only looks that way because it assumes a human caster. 'The body must die while the mind still comprehends.' Well, your body is already dead and your mind still comprehends. Enough for our purposes, anyway."

Daemonis's voice was a dry crumble. "And the other part?"

"'In the end there is nothing left of the one who makes the sacrifice, for he belongs to the one who accepts it,'" Darla recited. "Your soul is the one who makes the sacrifice, and what's that but a good riddance. Your body lives on. I'm certain of it."

"You're certain of it because the sacrifice isn't yours."

Darla bent down, hands on her knees, her face inches from Daemonis's. "If you start the spell tonight, I'll have the Slayer for you as soon as it's completed. If you don't, you'll be dead before long anyway. I'm not going through that vile water any more than I have to. I'm only coming back down here once more, and I'll have either your cure or someone else to succeed where you failed. Die if you want. All I need to usher in my brave new world is a vampire with a soul to be the sacrifice, and those aren't in any short supply right now."

The snarl in Daemonis's throat turned into hacking as it came out. "How are you going to get the Slayer? You don't even know where she is."

"That's the best part," said Darla with sadistic pleasure. "Once the soul is out of Angelus, he'll bring her to me. No more of this moral nonsense infecting everyone, and I get my boy back. I'll set up my part of the ritual in one of his old haunts, so after you finish yours, all I have to do is sit down and wait for him to come looking for me."

"Then bring me what I need," Daemonis rasped. "And get to work."

Darla left Daemonis's bedside, and the images playing out for Willow and Oz faded away. They looked at each other in horror, completely numb, then Willow dove for the phone and stared as it as the dial tone snored. "I don't even know who I should be calling," she whimpered.

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They hit the seaside road about twenty minutes into the drive. There was hardly another car out here, at this time of night, and the view was amazing. For long stretches at a time, they could see the ocean spread out below them, the almost-full moon hanging over and reflecting in ripples. Angel smiled as Buffy's hair flapped around her and she breathed in the salty air. He had been waiting so long to bring her somewhere peaceful.

They had left the wedding gifts unopened at the mansion, but Buffy decided that she couldn't wait to open the cards, and she started going through them as Angel drove. Most just made her look touched, but after opening one of them she snorted a laugh and held it up for Angel to see. He took his eyes off the road long enough to read what Cordelia had written there: "May your love be as joyous and eternal as it is forbidden."
"She's a piece of work," he said, grinning.

"They all are," agreed Buffy. "I'm surprised they didn't find 'forbidden love' gift wrap. It could've been a theme."

He put an arm around her shoulders, and she managed to scootch close enough to lean into his embrace. He loved how warm she always felt, and how he could feel the life coursing through her body. She was happy. The wedding was finished, and she was still happy to be with him. 'Forbidden' was such a silly word.

Her cellphone rang and she grudgingly shifted herself off of his shoulder. "I should have turned it off," she complained. "I thought they would know better than to call for anything but an emergency."

The phone's shrill tune resounded in Angel's ears. "They do," he said quietly.

Buffy cast him a worried glance and dug the phone out of her purse. She looked at the number showing up on the screen before answering. "Giles?"

The other side of the conversation was faint but clear to Angel. "No, it's Xander. Giles told me to call, we're all here at the store. And, sorry. We would have left you alone but it's an-"

"Emergency," she filled in. "What happened?"

"Daemonis is going to cast the reversal spell. The one that takes the souls out of everyone."

Buffy reeled, but wasted no time in turning to Angel and saying, "Turn around." He didn't argue. He had already slowed enough to pull a U-turn on the deserted road, and when they were facing in the other direction he pressed the gas again and started speeding back towards home.

"That spell was supposed to cost a life," Buffy said to Xander. "He doesn't have a life to sacrifice, this doesn't make any sense."

"Agreed," said Xander, the volume of his voice increasing with anger, "it doesn't. But it's happening. Darla's pulling his strings, and she says it's not going to kill him because he's already dead, and now the rat bastard is going to sell his soul to make it work and he's not supposed to have a soul to sell!"

Buffy swore under her breath, seeming at a loss. "We're, we're coming," she said into the phone. "Wait," said Xander, "there's more. She said something about how they need Angel's seer for her visions, and one other to help control her."

Angel twisted in his seat so fast that the car swerved. "Where's Cordelia?" he shouted at the phone. "Get her inside someone's house! And Wesley, he has to be the other one!"

"They're safe," was Xander's hurried response, melting a little of Angel's fear. "But Darla and Daemonis might be starting the spell already and we don't know where, except that it's in one of Angel's, uh, 'old haunts.' And Daemonis is still underground but Darla says she can use someone other than him. And they want your blood, but I guess we already knew that. Giles is trying to figure out some way to stop them before it starts, but...just hurry. Buffy, believe me when I say I'm sorry."

"Be sorry when you're the one trying to rip our souls out," she replied. "You guys should go somewhere safer than the store. And stay together. I'll call when we're back in town."

Angel took her hand after she had hung up and tried to think of something encouraging to say. There
was nothing encouraging about the thought of losing his soul while he was in the car with Buffy, though, unless she would appreciate knowing that this time she would lose her own soul at the same time. He wasn't sure what a soulless human would be like, having no demon to operate it. He wasn't sure what he would do to Buffy if he were evil and she no longer had the capacity to care. He was sure he was afraid, and that he hated Daemonis with all of his being.

And Darla...he hated her too, but Daemonis was a much easier enemy. Since Darla's reappearance, Angel had dealt with the maelstrom of issues she brought with her mainly by ignoring them, keeping his focus on the facts of the situation instead. The wedding had helped immensely. But now, coping mechanisms were no longer an option, and he was going to have to look at her face again. He just wished he could silence the little part of him that wanted to make her proud of him. He also wished he was driving in the other direction.

"I have a confession to make," said Buffy. "I'm really, really pissed about this, but it's for all the wrong reasons."

He looked at her. She was staring straight ahead, but with such ferocity that she might have been trying to make the road combust by sheer force of will. "I second your confession," he told her.

"Then let's see how fast we can kill us some apocalypse-happy vampires, and get back to the original plan."

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"So, if they need Wes to help control me, that probably means they're not just going to scoop my eyes out and ditch the rest of my body, right?"

Xander looked up at Cordelia in disbelief. Everyone else did too. She was still in her wedding outfit, having left her suitcase at Angel's mansion, and she was standing in front of everyone as if in a beauty pageant. "May I suggest you postpone your optimistic hypotheses?" Wesley answered. He and Gunn had the same clothing situation that she did, but they had at least been able to shed their ties and jackets, and looked a little less incongruent in the agitated group gathered in the Summers house.

"Well," huffed Cordy, "it's important! Being a seer isn't all it's cracked up to be, you know? These eyes are in high demand, and I happen to like them where they are!"

Nobody seemed to want to pursue the argument with her. Xander got up and moved closer to where Oz and Willow were huddled on the couch. Willow had been taking the news especially hard, and the way everyone had interrogated her and her boyfriend for all the details wasn't helping. "I'm never writing another spell ever again," she said. "Or I'm never using the internet again. Or both."

"Oh, that's no good," said Anya. "Then the only things you'll do with your time are study and compliment people."

Xander sighed and decided that the best way to comfort Willow was to keep her separated from his girlfriend. He took Anya firmly by the arm and led her from the living room, ignoring her genuinely confused protests, and got her into the kitchen and out of earshot to try to explain what everyone was feeling right now. Before he could, though, the phone on the countertop rang and Giles rushed in to pick it up. Xander and Anya turned to listen.

"Buffy," said Giles. "Yes. Yes. Good, where- what do you mean? Buffy, don't be tiresome, just tell me- Buffy!"
"What's going on?" asked Xander while Giles was still yelling irritably into the phone. "Is she in trouble?"

Giles didn't answer him until after hanging up. "She and Angel are initiating battle with Darla," he said. "And they refuse to tell me where it will happen."

Xander wasn't the only one upset to hear that. When it was explained to everyone else, there was an almost unanimous consensus that Buffy and Angel shouldn't be allowed to take this on by themselves, but nobody had any ideas on how to prevent it. Angel's old haunts in Sunnydale could have been any number of places: his old apartment, the wreckage of the high school, the Bronze, the local cemeteries, or somewhere that he used to frequent that none of them even knew about. They couldn't just check every possibility, nor did they want to split up and spread themselves thin. Again they were swallowed into a silence of frustrated waiting.

Then Gunn spoke up. "What about this Daemonis guy?"

Giles looked up from one of the books he had brought with him from the store. "What about him?"

"We know where he is, right? Konked out and helpless in his special place? Why not just off him while the deadly duo of romance is busy with the other one?"

Xander perked right up. "That is a swell idea. Can I come?"

Anya frowned at him. "Can I not? And you won't die?"

He promised he wouldn't, and they quickly selected the rest of the team for the mission. Giles wanted to stay so he could keep researching and wait for Buffy to call again, and Gunn told Cordelia and Wesley in no uncertain terms that they weren't leaving the house. "Angel's gonna skewer me if he hears you were outside when you're both on the vampire's most wanted list," he said, with reluctant agreement from both of them.

Willow had to come so she could check for magical protection spells, and they thought Oz's tracking abilities might come in handy, so it was a group of four that left the Summers house armed with stakes and the only crossbow that they found in the house. Xander found himself feeling a little guilty when he pictured himself trying to justify the decision to Buffy and Angel, and even Father Tom. They were the ones who really deserved to take vengeance on this particular baddie, but saving his death for one of them came second to ensuring that the spell didn't go through.

Of course, if Buffy and Angel were successful, the spell wouldn't go through anyway, and if they weren't... Xander decided to copy Gunn's attitude and just be a man of action tonight. Thinking too hard was not helping at all.

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After five minutes of thick silence, Angel startled Buffy with a few sudden words: "I've got it."

"Got what?"

"She's going to be waiting for me at the factory. Where I lived after- that's where she'll be, I'm sure of it." He hoped Buffy wouldn't need more evidence than that. He could have told her that Darla would be aware of all the town's old vampire nests, possibly even catching some residual scent from himself and the other former residents, and that she knew how he thought and he knew how she did, lending them an enduring synergy that cemented his hunch into certainty. Those weren't conversations he thought he could handle at the moment, though, so he added only, "It's a good place for casting a spell. Nobody ever goes there."
Buffy just nodded. "Should we tell the gang to meet us there?"

His first impulse was to say no. His second was to intensify it to absolutely not. It was bad enough that he was going to have to expose Buffy to Darla's presence, but he knew there was no way to stop her from accompanying him now. He didn't want anyone else witnessing it too, and anyway he and Buffy between them could handle Darla. But on the other hand, refusing help could mean unnecessary risks, and dammit, it was their wedding day... "Do you want to?" he asked.

"No," she answered immediately. "Not unless it gets dire. But you're the one who knows her. You have to decide if we're enough on our own."

He winced, and inwardly resolved to keep the brunt of Darla's fury on himself no matter how much his protective behavior bothered Buffy, but this was indeed a decision that belonged to him. "We can do it. Tell them to stay in."

When she called Giles at the Summers house to tell him that she wasn't going to tell him where the battle was, she was ruthlessly impassive. Angel could hear Giles yelling at her from the other side, and even some other voices in the room asking him what was going on, but Buffy just delivered the information she wanted him to hear and hung up. In another situation, it might have been amusing. She waited patiently for a response, but the question sent Angel spiraling into too many memories to settle on an answer, and she had to speak again to snap him out of it. "Angel. This is business. I don't want to talk about Darla any more than you do, but your history is the only source of information we have, and if we're going to do this I want to do it with all possible advantages. I know there are bad places inside you and I know it hurts to relive it and for most of our life together I'm going to leave that be. But right now you need to let me in."

As always she was too strong for him. He told her everything he could think to tell. Darla's disdain for sullying herself in combat, leading her to send him and her other followers to do her dirty work instead. Her insatiable need for retribution over even the smallest wrongs or perceived slights. Her talent for manipulation. That, more than anything, was the danger that he and Buffy were about to face. Angel's familiarity with Darla might have been an advantage, but it went hand in hand with his weakness toward her. He hated to admit it, but he did need Buffy with him for this, if only to remind him where he really belonged. He had been able to kill his sire once before, for the same reason. This time would be no different.

They kept talking after they had parked on a street near the factory, trying to set up some kind of battle plan but ultimately admitting that the only thing for it was to walk in, find her, and both attack at once. The best scenario would be to interrupt her while she was already working on the spell, when she would be most vulnerable, but they would have to go with whatever situation they found when they entered.

The factory had been thoroughly burned out, legacy of Giles and his flaming baseball bat; they had to step carefully around busted glass and rusty nails. They came up on a stairwell and saw that one of the steps was missing, as if someone had crashed right through, and Angel requested that they turn around and find a different route. He didn't want to trust any stairs with his weight.
Before they entered the factory's core, Angel smelled hot wax and pointed with his stake to show Buffy that they were close. She readied herself and they entered the dark, cavernous space together, stepping into flickering candlelight and cold drafty air. Darla was still lighting candles, clearly in the preparation stages, though the parcels and items stacked up on the floor near her showed that she had been busy. She straightened up when she saw them and flicked the match in her hand to the floor. So they hadn't exactly caught her off guard, but she didn't look too happy to see them, either. "You're early," she said.

Buffy advanced with a few fluid steps. "We thought maybe we'd catch a worm."

Darla wouldn't even acknowledge her. "Angelus," she started, but Buffy cut her off.

"His name is Angel."

"Hush, little girl, the grown-ups are talking now. I have some unfinished business with Angelus-"

"His name is Angel." Buffy was fury incarnate, controlled and focused directly on her enemy, the Slayer that Sunnydale vampires had come to recognize and flee for the last five years. Angel realized, though, that Darla didn't fear her even now. He also realized that that was just plain stupidity on her part, and it was the most liberating thought about Darla he had ever had.

"We do have unfinished business," he said. "But we can finish it now. And this spell isn't part of it."

She raised an eyebrow. "What, my seeking spell? Yes, I guess it's unnecessary now that you're here, but thank you for taking an interest."

"Seeking spell?" Angel didn't want Darla to see him confused, but he couldn't help sharing an apprehensive glance with Buffy. "You're not trying to take everyone's souls away?"

"You know too much," Darla accused him. "You have a spy. I knew it. Well, a lot of good it's done you. I'm not casting that spell because it's not my job. My partner is taking care of it."

Buffy's voice was outraged and fearful. "But you said there were two parts, and you're doing yours up here while Daemonis is making the sacrifice!"

"Had to tell him something, didn't I? If he thought he could do it without me, he'd want me to be down there supervising. And knowing that he isn't going to live through this doesn't make me too anxious to be keeping him company."

The allusion to Daemonis's death didn't make Angel feel as hopeful as he would have expected. "How do you know he isn't going to live through this?"

Darla's smile when she had a secret made her look like a mischievous child, aside from being utterly and remorselessly vicious at the same time. "My sire told me," she said. She turned toward one of the doors behind her and called over her shoulder. "Dru, sweetie, come on out now. Daddy's come home."

The stake in Angel's hand slipped out and clattered to the floor. Nothing could have stunned him more than seeing Drusilla glide delicately from the entrance indicated, cradling a porcelain doll in her arm—nothing, that is, except that in her other arm she was clutching Spike's. The two of them moved up beside Darla without a word, Spike examining Angel and Buffy with merciless eyes, Drusilla staring straight at Angel but appearing to see nothing at all. "My seer, he thought dully. She has visions."

How long had it been since they were all together? It wasn't supposed to be possible. Darla was
supposed to be dead already. He was supposed to be dead already. Time was passing without him knowing how many seconds or minutes had gone by without any one of them speaking a word. Darla would be the one to break the silence, he knew. She was the one who would take charge. And Angel would sneak the power away from her, and Spike would challenge him for it, and Dru would watch the whole game play itself out with intrigued glee. So had it always been. I can't handle all three of them at once. I can't. Just have to give up.

No. That wasn't right, something was missing. Buffy. He wrenched his eyes away from Drusilla to look at his lifeline. Relief poured through him even as she gazed back with evident fear. This was the answer. This was where he belonged, with Buffy. They were a team. They were soulmates. They were married.

...They were outnumbered. Angel's heart dropped as the reality of the situation came clear. Spike couldn't hurt Buffy, but he could keep Angel occupied while both of the women went for her, if Drusilla chose to fight. And she might well fight. She had always been unpredictable, but never as much as she was now. Going into battle here and now could mean both Buffy's death and his own, and the soulless world would come to pass anyway. They had to get out of the factory without a fight, and that, he knew, was going to make things much worse.

"Surprise," said Darla. "I put together a little party to celebrate your homecoming."

"You've got no home for me."

Darla smiled. "Don't talk to me like I'm your enemy, dear boy. Wait until you hear how much I'm going to accommodate you and your silly whims. You don't want the spell to be cast? Fine. We have time to kill Daemonis before it's completed. You want your whore to live? Fine. We'll set her loose."

"I don't think," said Buffy, her hand tight around her stake, "that I like being referred to as my husband's whore."

Spike's mask of cold indifference slipped as he finally spoke, addressing Angel with outright incredulity. "Husband? You married her? Bloody hell, the poof's gone and forgotten he's a vampire. Vampires don't get married, do you recall telling me that once or twice?"

Drusilla pulled her arm away from him so she could smooth her doll's hair. "Vampires don't. Vampires mustn't. So many things we mustn't do."

Spike wasn't done yet. He turned to Buffy with a puerile smirk and put on a nostalgic tone. "Remember when we were going to get married?"

Buffy turned red and wheeled on Angel before he even had a chance to blink. "We were under a spell! Nothing happened!"

"Quiet, Buffy," said Angel. It killed him to talk to her like that, but now he had a part to play. Buffy was strong, she was smart, she had all kinds of experience, but she couldn't talk her way out of this. That was his task, and to make it work he was going to have to fool three dangerous people into thinking they were getting the best of him. All of them knew him too well for him to play it halfway, and there was no way to inform Buffy about his plan; he would have to fool her along with them and pick up the damage afterwards. He turned to Darla. "Why should I believe you would change your plans just to get me back?"

She shrugged. "The spell isn't going anywhere. The possibility is always open if you change your mind. Human life without souls is a big step to take all at once, so why not get used to being with us again first? All grievances forgotten. It'll be just like old times."
"Right," he growled, trying to gauge how much resistance he should show her before she believed he was coming around. "It will once you use Daemonis's trick to take my soul out. That's the plan, isn't it?" He gestured at Spike and Drusilla. "And these two have been promised the same thing. An easy fix."

None of them denied it, but Darla threw her hands up in exasperation. "God, Angelus, you're obsessed with that soul of yours. You know what? If you're so attached to it, keep it. Keep it for as long as you want it. I've spent the last few days learning to deal with your kind, and I'm willing to give it a chance. You don't have to kill. You don't have to hurt your poor precious humans. Just come back to your family where you belong."

Angel's surprise at hearing this kind of offer from Darla made it that much more difficult to keep up the facade. He had never thought she would accept him with a soul, let alone delay her apocalypse for his sake. Recent events must have shaken her perspective in some improbable ways. She must be lonely. The thought almost made him laugh. "You've certainly turned a corner," he said casually. "Spike? Dru? Tell me what she's really about."

"We got the same tale you did, pops," said Spike. "And the same choice ahead of us, even. I might keep the soul, just for a laugh. I'm beginning to think it might not mean quite as much as you've been advertising."

"She's all bright and new," said Drusilla wistfully, fondling the doll. "I made a new child."

While they were speaking, Angel tried to sneak a look at Buffy to see how she was taking it. She wasn't looking at him- wouldn't look at him, he guessed- and held herself ready, stake in hand, a pose that suggested she was still waiting for a fight. He closed his eyes for a second, trying to control the way he was aching for her before it took him over. He had done this before. He had acted out Angelus as she watched him and suffered. He could do it again.

But last time it had been only Buffy's pain that he had to shoulder. He hadn't faced the additional agony of suddenly realizing that he recognized Drusilla's doll.

"You're right," he said abruptly. Buffy snapped her head around to face him, showing him a horrible expression of grief. He plunged onward, needing to have this finished in one way or another. "The soul doesn't mean much of anything. It doesn't have to get in the way. I learned that when I got mine secured."

"Angel," whispered Buffy, "you wouldn't really do it, would you? You won't...go with them?"

The final trial. He thought he had everyone convinced, if only because none of them thought he would be so cruel to Buffy otherwise. It made him sick to know that he was using her this way, but even if she ran out on him now, it might be worth it. It might save her life. "This isn't something you can understand," he told her harshly. "This is about where I come from, what I am. They said I can keep my soul. Nobody has to get hurt, and they're going to let me in."

"Angel," Darla whispered. "You're him."

Buffy's eyes were wet with unshed tears. Darla had a miniature smile of triumph. Spike looked cautiously interested. But Drusilla zeroed in on Angel's face, finally showing some clarity, and said in a hushed voice, "You're him."
He knew what she meant. The terror in her eyes was a living echo from long ago. He took an involuntary step forward, holding out a hand as if she were a skittish horse. "Drusilla," he begged. "Don't-"

But seeing him approach her was apparently too much. She turned and ran, back out the door where she had entered, her footsteps echoing through the wide empty space. Spike looked wildly from her to the others, then started off after her.

"Spike!" Darla commanded. "Get back here. Let her go."

"Piss off," he replied as he disappeared out the back.

Darla registered immediately, Angel was certain, that she was no longer on the side with superior numbers, unless she had truly won him over. She looked at him through narrowed eyes, awaiting his reaction to the change in the stand-off, but Buffy struck first. She launched herself at the female vampire with a savagery that excited Angel's own battle fury even as it made him fear for her life. He rushed forward to help, but Darla didn't even wait to see which of them he was helping before dodging backwards and reaching into the pile of supplies she had stacked up nearby, the ones that Angel had thought were for the soul removal spell.

A handful of thrown powder later, Darla chanted some activation words and a wall of flame shot up from the floor between her and Buffy. They were close enough together for it to singe both of them, and Angel was close enough to Buffy to feel its searing heat, but it didn't look like anyone was harmed. He could see Darla's outline through the fire and hear her receding footsteps as he reached Buffy, who was already retreating in the opposite direction, coughing and looking around herself frantically. He grabbed her shoulder and pointed out the exit, and she went for it without hesitation.

The building had already been shelled out by fire once; it was a treacherous place to be running even without the relatively small fire now blazing at the heart of it. They cleared the smoke quickly, though, and Angel's night vision was enough to find a safe way out. When they reached the outside, Buffy sucked in a few deep breaths of fresh air and shook her head as if trying to rid herself of the clinging smoke.

He wanted to hold her, touch her all over to be sure there was no damage to her beautiful skin, but he kept himself a few feet away. "Buffy," he gasped, still full of smoke himself, "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean any of it, I was just acting. Please don't cry. It wasn't me, I had to do it..."

"I know that. You were trying to get us out of there without fighting."

"What, you couldn't tell I was acting?" She actually sounded a little insulted. "I know you wouldn't go hang out with those losers again. See, I've grown. This is me not being threatened by your vampire ex-girlfriends."

He closed the distance between them and engulfed her in his arms, finding her scent underneath the burning smell that surrounded them. "I'm an idiot. I should have trusted you. It was just, the three of them there together. Drusilla. I had no idea."

"I really really don't blame you for the having no idea. I'm pretty sure I didn't have one either." She tightened her arms around him, then let go and pulled halfway out of the embrace to meet his eyes. "But, Angel. We still have to stop Daemonis."

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Getting into the lair had seemed so glamorous in concept, so Mission Impossible. The glamor fell away from it quickly, though, when Willow found out that the Mission was Possible, but also Difficult and Muddy. They had brought ropes to climb down the slope instead of sliding down it, but as Angel had discovered earlier, there wasn't really a way to avoid stepping through the water before getting to the door. As she tried to sluice some mud off of herself with her hands, she imagined what it would feel like for it to sting wherever it made contact with her skin, and shivered in sympathy. She got down second, after Gunn, and stepped into the entrance as soon as he wrenched it open. Xander came next, and Oz pulled up the rear.

They gathered at the top of the stairs together before moving any farther, which made Willow feel claustrophobic but still safer than she would be in such a dark nasty place by herself. She did her part and checked for enchantments, and Oz did his and checked for any unusual smells, and when they agreed that all was clear they continued downwards, all of them relying heavily on their flashlights. The stairs weren't only steep and narrow, they were damp, and it wouldn't have helped matters for one of them to break an ankle.

Searching the abandoned lair wasn't fun at all. Casting the same spell repeatedly, testing each area they entered for traps, wasn't fun either. The very least fun part about the ordeal, though, was that there was no master vampire on his deathbed to be seen anywhere. Willow felt fairly certain that they would recognize him when they saw him, Daemonis being recognizable to say the least, but even that kind of assurance was rendered irrelevant by the complete absence of any vampires anywhere.

They kept looking long after it was obvious that Daemonis should have turned up by then, but finally Gunn stopped them and said, "We checked this room twice already," and then they stopped pretending that looking was doing any good. They formed a circle where they stood and discussed their options.

"Smells like vampires down here," said Oz. "Couldn't really tell you which ones, though. I only met Daemonis once, and I was...busy. And not human."

Xander turned to Willow with such a look of hopeful confidence that she started to feel even more tired than she already was. "So what's your internal Magic 8 Ball saying about this, Will?"

She sighed. "It's doing the 'Try Again Later' thing. I'm not sure what I can do here, I don't have any books with me or anything."

"This is still the place Sippy is spying on, right?" asked Oz. "And it showed us Daemonis and Darla here, just a couple hours ago. I don't get how he could leave between then and now, if he's really as sick as he looked."

Willow thought about that. "Sippy doesn't just show what's going on in the present. It reports on anything important that it saw since last time we asked, like a recording. But we check on it every day, so it couldn't have been that long ago. You're right, he shouldn't have been able to get out. You know what, I have an idea for a spell I can try."

Everyone allowed her the space and silence she requested, and she concentrated hard on the image of Daemonis's ugly face and remembering some rhyming couplets that she had learned months ago and hadn't used since then. Fortunately, the incantation came out right, and when she opened her eyes she saw a swirl of blue lights in the air which lingered for just seconds before fading away. "It worked," she announced.

Gunn looked dubious. "That was it? You cast a spell to make a blue light?"

"I cast a spell to make a light, yeah, but I didn't know it was going to be blue. It's like a pregnancy
test! Blue means yes."

"Thanks for the freaky analogy," said Xander. "Yes what?"

"Yes, Daemonis is still here. He's just hiding. And before you ask, there's no way I know of to reveal him before he decides to come back. On the not-so-unlucky side of things, I'm sure he can't do any big spells in the meantime, so at least we have him cornered."

The question then, of course, was cornered until when? They were still pondering it as they went back up the stairs, seeing nothing else to be done in the lair. Gunn suggested leaving a guard down in the lair for as long as it took to find a more permanent solution, but Willow didn't think that it was a safe place for any of them to be hanging around for long, at least not until they knew that Darla was dead. She also didn't think it was necessary. "Sippy's keeping an eye on the lair for us," she explained. "If we find out that Daemonis is back, we can get here fast enough to kill him before he casts the spell. It's going to take him some serious time to get it- hey, someone's up there."

She had just come out of the door, leading the way, and the dock right above her had the distinctive patter of feet on it. Before she could scare herself with the possibility of being discovered by perfectly normal people who just came out here to row a boat, Buffy's voice called out, "Willow?"

"Yeah! It's me! You're alive, that's great!" Willow snatched up the rope and pulled herself up the muddy slope again, getting a hand from Buffy as she reached the top.

She also got an earful. Buffy was, as expected, aghast that they had come out here without her or Angel, and Willow was too occupied with getting herself out of the lake to offer counterpoints. Instead she plopped down on the deck to catch her breath as Buffy pulled up the other three, admonishing all the way and asking questions about Daemonis that nobody was in a position to properly answer.

Willow jumped a little when a quiet voice from just feet away from her asked, "Are you okay?"

She didn't get up, but stared until her vision adjusted and his shape became clearer. "Yikes, Angel! Still demonstrating how creatures of the night work, huh?" He was standing in the shadows where the dock met the land, so still and dark that he had been virtually invisible until he spoke. Willow continued, "Yeah, we're fine. I didn't think you would come this close to the lake."

"The air is okay now. I can be here as long as I don't get wet. What happened?"

She started explaining as everyone made their way onto the dock and joined the conversation. For Angel's sake they started walking away from the lake as soon as the newcomers were satisfied that they were in no immediate danger of Daemonis casting the spell. "So he's still alive," summarized Buffy bitterly. "That makes a stunning zero-out-of-four on our kills tonight. My plan for maximum efficiency is not going as well as I had hoped."

"Four?" asked Willow. She had a really bad feeling about that number.

The feeling only got worse as Buffy described what she and Angel had been up since calling the house. Willow glanced up at the sky, hoping selfishly that they had no leads they could use to keep pursuing the vampires tonight. She couldn't be the only one who needed sleep.
The Runaround

Chapter Summary

So...much...fic...

"Okay, we need someone to be at the store in case Sippy has news about something going on in the lair. You might have to keep it closed tomorrow, sorry Giles, I know I can't just be making executive decisions like that, but we're going to need privacy in there. You understand, right? I mean, the customers. They can't-"

"Buffy," Giles interrupted, "tomorrow is Sunday. The store is always closed on Sundays."

"Oh," Buffy smiled nervously and picked up a book, opening it to a random page without bothering to look at it. She needed to be doing something, and just talking wasn't doing the trick. "Well, that's that. Xander? Anya? Want to babysit the kitty?"

"What fun, a Magic Box sleepover," said Xander. "Does Sippy have any movie channels, or is he always just 'Meanwhile, back at the lair'?"

Anya accepted the assignment without argument. "This house is too full of loud and frustrated visitors to have good sex here anyway," she said. "Xander, come help me carry pillows and other things that make hard surfaces comfortable." The two of them prepared to return to the store for the night, leaving Buffy and Giles with a pile of books that Giles had brought along from there and deposited on the dining room table.

Giles squinted at the books as he cleaned his glasses, then said, "I'll relieve them in the morning. If there isn't a way to discover the whereabouts of Darla and her cohorts, I can at least investigate the spell that Daemonis has used to conceal himself."

"Right. Good." Buffy closed the book, its contents still unknown, and grabbed another one, giving it the same treatment. The only thing more maddening than leaving all four vampires alive was that all of them were now missing, and Daemonis was the only one who had left even a clue on how to find him. She felt like she was wired enough to take on all of them at once if she could only get her hands on them, and instead she had books. "They'll be up and out again tomorrow night. Any kind of head start we can get on finding them before that is a check in the victory column."

Oz and Willow were holding nearly identical poses at the other end of the table, arms folded with their heads resting on top. Exhausted as they were, neither had allowed themselves to nod off yet, for which Buffy was grateful. Oz concealed a yawn before he spoke. "I can try to do some tracking. It's hit or miss, but I at least know Spike's scent well enough to follow if I find it."

"And I can..." Willow trailed off, and she had to rub her eyes and shake her head before regaining focus. "I can keep looking for a seeking spell, I guess. The ones I know won't work because they need a personal item, oh, maybe I can get something from Spike's crypt. Do you want me to go to the crypt?"

The strain in Willow's voice brought Buffy out of her own mechanical haze a little bit. "No. No, you need to sleep. Oz, you need to sleep too. Giles, you need to sleep."
"It's almost dawn," Giles agreed.

Buffy's eyes snapped up. "Dawn? Oh great. Is there room to sleep everyone here?"

Giles nodded. "I expect some of us will need to see what kind of rest the floor can afford us, but you and Angel should take the guest room."

"Huh?" said Buffy. "I meant everyone else. We're going back to the mansion like right now."

Willow gave her a look of bleary confusion. "But why? I thought you wanted to keep everyone together so we could work on this."

She had said that, hadn't she? She had been ordering everyone around since she found them at the lake. It felt like no time at all had passed between then and now, yet at the same time, when she tried to remember waking up that morning it felt like weeks ago. She faced her friend and told the truth. "Because Angel's headed for meltdown territory and I need to get him alone."

Willow, Oz, and Giles all looked through the doorway to the kitchen, where Angel and his team were gathered around the island countertop and conversing with heated intensity. They had gravitated together as soon as they were all in the same place, just as the Scoobies had gravitated to Giles's guidance, and she had no doubt that they were working out assignments of their own. Angel glanced over his shoulder at her, probably noticing that everyone at the table was looking their way, and she flashed him a smile that was bound to be unconvincing. On second thought, he had also probably overheard her last remark. Oops.

"Well..." said Giles.

Buffy knew what he, and Willow and Oz, were thinking: Angel seemed fine, far from the meltdown borderlines. "I'm serious," she hissed. "What he went through tonight..." Her voice surprised her by cracking, even at the whispered volume she was holding, and she covered her mouth to suppress a tiny sob. Knowing she was still visible to Angel if he turned around again, she stood up and moved away from the table. Willow pushed out of her chair to join her, and Buffy saw Oz tap Giles's arm and gesture at the doorway. The two of them got up quietly and left the girls in privacy.

Their departure alone might have been enough to set Buffy off; it was so considerate of them. Before she even formulated any of the sentences she'd thought to say, tears started falling, and Willow was hugging her tightly and murmuring unclear but comforting words.

"Why can't they just die," Buffy whimpered into her shoulder. "Why does the past always have to be coming back and hurting him?"

"I don't know," Willow confessed. "He tries so hard, you'd think he'd get a break sooner or later. But you know what?" She took a step back, her hands on Buffy's shoulders, and gave her a hopeful grin. "Angel thinks he's lucky. Isn't that the craziest thing?"

Buffy wiped her face with a sleeve and chuckled. "And you're going to tell me it's because of me, right?"

"I am, but the best part is I don't have to make it up. Come on, you should get him alone, like you said. If you hurry you won't even have to smother him in blankets for your ride home."

When Buffy went to collect Angel from the kitchen, he only resisted for a second. Certainly there was part of him that didn't want to sleep until his old companions were found, daylight be damned, but he wasn't about to fight Buffy on it. Especially not when all three of his employees backed her up with, "Go home," and even somehow managed to all say it at the same time.
It felt very odd to be walking back into the mansion, despite having been there less than a day ago. Buffy had been trying hard not to think about where she and Angel were supposed to be right now, and what they were supposed to be doing, but when she saw the gifts on the table still wrapped and waiting, it was hard to keep living in denial. She deliberately looked away from them, and Angel saw it and took her hand firmly, leading her upstairs without saying a word.

They settled on the bed together, but his shell didn't come down right away. She didn't force it. She sat leaning against him until he chose his words: "They brought back Darla as a human. She had the one thing in this world I want, and she threw it away."

"Makes you mad?"

He thought about it, then shook his head decisively. "I don't blame her. She had no chance to adjust, and there was nobody there to help her." He closed his eyes for a moment. "She looked for me and I wasn't there."

_Because you were here with me_, thought Buffy, but she didn't want to complicate the matter. She couldn't feel guilty about it, either. Darla's second chance was blown, but she had been a dead thing to begin with. Wherever her soul was now, it was where it belonged, and the only thing to be done was to make sure her body, and her demon, went where they belonged too. "We'll help her in the other way. We bring peace."

"I hope so." He pulled her closer to him, not seeming to be conscious of doing it. "I thought tonight was going to be peace. I can't believe you had to be there for that. I can't believe you had to hear me say those things."

She drew in a breath that fluttered the fabric of his shirt where her face was pressed up to it. That was Angel, always thinking about her suffering even when his own was worse. But he was still here with her, not trying to hide as if her mere presence were a privilege he didn't deserve, and that made it better for both of them. She was glad he could talk about it, and sorry for what she was going to say next, no matter how much it had to be said. "Why did you do it that way? Why did you talk about what happened when you got your soul secured?"

His tone was flat and miserable when he answered. "Because it happened. You can ask Willow what I said during the spell. That the soul doesn't matter, that I was going to end up a killer either way...and when I said it, I believed it, so I thought they would too. Especially now that they've all gone through what I did."

"Do you believe it now?"

It wasn't exactly a question that needed to be asked, she knew. She might as well start every day by asking him if he thought he might go on a murdering spree today. But if he still had some kind of fixation on his brief final experience with having no soul, maybe it would be good to let him confirm out loud that it was over.

So she wasn't exactly prepared for him to answer, "Partially." Seeing her start to blanch, he continued quickly. "I said that evil can come from a vampire that has a soul, and Daemonis proved that for me. I said that a soul doesn't have to get in the way of a good time. And I didn't even know how right about that I was. Being here with you for these last few months- in spite of everything- it's amazing. I'm so happy it makes me dizzy. I'm so happy I can't even think about the curse. I can feel things I never felt without a soul, and sometimes it hurts, but it's always, always worth it. It's not punishment anymore. It's something I chose."

Buffy craned her face up to see his. "And they didn't, did they? They just wanted an easy fix, like
He swallowed hard and nodded. "I thought that Spike at least could be redeemed. He always seemed like he was already halfway there—eating food like a human, talking about love like a human. I used to mock him for it."

"And Drusilla?" The words were out before Buffy had thought them through. Maybe he wasn't ready to talk about Drusilla. Maybe she should just stop with the questions.

But he didn't flinch to hear the name, and he didn't obfuscate his answer. "She can't be redeemed and she can't handle having a conscience. She was insane before I turned her. This is worse for her than for any of us." He shifted suddenly on the bed, twisting to face her, and grabbed her upper arms so tightly that she wondered if he really thought she was going to try to escape. "Buffy," he said, his tone dire and his eyes boring into her. "I hurt her so badly. I did things to her that should never even be spoken aloud, and I made her worship me for it. She would look at me and remember all of it and still couldn't hate me like she should, because I took that from her too."

Buffy recalled telling the others that she wanted to get Angel alone to avoid a meltdown. She felt his desperation through his deathgrip on her arms, his shame breaking the surface of memories he had never wanted her to hear. Even after he stopped talking she could hear that he was taking short, shallow breaths, some kind of carryover that vampires had from a human's physiological channeling of emotion.

Slowly, without breaking eye contact, Buffy placed her hands over his and then guided them away from her biceps and into her lap. She didn't have to pry him off of her; he responded as soon as he felt what she was doing, and looked at his own hands as if shocked by their betrayal. Without giving him time to wonder if he had hurt her— he hadn't, anyway- she leaned in and kissed him, very gently. His lips barely moved against hers, but when she touched his cheek and ran her fingers along the curves of his shoulders, she felt his body lose some of its rigidity and she knew she had him back. The moment had passed.

"But she can hate you now," Buffy said softly, still trying to cradle him in the diminutive circle of her arms. "Is that why she ran away?"

"She ran because she was afraid of me. And who wouldn't be?"

She chanced a smile, tilting back to show it to him. "Do I really have to answer that? For crying out loud, you've got a Slayer hanging on your neck here."

It worked. This time he was the one to initiate the embrace, and she felt kisses in her hair before he let go and stood up. She stayed on the bed. Sure, he was pacing a little, but he was just pensive now, not freaked. "It shouldn't be long before Spike and Dru go back to Darla," he said. "They need a leader. Hopefully that means we can find them all at once, but we won't know how to take them out until we do."

"Mm. Well, now your finder-outer squad is here catering to our whims along with the Sunnyhell regulars, so I bet we get it charted and mapped in no time. It's like when Batman teams up with the X-Men. Or wait, maybe they don't live in the same comic books. Xander would know."

Angel nodded, eyes down as he wandered around the room. "They're good. They know what they're doing."

"The X-Men?" Buffy freed her hair from its elastic and started taking off her jewelry. It had taken this long to remember that she was at home and it was time to recharge, but now she could call it..."
quits on the worst parts of the night and save the good memories for later.

"My team." He smiled a little, showing he knew that the correction was unneeded. As he spoke he pulled his shirt over his head, still pacing, and she saw his back bared to her. The griffin on the right still guarded it with fierce dignity, rippling along with his muscles and presenting the initial of the only name she would ever be able to call him. "It'll be okay. We'll track them all down, we'll make sure they don't cast the spell. It'll be okay."

"Yeah." She slipped out of her own shirt, wadding it up in her hands with distaste for the spots it had accrued during the messier parts of the night, and then stopped short as she looked at herself without it. She had completely forgotten about the very provocative lingerie she had been wearing under it, chosen in anticipation for the getaway, and now her mind was so full of vampires and dirty work that it struck her as completely ridiculous.

She let out a stream of abashed giggles, and Angel turned around to see why. He saw the humor in it immediately, but the amusement on his face was greatly overtaken by approval. "Red," he noted. "Did you wear that for me?"

When Buffy had changed from the wedding dress into her current outfit, she had been thinking of all kinds of seductive things to say when it came off of her. She was pretty sure they were all very effective ones, too. Now, the only reply that came to mind was, "I really really did." She shrugged a shoulder, not wanting him to feel like it meant he had a function to perform. "It made sense at the time."

"It makes sense now." In a few quick steps he was back on the bed with her, fingering the red frills in a way that made her blush like a virgin. "God, Buffy, you're so beautiful."

"I knew you liked me in red."

"I like you in everything. Or nothing. And you look amazing in white, did I tell you that?" He touched his forehead to hers and ran his fingers through her hair. "I wanted tonight to be perfect for you. I don't know how to-"

"Don't you dare apologize to me," she breathed. She almost told him to just kiss her, but some lines can't be used more than once, so instead she just kissed him. Regrets about the little cabin at the coast didn't last. They couldn't. Reality narrowed down to her lover's hands, clasped firmly once again on her arms, but this time only to lower her onto her back and hover over her with his tongue twining around hers. Ever since she had invited him back into herself, he had never needed to wait for permission. She could have doubts about her timing or his desire, but he always knew when she wanted him, and when he came to her, it was to take what was his.

It wasn't until she felt his weight pressing her into the bed that she could fully relax. It kept occurring to her that they were married now, and the thought felt new each time. Maybe she wouldn't get to wake up beside him every day, but she would get to keep having those days for as long as they both were alive.

After she was spent, she nestled against him and enjoyed the silence that accompanied the continued wanderings of his hand. She must have been halfway into a dream already when she spoke- she couldn't think of any reason that she would bring it up otherwise, sudden curiosity notwithstanding. "You could have fooled Darla if you went with her. You could have played the part until you had her trapped."

"Yeah," Angel agreed sleepily. "But she would have touched me."
Buffy began to feel very optimistic about the battles she most likely had coming tomorrow. As far as she was concerned, Darla had already lost.

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After Giles showed up at the Magic Box the next morning, Xander brought Anya back to the house just in time to catch Wesley and Gunn as they were going out the door. "Whoa, hey," he said, grabbing Wesley's sleeve. "Fill me in first? I just spent the most boring night ever on the most uncomfortable table ever in the spookiest store ever. Whatever you're doing right now there's a high probability that I'm going to beg you to let me tag along."

"Sure," said Gunn amiably. "Wouldn't hurt to be bringing a guy who knows the territory."

"Or you could be in our group," put in Willow as she and Oz descended the stairs. "We're going to break and enter! But it's just a crypt. Ooh! Or maybe we could call it a tomb, and then we'd be tomb raiders!"

Xander decided to let chivalry rule the day and turned to Anya. "Who do you feel like today? Sherlock Holmes or Lara Croft?"

She frowned back at him. "Well, obviously I prefer that you emulate fictional characters that have a penis, but I was going to join Cordelia's group, because she's staying here."

"Your fate has been determined, Sherlock," stated Wesley, opening the door again. "Shall we?"

Xander got into Wesley's car with him and Gunn, Willow and Oz set off on foot, and Anya and Cordelia waved goodbye from the doorway. Xander got a few details during the ride about what they were supposed to be doing, and the first item on the list seemed to be a stop at Angel's mansion. Both men had been adamant about the need to retrieve some of their own clothes, and Xander couldn't really blame them. The shirts he had loaned them were perfectly good no matter what they might say about the colors, but enormous height was a trait that Wesley and Gunn happened to share, and just about everything was small on them.

Buffy answered the door in a bathrobe and pointed them to their suitcases and to rooms where Wesley and Gunn could change. She had morning hair and starry eyes, but she was as calm and collected as ever, greeting everyone politely and thanking them for the work they were putting in today. While he was alone in the room with her, Xander took the chance to ask if she was alright, and she merely stood there with her folded arms and said, "Fine. You?"

"Fine. Uh, where's Angel?"

"Busy." She said it with a smile. "Sorry we can't come help. Daylight."

"Yeah. Them's the breaks." He wondered if she was challenging him to mention that daylight only posed a problem for one of them. He thought he might mention that later, maybe if he was feeling a little more suicidal. "So...yeah. The guys just needed their clothes."

"Yep."

"And then, we're, uh, gonna go. Since you and Angel are, uh, busy."

She smiled again. "There's a reason I'm not inviting you to sit down, Xander."

Wesley and Gunn returned, a timely rescue. Wes exchanged a few words with Buffy about keeping everyone in contact in case anything was found or changed, and she promised to keep the phone on and then gave them a warm but insistent goodbye. Xander took the hint as well as they did, but just
before he was ushered outside he turned and blurted out, "Buffy. I think I forgot to say this yesterday, but...congratulations."

She responded by wrapping him in a quick hug and murmuring her heartfelt thanks into his ear. Then she shooed him out the rest of the way and turned back to her home, and he shut the door behind him and rejoined Angel's extra tall detective force.

Xander was able to be of real help, it turned out, and sooner than he would have expected. Giles had written out directions to a few different places in town that might have information, but none of them led to anything useful and Xander put in a vote for trying Willy's pub next. Even Giles had only a passing familiarity with that one, but Xander knew every entrance. He led them to the 'human' one, which faced the street but opened into a dark hallway that protected the vampires within from getting hit by any stray sunlight. It also incidentally gave them a viewpoint that let them see what was going on in the bar without being immediately visible.

Gunn saw it first. He was in front, and blocked the other two with an arm before pointing at the bar and mouthing the words, "Is that him?"

Xander confirmed it silently, stunned. Spike had his hands on the counter and was leaning over it in the most threatening possible pose, and he was saying something inaudible to Willy, who was putting on his usual show of helpless shrugs and stammered denials. Xander looked to Wesley and Gunn to see what they wanted to do, and after a few glances had passed between the three of them, he stayed put and held his silence. With Spike impaired by his chip, they undoubtedly could have killed him right then and there, but they had discussed it earlier and they needed to either shadow him or force some information out of him first, or they would never get on the trail of the others. A bar full of vampires was a terrible place to initiate a fight, anyway.

Spike slammed a fist on the bar and stormed off toward the exit that had sewer access, and Xander and the others gave him a moment's head start before emerging cautiously from the hallway. A few of the customers looked up from where they were huddled over their drinks, but when they saw that the humans weren't going to bother them, they went back to their own conversations or sullen solitude. Willy, however, recognized Xander and beckoned him over right away. Xander was suspicious- Willy wasn't a friend, though he was usually harmless and tolerable in temper- but they had come here for a chat with him anyway, so he approached the bar and Wesley and Gunn came up on either side of him.

"You guys with the Slayer?" Willy asked. "Working with her and Angel? You prob'ly wanna hear about what Spike just told me, right?"

Xander raised an eyebrow. "And you're just going to tell us? Is this some kind of proactive attempt to keep us from threatening to beat it out of you?"

"Hey, hey, none of that." Willy grabbed a rag and started reflexively wiping the counter. "I'm giving you this one for free 'cause he's looking for his girlfriend, and if he finds her there's gonna be trouble here that money can't fix."

"His girlfriend?" said Wesley. "You know about Drusilla?"

"Damn right I do. Thought we'd seen the last of her when Spike came back into town and she didn't, but whaddaya know, last night I'm closing up shop and here she is."

Gunn grabbed his wrist, halting the movements of the cleaning rag. "She was here? You saw her? Now do me a favor and tell me you're not taking money from her boss."
"I toldja," said Willy. "This ain't a money thing. I dunno what they're up to, but it's not good and you guys can end it." He waited for Gunn to loosen his grip and then twisted his wrist away from him. "I told Spike I didn't know a thing, see? But he's gonna tear up the town looking for her, and I figure we're all better off if you get there first. So, you gonna listen?"

"All ears," said Xander.

"'A'right. There's this guy I get in here sometimes. Human guy. Minds his own business mostly, but sometimes he picks up a vamp chick and takes her home. Got that blood kink thing, I guess."

Everyone made appropriately disgusted grimaces. Wesley followed his by saying, "What an extraordinarily distinguished establishment you seem to be running here."

"Hey," Willy retorted, "this ain't a suckhouse. The guy doesn't make trouble, he can do what he wants. But last night, the vamp chick was Dru. Woulda warned him off her, but he didn't give me a chance. Now, I know where he lives, see? We hung out a couple times. I don't know if she's still there- hell, I don't know if they even got there in the first place, maybe she just sucked him dry and left him on the sidewalk- but it'll give you a start."

"Wow," said Xander as Willy scribbled down a name and address on the back of a receipt. "Thanks."

"Just get the job done. That Drusilla's crazy. And lately, all them other vamps are crazy too, I don't know what their problem is. And Spike, he's gonna burn this place to the ground if he finds out I had anything to do with this, so for God's sake, kill him too."

Gunn gave him the quick nod of the competent warrior. "Sounds like a plan. Keep it real, barkeep."

They went right to the address they were given before even contacting Angel, hoping to follow the trail to its end before they returned to him with a report on their progress. Wesley ordered that they take every measure to prevent Drusilla from learning that they were after her, but nonetheless, he knocked on the front door and openly asked the man who answered if he had seen a woman who matched the description he gave of Drusilla.

The man was, unsurprisingly, wary of them, and the first thing he asked was, "Willy send you?"

"He was concerned," said Wes smoothly. "He knew she was dangerous. I expect he'll be quite relieved to hear that you're alive and well after your encounter with her."

"Yeah, uh, thing is, I didn't really have one. She wanted me to bring her to another bar first, and then she left me and picked up some other guy." He scratched his head. "I don't think she liked it that I knew she was a vampire. Sounds crazy, I know, but she was kind of..."

"Crazy," said Xander. "We know."

Gunn tapped his fingers on the wall impatiently. "You got anything on this guy she went with? Ever seen him before?"

"Seen him, don't know him. The bartender probably would. The Bronze, downtown, you know the place. Good luck." He closed the door in their faces, which Xander thought was nice and tidy. If the bite-fetish barfly wanted to get rid of them, the feeling was fully mutual.

The next part of the process was as arduous as any in which Xander had ever participated. The first guy didn't know, but he knew a guy who might know, but he wondered why they wanted to know, but there was another guy they should ask if they really wanted to know, but his phone number was
missing, but some cash might make it easier, but maybe they should try the first guy again. Wesley and Gunn were as aggravated by the runaround as Xander was, but he was impressed to see that they had few reservations about threatening when it helped, and the chilly tone that Wesley used for it was more impressive still. In the end they had another address, as well as the knowledge that Drusilla and her date must have reached his home shortly before dawn, so she was, in all likelihood, still there.

It was time to bring the story to Angel. Xander hoped that Buffy had changed out of her bathrobe by now.

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Between researching Daemonis's concealment spell, fielding calls from nearly everyone at one point or another, and keeping one eye always on the Moisipi spirit, Giles was busier than he would have thought he could be in the store by himself when it was closed. When Wesley called and told him that they were all convening at Angel's to compare notes, he cursed to himself and glared at the Moisipi, which had been silent all day but would undoubtedly start spouting information the moment he left it alone. "Start without me," he told Wesley. "Or send Anya over to take my place. Tell her she's on the clock as long as she's here."

He was the last to arrive at the mansion, but only by a few minutes. Father Tom was being filled in on everything that had happened since he left the reception the night before, and he looked none too happy about being out of the loop throughout the entire saga. When Giles entered, everyone seemed to be trying to find delicate terms to explain the significance of Darla and the other two vampires working together, until finally Angel looked up and said, "Drusilla. Spike. He knows."

Father Tom nodded passively and let the disjointed story continue, but when they got to the part about Daemonis disappearing and the need to keep watching the Moisipi in case of any change, he interrupted. "He's there but he isn't visible or tangible?"

"Yes," said Giles. "And I've spent the morning investigating possibilities of magic he might have used, and come up almost entirely empty."

"Because it's not a spell." The priest shook his head in irritation as everyone swiveled to give him a blank stare. "I've been hunting Daemonis for years. Did none of you think to call and ask if I knew anything that might help?"

There was an embarrassed silence. Giles wondered if he could have been studying in his own home all this time. Xander had gained a look of intense consternation, no doubt wondering if he and Anya could have spent the night in bed. Willow answered the question in her own sheepish query: "We figured...didn't want to bother you?"

Father Tom sighed. "He has an ability that lets him vanish when he feels the need, as long as nobody is there to see him do it. As far as I know, he can rematerialize the same way, but by keeping watch with that spirit, you're effectively holding him in place. Given the urgency of his current situation, I've little doubt that he'll want to return as soon as he has the opportunity, but for now, you don't need to worry about him."

"Relief, anyone?" said Xander after a brief pause. "Are we feeling a little relief? I'm gonna go with relief. Moving on."

Willow raised her hand, bubbling in anticipation. "My turn? Oz and I got this nifty Zippo lighter from Spike's crypt. We can cast the seeking spell any time."
"Classic!" Buffy praised her. "And Spike should be with Drusilla, so that's two down."

Wesley cleared his throat. "Actually, Spike seems to have lost Drusilla at some point last night. But we may have found her." He went on to tell everyone how he, Gunn, and Xander had located her current refuge. Through most of the story he spoke directly to Angel, who took it in silently with an unwavering gaze, and ended it by handing him a slip of paper which seemed to have a name and address written on it.

Angel studied the paper for longer than someone with a memory like his ought to require, then said to no one in particular, "If Spike lost Dru, he'll go back to Darla. He won't think anyone else could help him find her."

"So I retract my earlier statement," said Buffy. "That's three down. Four if we count Daemonis. Anyone else got news?"

"Here's something," Oz offered. "It's ten minutes to sunset."

Cordelia stood up and peeked out of the heavy drapes. She turned back to the room, apparently satisfied that Oz's statement was accurate, and announced, "Cry hammock! Unleash the dogs of war!"

"Havoc," corrected five or six voices around the room, Giles's among them.

"Whatever," Cordy replied. "Get going! You're unleashed!"

***

Angel wasn't sure how to go about splitting up the group, but Buffy didn't seem to have any qualms about excusing herself and him by telling them simply, "I need to talk to Angel alone for a minute." She led him through the house to the door by the garden, a private spot though still protected from the last rays of sunlight.

She cut right to the chase. "You want to go after Drusilla by yourself, don't you?"

"Yes," he said, the truth of the answer bringing it out of him without any need to think about why. "But I don't know if that's possible, with the other two loose at the same time."

"Let me take care of them." She brought a fingertip to his lips quickly, cutting off the protest he was about to make. "Spike can't hurt me, and I can handle Darla by myself. Can't I?"

The question was asked sincerely; once again, she wanted confirmation from his knowledge of Darla. All he could do was answer with the same honesty, though it turned his stomach to think of Buffy and Darla in a mortal battle. "You can handle her."

"And if you sneak out of here now, the gang won't have anything to do but back me up. So I'll be fine. We really can't wait on either of them, Angel. If we try to get them one at a time, the other could be up to some serious no good."

"You really want me to do this?"  

Her voice took on an edge, as it did when the anger that she felt at the world seeped through. "No. I want you to take me back to bed and make love to me until I pass out. But it looks like right now I'm supposed to be thinking long-term, and as far as that goes, I want closure. So go get me some."

The sun had finished setting, and Angel took one step outside. He didn't think that he could ever find
closure for his history with Drusilla, but there could be an end. He had to move fast, though. "I'll go. You'll tell them not to follow me?"

"I'll demand it. Here." She grabbed his stake sheaths from the weapons chest nearby, and he strapped them on and loaded them as she turned and found him a coat that would conceal them.

"Don't underestimate Darla," he said, donning the coat. "And keep your eye on Spike too."

"I know. One more thing." Buffy ducked back out of the room and came back quickly with a small pouch. She shook the contents into her hand and explained, "Wesley gave these to us. You probably won't need another weapon, but they're so small, we might as well each take one."

He lifted one of the 'weapons' delicately from her palm and stretched it out to look at it. It was nothing but a pair of brass handles connected by two feet of cord that was so thin and clear that it was almost invisible, but he thought he understood. "Garrotes?" he asked.

She nodded and demonstrated with the other one, looping it once around his wrist and taking a handle in each hand. "You can cut through a lot of different materials like this," she said, pulling her hands apart just enough to exert the slightest amount of pressure on his skin. It didn't hurt, but he could feel the way it would slice through if she meant business. She released his arm and wound up the tool, using a clip to fasten it onto her belt loop. "It doesn't do much for someone with ordinary human strength, but...go us."

He coiled up the other one and tucked it away in his pocket. "Apparently Wesley has some strange ideas about wedding gifts," he said.

"He also got us a crockpot." Buffy offered with a rueful smile. "Hey, I'm just glad they don't say 'His' and 'Hers.'"

"I better get moving. You too. I'll find you as soon as I can."

Before letting him go, she reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder, gazing up at him intently. "I love you."

It wasn't a phrase he ever tired of hearing from her, but it also wasn't routine for them to say it every time they had to part before facing some kind of danger. It was too much like a goodbye, or at least an admission that one of them might not come back. Right now it was probably the only way that Buffy could show him that she was afraid. He pulled her to his chest and hugged her tightly, feeling her return the embrace with her usual fervor. "I love you too," he answered, kissing her first on the forehead and then on the lips. "And I swear, I will take you to the beach."

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Willow's locator spell, simple enough to cast, brought the merged teams to a crypt much like the one that Spike had so recently vacated, though in a different cemetery.

Actually, the spell didn't bring them anywhere. It showed Willow where the vampires were, and it showed her how to get there, but it certainly didn't provide any transportation. To get there they all had to squeeze into Giles's car and Oz's van with their sharp and bulky weapons, and when they got out at the graveyard's gate, they ran. Willow couldn't run as fast as Buffy, or many of the others, but she tried her best. She was the only one who knew exactly where they were headed, and she could tell that Buffy was already anxious about getting there too late. There was magic for transporting people, Willow knew, but she hadn't had the time to learn it yet. It was just impossible to know what to prioritize in her magic studies. It seemed like every day she needed something completely
The cemetery surrounding the crypt that had hidden Spike and Darla for the day was a vast one, and the crypt itself was certainly on the spacious side. They came up to it panting, Willow gesturing at it as her breath came back to her. The warriors among them didn't need to talk it out; they shared a few glances, hefted their weapons, and then Buffy led the way down the three steps to the door and kicked it open.

Willow waited outside trembling, with Oz standing by her and Giles, Cordelia, Xander, and Anya nearby. Everyone else had gone in, but it didn't take long for them to sweep the place and return, sans Father Tom. "No blondes," said Buffy. "There's a survivor, though. Who thinks they can help the holy man make her talk sense while I start working on Plan B, tentatively labeled Oh Shit They're Still Missing?"

Cordelia stepped forward fearlessly. "I learned a lot about comforting scared girls by working with Angel," she said. "And hey, she might have a priest phobia. I'll have her out here shaking hands in no time." She entered the crypt like it was her own front door- although, Willow thought, she probably didn't hold her nose before walking into her own front door.

Willow and Oz hurried up to Buffy to catch her attention before everyone else did. "The spell worked," said Willow. "This is where they were when I cast it, so they must have just left. And, well, I could cast it again, but if they're already on the move, it's not going to do much good."

"Their scent is fresh," Oz confirmed. "I can try following it. No guarantees on the quality of the haste, though."

Buffy exhaled with evident frustration and turned away. "Giles, you have any thoughts on where they're going? ...Giles?"

Giles had moved farther away from them while they were talking, and now seemed to be involved in his own rapid discussion with Wesley and the others, punctuated with a lot of looking and pointing out at the darkness. Willow and Oz followed Buffy over to the other group, where she announced their presence by inquiring, "Did you guys find something else interesting to talk about? 'Cause I thought we agreed that it was my turn to choose the activity for the night."

"Demons," said Gunn.

The answer was succinct enough to make Willow start scanning the area around her for danger, but Wesley elaborated with, "We've spotted several already. They're keeping at a distance as of yet, but they may become problematic when we wish to leave the premises."

"Which we have to do," stated Buffy. "Soon. Darla and Spike have way too much of a head start already."

Something moved, out from behind one large headstone and hidden again by another in the blink of an eye, but this time it was close enough for everyone to see, and Willow had no illusions about it being friendly. Xander shuddered. "Aye carumba. Just when you think all the flunkies got swallowed up in a mass baptism incident."

"Daemonis amassed many followers," said Giles, "not all of them vampires. It's likely that they switched their allegiance over to Darla when she gained control, or that they simply knew that something was afoot here and came to investigate. Either way, we'll need to find a way around them, or prepare for more of a battle than we had anticipated."
The conversation was saved from getting any bleaker by the emergence of Cordelia and Father Tom from the crypt, escorting a teenage girl with long dark hair and a pretty face. Evidently Cordelia had made good on her boast of sealing a quick friendship: the newcomer still looked nervous, but she took her place in the small crowd without hesitation. Cordy beckoned Buffy over, and everyone else tried to keep a respectful distance while still listening in.

"You guys aren't, like, normal," the girl ventured. "I mean...are you? Normal human people?"

"Honey," said Cordelia with utmost sympathy, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "Is your brain fried? We understand if it is, but we don't have time to get into that right now, so you better just start by letting us know."

Willow's first impulse was to speak up in the girl's defense, but Cordelia had a point. What they needed more than anything right now was information, and mental recuperation came second. Xander seemed to pick up on the same thought, and even declared it with a workable proposal: "Hey, if what we're looking for here is brain power, how about skipping all that vocal stuff?" He looked pointedly at Father Tom. "Doesn't this count as a justifiable cause to read her?"

"I can't," the priest informed him. Then he asked the girl directly, "Are you a vampire?"

"Yeah," she replied, without shock or hesitation. "I mean, I think so. I was just getting used to it and now everything feels different and I don't know why."

It was hard to see everyone's reactions in the dark, but Willow noted that nobody gasped, and Cordelia didn't remove her hand from the girl's shoulder. Giles's voice was grave when he spoke. "You were sired more than ten days ago?"

"Yeah, it was maybe two weeks."

Buffy stepped up to face her and said with deep sincerity, "That is great. And later on we can explain why it's great. And we might be able to help you. I'm sure things have been hard, and I can't promise they're going to get easier anytime soon, but you really have a chance. Something you can work with. In the meantime, can you work with us?"

"...I guess?" The vampire looked more bewildered than panicked, but being rushed like this still wasn't going to be easy on her.

"Okay," said Buffy. "Have you seen a vampire named Darla?"

The name was clearly familiar, from the girl's expression, and carried some kind of emotional weight. "Darla?" She bit back a choking laugh that carried a frantic undercurrent. "Of course it would be Darla. Can't be more than one of those around...she was here. She's everywhere, really. She's the top. We all have to obey her because she knows best, only now there really isn't any 'we,' since I'm the only one left. And she has this Billy Idol guy, he kind of scares me too."

"Spike!" It was too obvious to have to say it out loud, Willow thought, but that didn't stop most of them from making the exclamation at once. Finally, finally they were getting their enemies cornered.

"That's him. That's his name." The young vampire raised an eyebrow. "You know everyone, don't you?"

"Where did they go?" Buffy pressed her. "What did they say?"

"I don't know where they went. Darla was ticked. She said that the spell should have gone through by now if Demonic had done his part. She said he must be dead."
"Daemonis, you mean?" asked Wesley.

The girl looked faintly irritated through her confusion. "Whatever. She said Spike had to take his place."

This time Giles was the one to put words to what they were all thinking. "Spike is going to be the sacrifice," he said. "Darla intends to use him to cast the spell."

"I have to go," said Buffy as she whirled to face him. "I have to catch them before they reach the lake. Guys, can you hold your own here? I can't do this if any of those demons out there decide to follow me."

"You bet," Gunn assured her. "We all go out there and keep them busy, and you run for the door."

Willow wanted to just throw in her support and start facing some demons, but she was calculating some times and distances in her head and it wasn't working out. Buffy wasn't going to make it to the lake on her own strength. Willow lowered her voice, and the two of them automatically separated themselves from the others as she tried to explain the situation to her friend. "You have to move fast. Faster than just running, and there aren't any direct roads for a car. I have a spell for this, but...I have to stay linked to you. I have to be in meditation for as long as you need it, and stuck here with everything...I don't know."

Buffy took a deep breath, nodding her comprehension. "Be ready with it anyway, and I'll see what else we can do. You need to set anything up?"

"A few calming exercises wouldn't hurt."

"Do them. Don't go far."

Wandering off was the last thing on Willow's mind. It was impossible to tell how many demons were out there, or what kind they were- there was just an occasional rustle or shadow that made her remember checking her closet for monsters as a child, sometimes every few minutes, all night long. Oz squeezed her hand and let her recede, and she sat down cross-legged outside the crypt and leaned against its wall.

The calming exercises were legitimate; they weren't unique to Wiccan tradition and contained no magic in and of themselves, but they were used by spellcasters at every level and always helped Willow clear her mind before a difficult spell. Conditions for deep concentration couldn't get much lousier than this, and she needed to take advantage of what little solitude she could find. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and pictured herself in a void. She stopped thinking about Buffy getting to the lair on time, stopped listening to the low murmur of voices as the others discussed it, stopped wondering why Buffy and Angel had chosen to separate for these crucial battles. Minutes slipped away, and only the weight of a gentle hand on her shoulder brought her out of her trance.

She opened her eyes and took Oz's hands to let him help her up from her sitting position. "It's okay," he said. "You can stay here and cast the spell. Cordy and Xander are taking care of the vamp girl, her name's Lydia. Anya and the Watcher-types are going to try to identify all these demons on the fly so we know how to beat them. The rest of the guys are clearing a path for Buffy."

Willow blinked, trying to focus on the shape of his face before her as her eyes readjusted to the night. "What about you?" she asked.

"I'm going to protect you." He took her hand and brought it to his lips to kiss, then led her behind the crypt. The rear wall was shorter than the others, and she had no trouble climbing up to the roof with
the boost he gave her. The stone surface was cold beneath her and a little dirty, but it was solid, a
good place for working magic. She looked back down at Oz, who smiled before he turned away and
began shedding his clothes.

When he turned back, he was the wolf in full. Willow's heart beat a little bit faster- she knew how
much progress he had made, but this was an awfully dramatic way to test it. "Oz?" she said
tentatively.

In answer, he reared up with his front paws bracing against the crypt, looking up at her and wagging
his tail. That alone sent a little thrill through her body. She had never seen the wolf wag his tail
before. Without a thought for the risk, she got down on her belly and stretched out her arm to pet his
head, right between the ears. He neither growled nor flinched, and she could barely contain her glee.
The wolf had never let her touch him before, either. "I love you so much, Oz," she told him, and
then he dropped back down to all fours and trotted away, settling within her range of vision but
facing the darkness of the cemetery, standing sentry.

Buffy and Giles came up to the other side of the crypt, and Willow crossed it to talk to them.
"Buffy, are you ready to be Speedy Girl?"

"So past ready. And selfishly giddy about being temporarily imbued with extra super powers."

Willow searched the ground for her supply bag and had Giles hand it up to her. There were a few
small items she always kept in there for their versatility as spell components, and one of them was a
small white feather. She showed it to Buffy without letting go of it. "This is going to be the talisman.
You have to hold it in your hand the whole time you're running, and I'll be here concentrating to
keep the power in it. When you get to them, drop the feather, and I'll know I can let go of the spell."

"Aye aye. Profuse thanking is coming up as soon as we have time for it."

"'Kay. Oh, and don't trip, okay? That would be really bad."

Buffy nodded emphatically, and Willow spoke a simple chant over the feather to get the spell started.
Then she took a deep breath and leaned down to hand the talisman over, straightening carefully as
the influence of the spell made her lose some of her steadiness on the crypt's rooftop. She got into a
meditative posture as Giles murmured, "Do be careful," which was probably directed at Buffy but
could have been both of them. Willow didn't open her eyes to find out. She was damned well going
to be careful without any encouragement for it anyway. Oz had her back, the gang had the battle,
and she had the wings on Buffy's feet.

The Slayer's accelerated departure sounded like a clap of thunder. There were sounds that continued
beyond that; clangs, shouts, roars, the wild mournful call of a wolf. Willow heard everything and
never opened her eyes to see it.

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The urgency of her situation didn't mean that Buffy wasn't marveling at how it felt to run like this.
When she had first gained her powers, there had been moments between the angst and the training
when she would test her strength or reflexes just for the fun of it, forgetting about all the duties and
changes that being Chosen had brought into her life and just enjoying it for what it was. It had been a
long time since anything had felt new about super strength and reflexes, though, and the enhanced
speed that she was using right now was exhilarating in its sheer novelty.

She wasn't sure how fast she was moving, but she thought it was at least highway speed. It was hard
to look at anything that wasn't straight in front of her- she herself would probably only appear as a
blur to anyone she passed- and the importance of Willow's warning about tripping was made clear. She concentrated on picking a clear path through the cemetery, leaping the gate, and crossing some populated but quiet territory before reaching the woods. For the last part of the journey she found herself back on a road, the one that led up to the dock, and she could smell the water and feel the change in temperature before she saw the lake.

Two faces were visible at the dock, pale spots against the darkness of their clothing and the night around them. Buffy's hyperspeed made their appearance seem sudden and alarming, and for a moment she actually tried to put on an extra burst of speed, as if they would have the opportunity to escape her, instead of preparing to collect herself for battle. She came to her senses as they both flinched in shock at her unconventional arrival, and she opened her hand, letting the white feather float lazily to the ground at her skidding feet. Her breath caught up to her in a few beats, and she drew in a huge gulp of air that wrenched painfully at her lungs. The spell had made her hectic dash possible, but it hadn't entirely shielded her from the aftereffects, and she hoped that her legs would stop trembling before she had to start using them for kicking.

Spike was crouching and holding onto one end of a large plank of wood; on closer inspection, Buffy saw that he had pulled it from the dock and there was now a wide gap in front of him. He straightened up as she began to approach, but Darla spoke first. "If it isn't the cheerleader. Angelus didn't come? Poor boy, probably couldn't bear to be taking sides. Oh, or maybe he didn't want to see you die. He can be so sentimental."

Buffy considered telling them the truth about where Angel was, just to see what Spike would do if Drusilla's name was invoked, but for now it was safer to keep him here, where he was helpless against her. "He chose a side," she said instead, then looked at Spike. "Everyone made a choice."

"Right," he said, unimpressed. "Angel chose Bachelorette Number Three, I chose One and Two, and you chose a last-ditch effort to try to make me feel repentant. If you two are going to fight to the death, can you just get on with it?"

"You're an idiot, Spike. You're never going to get what you want this way."

He snorted. "Stakes and stones, princess. You haven't got a sodding clue of what I want." He began to stroll closer to Buffy, though he stayed on his side of the missing piece in the dock. Buffy took a few steps forward herself, and looked down to see water swirling beneath the gap. It was too dark to tell for sure, but she calculated that it was directly above the door to the lair. "Perhaps I've become the compassionate one," Spike continued. "I don't see your lot finding much concern for the suffering you've wrought. Lost souls come back to the prison of cold flesh? A girl driven mad by pain and forced to endure it forever? Is that what you expect me to want?"

So Spike wanted to cast the spell so he could save Drusilla from the torment of her conscience. It was heartbreaking, in a way, seeing the lengths he would go to for her. With any luck, Angel had already released her into death. "Maybe not," Buffy replied, "but whatever you do, things will never go back to the way they were before. Even with her."

Darla's hand flashed out in a quick movement, and Buffy thanked her lucky stars that she had been keeping one eye on the female vampire. It gave her the heads up she needed to catch the knife that was thrown, her hand closing around the hilt while the point was just inches from her chest. Buffy glanced at the weapon, then tossed it into the water. A knife wasn't going to be much use here.

"Smooth catch," said Darla. "I was starting to feel left out of the conversation. So, Buffy darling, it's been a while. How's your mother? I remember her, she was so...sweet."

Buffy knew better than to rise to the bait, but the surge of fury she felt at the calculated jab veiled as
an offhand remark eliminated all of the weariness that the run had brought into her. She transferred all of her attention off of Spike and onto Darla. "If you want to catch up, let's talk about the good times. Like you getting staked by Angel."

"And you think that was for your sake, don't you? You have much to learn about my boy. You know what would help?...Two hundred years of insight into his mind."

There had been enough talk, and Buffy no longer felt winded. She jumped the gap and twisted into a handspring as she came down, reaching Darla feet first. It would have been a serious blow, but Darla dodged and was positioned to defend as soon as Buffy was upright again. Silence cut through the night as they made one slow revolution around each other, broken only by the gentle sound of the water lapping against the rowboats tied up at either side of the dock. Buffy made her second attack, realizing that Angel had meant it when he said that Darla didn't like direct combat; she kept waiting for Buffy to initiate so she could play her defensive moves. Seeing these tactics didn't make Buffy temper her aggression at all, but it did make her warier. It was too hard to tell yet just how strong Darla was.

She got an answer sooner than she wanted, when Darla swatted away her punch like it was nothing and landed one of her own directly in her face. "For instance," the vampire said conversationally as Buffy staggered backwards, "you ought to know that he's going to want to hurt you. Nothing you need to take personally, of course. That's just how he likes it. And don't think that he's lost his instincts just because he put a ring on your finger."

Buffy felt one of her heels find the edge of the dock. She recovered her balance quickly, but it had been too close and she made sure to keep more to the center. "You're like fifty shades of jealous right now," she replied. "Never had a boy give you a ring, huh?"

Darla walked boldly across Buffy's path, stopping at Spike's side. For his part, he was simply watching the match with his hands in his pockets, but Buffy knew he was never going to be as passive as he appeared. Darla neither touched him nor spoke to him, keeping her eyes only on Buffy. "He's going to want you bound and gagged. Trembling when he touches you. And every single day you're together, he'll crave the sensation of burying his fangs in your neck and guzzling down that warm, rich, young blood of yours."

She took one more step and Buffy saw that she had not been heading for Spike, but for the loose board that he had pulled up. Before Darla could pick up the board, Buffy darted forward and stepped onto its other end, preventing her from gaining a weapon. It also gave Buffy a good opening for an attack, and she delivered a series of kicks and punches, some of them successful, before finding the space to make a verbal reply. "Oh, you guys drink blood, huh? If only I were your age, I might have known that." She crossed her wrists to block a hit, then snatched Darla's hand out of the air and held it immobile for a few tense seconds. "But here's an angle for you- maybe that's what I want him to do to me."

She was rewarded by a flash of surprise hitting Darla's face, but then the vampire twisted out of her grasp and kicked out at her so hard that she went flying, almost to the end of the dock. Gravity caught her first, but before she had her momentum back under control she slid into the tall wooden post at the corner, ribs first. She rolled back to her feet quickly- nothing was broken, but being thrown like that had frightened her. For the first time, it occurred to her that she might not win this.

Darla was approaching with a purposeful but unhurried stride. "Spike," she commanded, "you know what to do. Get on it."

"I think I want to watch this first," he said. "Can't resist a good catfight."
Buffy stared at him, indistinct as the darkness made his form at the other end of the dock. She was suddenly aware of how much of a danger he could really be right now. If he got bored before she was done with the ‘catfight,’ she wouldn't be able to stop him from getting into the lair and casting the spell. Keeping her fighting stance and watching Darla, she called out to Spike, "You're not one of them, you know."

"Oh, there's a twist," he called back. Evidently she had captured his interest, because he started walking towards her- and away from the access to the lair. Good. "Not one of who?"
Buffy met Darla's backhand and returned it in kind before answering. "Her. Them. Your new club. You're not crazy like them and you're not evil like them. You don't fit right and all four of you know it."

"Priceless," said Spike with open incredulity as he stopped in front of the dueling women. "I'm not evil, now?"

Darla's blows were coming fast and ruthless, and Buffy had to grit her teeth and keep her concentration divided between fighting her and talking to Spike. "Not like they are. I mean, seriously, Daemonis? You were going to follow that?"

"I'm not following anyone," he spat, definitely getting angry.

"And you don't need to badmouth Daemonis," Darla added with suggestive sarcasm. "Not the best I've ever had, but given his condition, the stamina was impressive."

Buffy almost stopped fighting just so she could gawk. "Oh, gag me. That was just about the epitome of TMI."

"It's an alliance," Spike continued. "I'm capable of an alliance, you know."

"It's a club," Buffy countered, countering a deft punch at the same time. "And all of its other members are treating you like the doormat. You're not like them. You can't kill like them. You're the only one who even has a chance to learn to live with a soul, and they hate you for it. Come on," she panted, getting desperate. "Your name doesn't even start with D!"

Darla's next move caught her off guard: an open-handed strike to the face. No way, Buffy thought. Did I just get bitchslapped? The indignity of it was insufferable, but on the other hand, it had to mean that she was fraying Darla's patience, and maybe that meant she was getting to Spike, too.

"You are nothing," hissed Darla. "You are an insignificant, ignorant, inferior little child. And Angelus is a confused, broken toy. And before long, he and I will be sharing the last of your blood and laughing over it. Welcome to the glory of the new world." She rushed at Buffy, grabbing at her clothes and limbs, working to disrupt her balance. The same pole that Buffy had rolled into kept appearing in the corner of her vision, reminding her of how perilously close they were to the edge of the dock.

Buffy fought back with the dirtiest tricks she could think up, going for the eyes, the hair, inflicting pain in any way she could. Unable to spare a glance at Spike, she nonetheless cut loose and screamed at him. "You can't save Drusilla! She's going to be in agony for as long as she lives and this is your last chance to give a damn about it!"

Darla's voice came out much more steadily, though just as loud. "Spike, get down to the lair and cast the spell. Right. Now."

Spike stood in easy range of a misplaced blow from either one of them, but he still appeared calm,
almost disinterested. He looked them each in the face, then said casually to Darla, "Never really liked you anyway." With that, he lifted his foot, planted it in the middle of her chest, and shoved.

Darla had less than a second to show her complete shock, and then she was toppling backwards. Like any falling person would, she reached out to grab the object closest to herself, and the object was Buffy, who had no chance to break away. During the ten foot drop, Buffy had time to notice the moonlight rippling across the surface of the lake, the hard smack of the water as it met her body, and Spike’s roar of pain as the ensuing splash hit some exposed part of his body.

*Can’t hurt me*, she told herself as she sank beneath the surface. *It's just water, just holy water, I'm not a vampire, it can't hurt me.* But she was going under, and she felt a rivulet trickling down her nose, and this time there was nobody around with the breath to save her.
Angel had never fought Drusilla in earnest. He had never needed to- for the entire duration of the time they were together, she had been completely submissive to him, though not everyone could see that by observing their relationship. She liked hurting Spike from time to time, and Spike apparently liked being hurt, but Angelus had made it clear that he wouldn't put up with anyone's sadism aside from his own. Up until she discovered that he had regained his soul, Drusilla kept her impulses in check around him, and after that, they hadn't crossed paths enough for her to plan a serious attack against him.

He didn't need to fight her to have a clear appraisal of her power, though. Physically, he surpassed her strength by far. That wasn't the issue on his mind as he walked the streets to the address he had been given. Dru's greatest assets were all mental: her flashes of insight to the future, her ability to induce a hypnotic trance, and the unpredictability of her deranged mind. If she posed any real threat to him now, Angel guessed it was probably through the hypnosis. He thought he might be immune to it, but he had never been willing to relinquish control enough to find out, and she had made a few impressive kills with it in the past. A Slayer, even. It made sense to consider mind control first on the list of dangers he was about to face.

No. He was fooling himself. The first danger wasn't any of Drusilla's powers; it was his own overworked conscience. No matter how many times he went over the logistics of the mission, there was part of him that wanted to get it done by walking into the house and letting her kill him. It made too much sense. She deserved retribution for what had been done to her, he deserved punishment for the same thing, and all of it could be tied up and finished in minutes if he would only allow it.

The realistic side of him knew that it wasn't nearly that simple. He knew that she would be just as miserable after he was gone, taking no comfort from whatever justice had been done in the act, and still a danger to those around her. He knew that his quest for redemption involved more than just sacrificing his own life, or he could have taken the First's offer of release through suicide long ago. He knew that dying now would mean abandoning Buffy, and others, too, people who depended on him. Realistically, there was no reason to even consider ending this fight with intentional failure.

Emotionally, he just hoped that she would attack first. If she was wild, and brutal, and fought like an enemy, he could let his reflexes take over and kill her like one. But if she was afraid, if she looked at him with those eyes and turned to her old submissive ways...was he ready for this? And if she ran away again, would he be able to chase her down this time? Pin her to the ground, tell her it was for her own good, and slam a stake through her heart while they both replayed the memories that had made her into what she was? Was there any chance at all that he could keep her contained and try to ease her pain for the rest of her natural life- which would have no natural end?

He should be working on answers, he knew. He should be using this time to work up some resolve and at least feel like he was ready to face her when she reached her hiding place. Instead, his mind kept trying to retreat to its usual refuge: Buffy. This time, the refuge didn't work. Buffy was going to meet Darla now, and Spike. She might be fighting them already, and no matter what happened with
Drusilla, there was going to be death tonight.

He reached the house, an old saltbox painted a faded blue. The number was displayed right on the door, in flaking gold digits level with Angel's eyes. He wanted to spend a few minutes staring at them, wondering if he was sure he had remembered it right, but he knew he had. He knew there was no sense in planning any further, either. Paradoxical though it was, he seemed to have lost patience with his own desire to stall. He rang the doorbell.

There wasn't much of a wait before a man in his thirties or forties answered, holding the door open as much as the chain that still locked it would allow, and he and Angel peered through the two-inch gap at each other. "Yeah?" he asked, with equal measures inquiry and confrontation. He looked disreputable in the same way his house did- not decrepit, not hiding a violent past, just removed from the company of honest and hardworking people.

"I'm looking for someone," said Angel, "a woman. Long dark hair, English accent? She's been missing for a few days, and I need to take her home."

The man held a few seconds of silence after listening before he nodded slowly in response. "So she's a runaway, you're saying?"

"More or less." What else can she do but run away? That's the 'more' part. What is there that she could escape by running away from it? That's the less.

The door didn't open any further, but the man looked pensive. "That would explain why she didn't want to leave here all day. The way she's been babbling, though, it's hard to make heads or tails of anything she says. I did get one thing figured out, I think. She's got some kind of old boyfriend looking for her." He fixed Angel with a look of cold interrogation. "So, are you that boyfriend?"


"Her brother," repeated Drusilla's host, his skepticism evident, "come to take her home."

"I want to help her."

There was a long pause as the man continued to look him over. Angel was fairly certain he understood the train of thought that was happening now: Drusilla had overstayed her welcome, and even if she was playing as a human girl and hadn't harmed anyone, she wasn't going to be an easy personality to harbor for long. Her chosen date clearly had no personal desire to hurt her or force her to leave, but with someone showing up and offering to take the problem off of his hands, he might not want to look too closely at the gift horse's mouth. "Yeah, alright," he said finally, closing the door to unhook the chain and then swinging it all the way open. "Come on in."

As soon as Angel had stepped inside, he kicked the door shut behind him and grabbed the man by the throat, turning him around and slamming him against the door. He held him there a few inches from his own face, so that the fury in his eyes would be evident as he spoke through clenched teeth. "Why did you let me in?"

The man made a choking sound, and Angel lessened the pressure on his throat enough to allow him to answer. "Jesus Christ! You told me to!"

"No," Angel corrected in a menacing tone, "I told you a bullshit story about being her brother, and you knew you couldn't trust me, and you knew she was afraid of someone who was looking for her, and you let me in anyway. So go on. Tell me you had her best interests in mind."
"The hell was I supposed to do? You said she was a runaway! I thought you were going to take her home!"

Angel used the hand on his neck to give him a shove that knocked his head against the door. "You thought," he said, his voice getting louder, "that I was taking her out of here, so whatever I did to her, it wasn't going to be in your house! Maybe I came here to kill her! To rape her! Any of that make a difference to you?" His grip was getting tighter again, and the man's hands were pawing ineffectually at his wrist, so he let go of his throat and grabbed him by the shoulders instead. "That girl was under your protection. You failed her, and now you've lost the right to see what happens next. Get out of here. Call the cops if it makes you feel better. But don't come back home tonight unless you think you can change the past."

He let go. The man was out the door without a second glance and running hard as it closed behind him. Angel turned away from it and rubbed his hands over his face. Very little of that conversation had been what he intended. On the other hand, there wasn't much about it that he was going to regret, either. He looked around the little house. There was definitely nobody living here except for the occupant who had just departed, but he could sense Drusilla nearby, had caught her scent before he even entered. It was good, he supposed, that she hadn't tried to run from him after hearing him enter, though it could also mean that she was going to attempt to ambush him. He took a few steps down the hallway and turned to the left, into the kitchen.

She was sitting on the floor, her back against the refrigerator at the other end of the room, her skirt spread out around her. She didn't look up when he entered; all of her attention was focused on a small, pale fragment of something that she was holding close to her face and stroking with her fingers. Angel leaned against the doorway in silence. He was straining to hear the tune that she was humming in breathy bits and snatches, as if something would change if he could only recognize it. Finally he gave up and took a step closer.

"I've killed her," said Drusilla sadly.

Angel's vision swam. He had spent the last few months wondering if it were possible for all ensouled vampires to repent, as he had, and now he realized that from Drusilla, it was the last thing in the world that he wanted to hear. "It wasn't your fault," he said. "Darla was...it wasn't your fault, it was mine."

She tilted her face up as he kept approaching as slowly as he could. Unshed tears sparkled in her dark eyes, but her voice was merely plaintive. "I've killed Miss Edith."

Angel stopped in front of her and sank to his knees. He saw now that the object she had been fondling was a broken piece from the face of a porcelain doll. He could see its sculpted lips and the curve of its cheek, but that was all that was left. The rest of the doll's remains were nowhere to be seen.

"I covered up her eyes," Drusilla continued. "But she could still hear the screams. I covered up her ears, but she could still smell the blood. So I had to kill her." She looked directly at him. "Do you think she'll understand?"

That was the question, wasn't it? Angel reached out tentatively and touched her hair. What he wanted right then, more than anything, was to call her by her real name. Drusilla was the name he had chosen for her before he had even begun his sordid project, and he had never called her anything else. He could still remember the rage and terror in her voice as she screamed at him in one last moment of defiance before the end: "Stop calling me Drusilla! My name is-!" ...But there the memory ended. Try as he might, he couldn't recall the name her parents had given to her, and of course he had killed them too, had killed everyone who ever cared about her so that he would be the
only one she had left. His success had brought him here, sitting on the floor of a stranger's kitchen, with his arm around a broken girl who had her hand around a broken doll.

Collaring her with a new name had been his first betrayal committed against her. Forgetting her real one would be his last.

"Miss Edith talked to me of the screams, you see. She knew all the sounds and the smells. Ah, and the colors. She remembers...red. There was a night full of red. It came through one skin and it painted another, and there were dishes that fell from up high and shattered, bang, on the floor, and nobody wanted to stay but none of the doors went outside." Drusilla leaned her head on his shoulder, a gesture which froze him in shock for as long as it lasted, but that was only a second. Then she lifted up her face and looked him in the eye again. "And you were there," she remarked, as if just remembering. "You were the one who painted in red. Your hands in sister's hair. Your lips on mother's throat."

A hundred years of remorse had done its part to desensitize Angel to hearing his sins described, and his time in Hell had picked up where the self-propelled guilt left off. Still, hearing her speak of it made the memories so vivid. He hadn't laid a finger on her that night, just watched her clutching at the bodies of her murdered family and laughed and laughed. Too overcome to attempt to answer her, he stroked her hair and placed his hand over hers, which was still clinging to the shard of Miss Edith's face. She covered it with her other hand, itself as cool and smooth as the porcelain. He didn't know why she was allowing him to comfort her, but it was all he had to give at the moment, and he had to admit that he was, in the end, glad that he wasn't fighting her right now.

Suddenly she giggled, a disturbing sound to come from her even on her better days. "This is all wrong," she informed him. "It should be my pet Spike here with me. The Slayer with you. But now I have my Angel instead, and Slayer-girl's gone to play with Spike. Ah!" She arched her back and reached up toward the ceiling. "I see him. My sweet William, so righteous and left out of the club, and the girls have gone swimming."

"Swimming?" Angel didn't know why he asked. Even if she were having a genuine vision, it wasn't always possible to get a coherent description of it from her, and he didn't want to concentrate on that now.

"One swims in fire. One in memory. Both in God."

The last word made him remember her piety as a human, and he wondered if there was anything of that former self left in her. "Do you believe in God? Maybe he's waiting for you, up in Heaven with your family."

She showed her teeth in a smile full of bitterness. "Mercy for a demon child. Where is Spike?"

"He wanted to find you. He wanted to help you." Angel's voice tripped a little, wanting to use her name. He couldn't call her Drusilla, though, not anymore, so he searched for some kind of substitute. "Sweetheart, he loves you. Can you understand that? Remember being loved?"

"We could swim in love. It's fire and memory and God."

"Yes it is," he agreed. Too close now to need to wonder if his touch was frightening her, he embraced her fully, letting them both slump into the corner together. "I'm sorry, little one. I can't change anything. I can bring you home, though. Do you want that? Do you want to...to go with Miss Edith?"

She met his eyes and nodded slowly, and he knew he wasn't going to get more of an answer than
that. Steadying himself against the cupboards behind him, he dug into his pocket and found the garrote that Buffy had given him earlier. Drusilla was watching him with detached curiosity, so he reluctantly opened his hand and showed her the coil of metal and plastic.

Her eyes lit up. "It's lovely! Is it for me, then?" She leaned forward and turned her back to him, lifting her hair away from her neck in an obvious request for him to fasten a clasp for her. She had done the same thing whenever he killed a noblewoman and stripped off her necklace to give to his girl. Drusilla liked getting new jewelry, though she liked it more when it was spattered with blood. Angel stared at her bare white neck, unblemished by the kiss of death he had once placed there, and then he looped the plastic strand around it and crossed the ends behind her. "Goodbye," he whispered as she let her hair fall back down over his hands gripping the brass handles, and then he pulled.

He didn't have to watch her head fall off, for which he was grateful. The cord went through cleanly, leaving only a thin red line around her neck as evidence that it had been there, for the few seconds before she disintegrated. The doll's face fell from the empty space in front of Angel and landed into Drusilla's remains, fine black powder blanketing the tiled kitchen floor, the last signs of herself that his wayward child had left in this world. Before standing, he knelt over the ashes and used his fingertip to draw a cross in them. He had no other rites to perform, no words to speak over her. She had heard him say goodbye, and he had meant it.

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Darla had been clinging to Buffy as they fell from the dock, but they had separated at the moment of impact. As the water closed in over Buffy's head, she forgot everything about the fight, knowing only that she was cut off from her oxygen and had to get back to the surface. In her panic she sucked in a nose full of water, and the feel of it stinging her throat was a forcible reminder that she knew exactly how it felt to drown and that it could happen again. It could be happening right now if she lost control, and it was so hard to keep control when her clothes were bogging her down and she didn't know which way was up and she could still hear the Master's laughter, long gone to the rest of the world but echoing forever in her nightmares.

But the Master was a loser and he hadn't stopped her back then, drowning or no drowning. She flailed out with her arms, found her equilibrium, and kicked herself upwards. She wasn't in nearly as deep as it had felt, and her face broke the surface before she knew it for a painful, sputtering breath. She had no time for her recovery to turn into relief. The reason that she was in the water in the first place came back to her with a vengeance: Darla was still alive, and the fight was back in action. The vampire, Buffy saw immediately, had no chance of survival; her skin was scarlet all over and she was screaming horrifically, but still apparently intent on taking Buffy with her. The one breath that Buffy had managed to take was vital, for she was pushed back under before she had the opportunity for another, Darla's hands clawing at her head as if she were trying to use her to climb up out of the ubiquitous holy water. Buffy used all of her strength to fend off the assault, but after one glimpse of her opponent's rapidly deteriorating face, she closed her eyes. She wished she could shut out the ongoing sound of Darla's screams, too. New struggles brought new nightmares, and she had a feeling that these would be lasting her a while.

Her limbs were getting weaker, but they still sufficed to push Darla off of her again and take in another breath. Darla was weakening, too. It was too hard to estimate how much time had gone by, but Buffy could tell that Darla had already lasted much longer than any of the vampires that had been in the lake when it was originally transformed. Father Tom had said something about the concentration of the holy water changing as time went on, but that didn't help much. She just had to keep fighting until-
-It happened. With a final bloodcurdling shriek, Darla went silent and Buffy found herself grappling with a cloud of ashes. Slowly she opened her eyes. The moon was still shining down on the lake, and the water was still lapping against the rowboats, settling easily out of the churning that the fight had given it. She faced the sky, treading water, and tried to take a deep breath. The water in her lungs turned it into a coughing fit instead, and she put all of her focus into getting herself out of the lake.

As she paddled awkwardly to the boats, she saw a solitary figure peering down at her from the edge of the dock. "Spike," she croaked. He had probably been watching the whole thing with his irritating style of disinterested interest. She knew he might well have saved her life when he pushed Darla in, and his last minute turnaround was nothing short of momentous, but she couldn't help feeling resentful toward him anyway, for what he had just put her through. It would have been easier for her to be alone just then.

"Don't expect a hand out of there," he called. "I've got enough of that rotten liquid on me as it is."

She didn't answer. Getting herself out was toil enough. How had she managed to drift this far away from the dock when all she had done was thrash around? Finally she got both hands onto one of the boats, and let herself hang there for a moment before hauling her soaked and heavy body into the vessel. Then she rested again. She had half a mind to just sit there in the boat until Angel found her, now that she was out of danger, but she needed something stationary underneath her and she forced herself to make the extra effort and climb up the rope that fastened the boat to the dock.

Once firmly seated on the hard wood, she curled up her legs and leaned on her hands, and Spike stood over her, watching as she coughed and shivered. "Where's Dru?" he asked quietly.

"With Angel." She raised her eyes to give him a challenging stare. "He saves souls."

Seeing that he wasn't going to get anything more specific than that out of her, Spike cursed and walked away, giving her the solitude she had been craving. She almost called after him, but she wasn't sure if it would be in words of gratitude, warning, or something else altogether, and she decided not to risk it. After the sound of his footsteps had faded away, she got up and wandered down to where the dock met the land, stepping gingerly over the missing plank that gave access to the lair. Daemonis was down there, waiting for her, but she wasn't ready for him yet.

And the truth was, she didn't really want to be alone.

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Dazed by the magnitude of what he had just done, Angel spent the first part of his walk on autopilot. Buffy and everyone else were supposed to at the cemetery where Willow's locator spell had found Spike, and the only thing Angel was feeling, other than numb, was anxious to find out how they were faring. He didn't think he needed to worry too much about anyone's safety, considering the range of skills they had among them. Darla wasn't going to be prepared to face the Slayer, let alone a small army. But the fact that it was happening at all was bad enough, and he wanted to see with his own eyes that it was over.

By the time he reached the end of the block, though, his thoughts had become occupied with a replay of his conversation with Drusilla, and it brought him to an unexpected hitch. She had spoken of the girls going 'swimming,' which he had taken to be metaphorical if it meant anything at all, but what if her vision had shown her what was happening at that very moment? If she had seen Spike, it was probable that 'the girls' were Darla and Buffy, and if there was actual swimming involved, it meant they were at the lair by the lake. Angel changed directions and started moving faster. Buffy had a phobia about drowning; she wouldn't have taken the battle into the water out of her own choice.
Before he made it through the wooded area around the lake, he had already concocted an array of different scenarios for what might have happened between his sire and his love, and all of them ended in Buffy's death. The more he thought, the faster he ran, until he hit the dirt road that led to the dock and went tearing down it. When the glint of light on the water's surface reached his eyes and neither she nor anyone else was immediately visible, he yelled out her name, reckless in his haste though he had enough presence of mind to slow down so he could look for her.

"Angel?" came the answer. She had been huddled in a dip in the ground at the shore end of the dock, and at the sound of his voice she picked herself up and stepped out to meet him. Her clothes and hair were soaking wet, and she was hugging herself and shivering hard, but she was unharmed. When he rushed over and reached out to her, though, she held up her hands and took a cautionary step back. "Don't touch me." Before he could react- coming from her, those were words that belonged only in his nightmares- she explained, "It's holy water. I fell in the lake."

At the moment he would have gladly swum across the lake for the chance to hold her, but ignoring her warning would have just upset her. He settled for taking off his coat and handing it to her, and she accepted it gratefully without making contact with his skin. It was absurdly big on her, the hem almost dragging the ground, but she wrapped it around herself with a sigh of pleasure, dipping her head to breathe in the scent from it, and he consoled himself by thinking that they were embracing each other with the coat as the middleman. All the same, after he had safely disarmed the stake sheaths still on his wrists, he came up close and touched her cheek lightly. She was almost dry there, but he still felt a little bit of a sting, and she gave him a pained look that convinced him to withdraw his hand.

"Darla's dead," she stated.

He nodded. The dull ache inside of him, the one that had been there ever since he learned that Darla had come back to life, barely changed. He supposed it would eventually, once he went through the full emotional process of dealing with her death all over again, but right now there was too much to think about. "Spike?" he asked.

"Ran off. But, Angel, he helped me. Darla told him to cast the spell, but he turned on her instead. I don't know what would have happened without him."

"Good. That's good." He meant it, though he knew how distracted he sounded. Spike wasn't causing trouble, and that was all the clearance that Angel needed to put him out of mind for now. Furthermore, the thought of Buffy needing to rely on Spike's intervention instead of the people she trusted was damn near infuriating. "Buffy, where is everyone? They were supposed to be backing you up."

"I had to leave them at the cemetery," she admitted. "There were some demons attacking. They had it under control, but I had to get here fast."

"Oh." His anger faded. He hadn't really thought that one out, anyway. Of course their friends would never abandon her in a time of crisis. "You think they're okay?"

"For now." She drew in a deep breath and looked up into his eyes. "How did it go with Drusilla?"

He had a fleeting urge to tell her the full story right then and there, complete with confessions of all the horror in the past that he had shared with the mad vampiress, but he knew that to do so would be begging for comfort. She would have given it freely, but he never could bring himself to beg her for anything. It was unworthy. "She's dead too."

Buffy cringed a little. "Are you...okay?"
"I will be."

"Just one left, then. Ready for the big ugly? I waited for you. Figured you would want to be here for it."

Angel had no qualms about ridding the world of Daemonis that very minute, but he was bothered by Buffy treating the subject with such indifference. She looked so exhausted, and still cold despite the coat, and he wanted to protect her from her life's work more than ever. "Let me take care of this one. Please. It only needs one of us, and tonight has been hard enough on you already."

Instantly she was on the defense, as indignant as if his words were intentionally patronizing. "And it's been a trip to the day spa for you? Don't even think about going down there by yourself. He's been tormenting us for long enough. I'm going to see this to the end."

"I understand. I do. It's just that...you've never killed a vampire with a soul before, and it might be kind of intense. And I know, the world what it is right now, sooner or later you'll have to do it, but you don't have to start tonight. It's different for me. Easier, in some ways."

He wasn't sure if he had made his point, but he stopped talking when he saw the stare of disbelief she was giving him. "How quickly they forget," she murmured, shaking her head.

"What...what do you mean?"

"I killed you, Angel. Soul and all." Her tone turned sarcastic, as so often happened when she was upset about what she was saying. "Come to think of it, that was kind of intense. But hey, someone had to do it, right? Seems like someone keeps turning out to be us, and it's not getting any less intense each time it happens. But Daemonis, he's just one more evil guy, as far as I'm concerned." She sighed and looked toward the dock and the lair, then back at Angel. "Killing you almost destroyed me. I don't even like making the comparison between that and this, but the truth is that now that I've been there, this is a walk in the park. Honestly, I wish it were harder. I wish I could think about his soul, and redemption and everything, and start having doubts. I know I was a lot more innocent when you fell in love with me, and I miss that as much as you do. But innocence isn't going to help me stay alive. I can't make room for that much guilt and still be able to do what I have to do."

It wasn't hard to see that she had chosen to say her piece in a way that she knew he would understand. Guilt was what he had always seen as his burden, something a pure-hearted, pure human girl like Buffy should never have to shoulder, and part of the reason that he hated constantly seeing her in these life-and-death situations was that he knew that eventually she would end up shouldering the guilt whether she deserved it or not. She knew it too. Obviously, she was more prepared for it than he was. They shared a look through the darkness, and when she saw from his silence that he wasn't putting up any further resistance, she lifted her shoulders in a resigned shrug. "Right now the only sense I can make out of what I feel is that Daemonis is mine to kill. Sick, but there it is."

"You're still innocent," he replied.

"Don't say that. Don't fool yourself."

"I'm not. It's true. You've made hard choices and you've endured some terrible things, but that doesn't change who you are. I know," he said to still the protest she was about to repeat. "It doesn't feel that way. But I just wanted to say that I don't miss the way you used to be. I love you as you are right now."

Her expression got softer as she considered this, and then she gave a short laugh. "We sure seem to
pick some strange moments to have these conversations."

"Yeah. We need to find the others."

"And then go home and take a shower and get under the covers."

"Let's get this done."

The plank that the vampires had pulled out from the dock seemed to be in the right place to allow someone to slip through it and into the lair's door without touching the water, but Buffy insisted on going through first to be sure. She opened the hatch with a firm kick before letting go of her handholds on the dock, and he heard a small splash before she called up to him, "Swing forward a little before you drop, and you should be fine."

He was. He stayed at the top step for a moment, adjusting to the increased darkness of the stairwell. She was a few steps down already; he could sense her presence there before he could see her, and he could hear her attempting to keep a little space between them as he descended, as she was still being careful with her damp hair and skin. Too careful, he thought: her night vision wasn't as sharp as his, and she hadn't been down to the lair before. If there was anything for her to be cautious about, it was these steps. He caught up with her and grabbed her hand without warning, ignoring the slight hiss that his skin made when it touched hers.

"Hey," she complained, trying to pull away.

He refused to let go. "It's not right," he said tightly. "I'm done with staying away from you. We're doing this together, I've earned that much."

She hesitated for a moment, and then she squeezed his hand and kept a firm hold on it. They went down together.

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"We need to be somewhere safer than this," said Xander. He wasn't offended by being put on fledgling vampire babysitting duty, especially since he was allowed to carry a comfortably dangerous mace during it, but his charge wasn't being wholly cooperative and neither was his fellow babysitter.

"We're in a cemetery fully of angry demons," Cordelia retorted. "Which safe place around here is catching your eye?" She was armed with a slender sword and looked fully at ease with it, though he hadn't seen her use it yet and she didn't seem to be in any hurry to join the fight.

Xander scanned the area, already knowing that their options were few. "The crypt," he suggested. "We should stay in there until it's over."

"No way," interjected Lydia. "You guys need to breathe. Right? And I was down there all day and believe me, it sucks. Do vampires have to live in crypts?"

The crypt was still the best place to go, Xander thought, but she might be right about its breathability. He considered stationing them all against its wall instead, but Oz-wolf had staked that area as his territory, and from what they could see, the wolf wasn't in the mood to differentiate friends from foes. Xander sighed and led them to an especially large headstone nearby. Not all of them could hide behind it, even if it had covered them on more than one side, but that was why they were standing guard.

"So your sire didn't give you a lecture and a pamphlet?" he asked Lydia as they found positions to keep themselves as concealed as possible.
"Hey," Cordy reprimanded him, "show some sensitivity." She turned to the vampire and said brightly,

"You can live wherever you want. Angel lives in a mansion!"

Lydia's eyes widened covetously. "A real mansion?"

"Yeah, and he's got a hotel in LA, too. I work there with him."

"That's so cool. Who's Angel?"

Xander let the girls get acquainted while he tried to scope out how the rest of the team was doing. He wanted to stay closer to Anya, but she was busy doling out information on the demons she could recognize, and protecting herself by sticking close to the brawny types. Xander fought a surge of jealousy and told himself that she was doing the right thing, but her exposure out there made him want to heft his mace and start whaling on anything demonic in his range. Except for Lydia, of course. And, well, Anya herself. At least the blurry lines between demons and good guys, in this case, were made clearer by the demons on his side being attractive women.

He had only taken a few steps away from the headstone, but while his back was turned, Cordelia gave a little shriek and he whipped back around to see that a demon had caught sight of them. It was one of the big dumb ones, making loud huffing sounds and wearing a variety of studded chains, and as it began lumbering toward the girls, Xander wondered if this was the one that was going to kill them all. He lifted his mace and stepped forward.

The demon didn't get a chance to lumber any closer. It had apparently crossed the boundaries that Oz had set for himself, and the werewolf broke out of his circuit around the crypt to launch a headlong attack. He ripped off some serious flesh before the monster's huffing turned into wailing, and soon it was trying to run instead of fight back. Oz chased it for just a few yards, then apparently realized that he had gone too far from his station, and let his victim melt back into the darkness. As he passed Xander and the girls on his way back, he paused and bared his teeth at them, as if making a point.

"Don't make eye contact," Xander instructed quietly, then raised his voice and called, "We're friends, Oz. Xander. Cordy. Go protect Willow."

The wolf bounded off in that direction immediately, and Xander mopped his forehead with a sleeve. It was hard enough being surrounded by cranky demon freaks without needing to worry that one of their own was going to go berserk and turn on them. He knew Oz wouldn't have chosen to go wolf for this battle if he thought there was a chance of that happening, but it was all too clear that the wolf lacked the rationality of Oz's human mind. As an animal he was very much tuned into the raw elements of the world around him, and with this much violence and heightened emotion going on, he had to be near his fraying point.

"Wolf-wrangler Harris," said Cordelia, impressed. "Where'd you learn the magic words?"

He shrugged. "Just from hanging out. He's in there, he just needs a little reminder sometimes. He usually recognizes the sounds of our names, so that's the easiest way to get through to him. Pretty far cry from the werewolf you remember, I bet."

"It's always the quiet ones," she agreed. "But man, that demon. For a moment there I thought we were a midnight snack."

"Yeah," said Lydia, standing suddenly and brushing off her black jeans. "Screw this." She sprinted off, not away from the battleground but to the center of it, and Xander saw her bend down and scoop
up one of the last few weapons still available from their pile on the ground. Then she was headed after the demon that the werewolf had temporarily defeated for them, and Xander was left with a mouthful of stunned and fragmented objections.

He couldn't run after her; she was too fast and obviously knew what she wanted. Instead he followed her with his eyes until the night swallowed her, then said to Cordy without turning to look at her, "We are complete crap at babysitting."

Cordy's answer was an unexpected gasp and a thump as her back hit the headstone, hard. Xander whirled and saw her holding her head and jerking in a few rapid spasms. She opened one eye as he knelt beside her and held her steady. "Vision," she said weakly. "Oh God, where's Angel?"

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The walls on either side pressed tightly against the narrow stairwell, and Buffy thought they seemed a little damp. Angel didn't seem to be affected by it, though, so she supposed the holy water hadn't gotten this far. He held onto her hand and stayed in step with her the whole time, shoulder to shoulder despite the cramped space. By the time they got to the bottom, their footsteps were echoing in a synchronized pattern. Angel pointed the way from there, but she could hardly see even him in the pitch black surroundings, so he guided her with a touch, saying nothing.

She couldn't get much of an impression of the lair except that it was dark, and that she hated it. This was where Daemonis had been hiding from her, still pulling her strings even after he stopped being seen by anyone. This was where Darla had come to toy with Angel and team up with his enemies. This was where almost every vampire in Sunnydale had taken shelter when they chose the easy way out of their guilt. Buffy had no use for such a place. She wondered if Giles had access to explosives, and whether the town's residents would like having a bigger lake.

Angel stopped them in front of the only door that had even a sliver of dim light showing through the crack, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She was tired of not being able to see anything. Both of them pushed at the double doors and found them locked, and they shared a look of silent agreement and took a step back. Buffy laughed inwardly, realizing what an appropriately dramatic entry they were about to make, and then they each lifted up a foot and kicked at the doors, which burst open and then dangled forlornly on their hinges. Angel offered her his hand again as they crossed the threshold, and in the newly found candlelight of the chamber, she could have sworn she saw an amused twinkle in his eye. She accepted his hand and they continued their march.

The room was too big to be adequately lit by just candles, but there were a lot of them and they were arranged on an assortment of tables and shelves that had been dragged to the middle, so that the illumination was centralized. The floor just in front of the candle collection was adorned with a nearly-finished round symbol in black paint, and kneeling over it was a master vampire with a paintbrush in his hand.

"Hey," Buffy greeted him casually, as his diabolic orange eyes darted from her to Angel and back again. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

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The wolf gagged on the taste of demon, wiped his muzzle on the grass, and then charged at another. There were a lot of them, but the wolf wasn't keeping track. Some of them seemed stronger than him, but that didn't matter either. All of them learned to fear him quickly enough.

Oz had made his decision after a complete assessment of his powers and his current state of control. He had done his best to account for the wolf's hypersensitivity to bloodshed, knowing that there was
a strong possibility that his sentry duty was going to turn into fighting duty. He hadn't guessed, however, that there would be so much more fighting than guarding. He had also somehow failed to register the fact that tonight was the full moon.

The moon didn't mandate his wolf cycle anymore- there was no wolf cycle, ever since psychological stimuli took over the change- but he could always feel its influence waxing and waning throughout the month, in either of his forms. Ordinarily he would just stay human through the three most extreme nights, leveling out the excess of passion by means of music or some time alone in the woods or a few magic mushrooms, but now he had deliberately taken on the feral form and the moon was his master. Some part of him understood all of this fully and even worried that the savage joy surging through him was going to get out of hand. The currently dominant part of him didn't care.

Rules of engagement were simple: nobody and nothing came near the crypt. If it tried, it got fangs in its throat. If the throat was too hard to reach, there were always guts that could be spilled. A few might attempt to sneak around to the other side, but they never made it. One got so far as to touch the stone wall, searching for a handhold to climb up. That one got more attention than the others, and it certainly didn't get the chance to run. The wolf felt centered, absorbed in the function that he was built for. Fighting didn't need a reason; fighting was its own reason. At the same time, seeing humans taking place in the battle filled him with disdain instead of hunger, a clear warning from his duality. They shouldn't be here. This was between him and the hellspawn. And there was something else that gave the fighting a reason: he had to guard the crypt. The crypt itself was nothing, but there was something on top of it worth protecting, someone who needed to stay alive. Not for the wolf's own sake, not for blood or passion or the moon, but because it was good and right. Unbelievable, really, that the wolf could think that 'good and right' was more important than the moon, but for him to stop and think about it would be more unbelievable still.

He had a moment of respite to make a loop around his territory. Two humans were hacking at a beast that he would have attacked on his own if it had come nearer to the crypt, but they were taking it down themselves without assistance. One glanced at him and said something to the other, who made a reply that somehow seemed to lead to both of them keeping their battle away from him. Giles, thought the wolf as he watched the one who had spoken second. He didn't know where the word had come from, but he did know that it meant he could trust the man to fight on his side.

There came a thump and a cry from the roof of the crypt, and without any need to consider the sound or its source, the wolf turned and ran the few paces that brought him back there and gave him the momentum to leap swiftly up and onto it. The human who was worth protecting was picking herself up onto her hands and knees, and when he came up close and sniffed at her to see if she was alright, she pushed a hand through the thick ruff of fur on his neck and leaned some of her weight into him. "I'm okay," she panted. "I just wasn't ready, Buffy dropped the feather and the spell kind of had this kickback, knocked the wind out of me. But that means she got there, and I'm fine...none of this means anything to you, does it?"

Unable to make much sense of her string of words, the wolf did his best to communicate by licking her cheek. She giggled and patted his neck, then said, "You should get back down there where you're needed. I'm going to...I don't know, I'll think of some way to help. And when you're human again, I have some great ideas for rewarding ourselves for this. Don't worry about me, okay? I'll stay up here."

Enough of the meaning came through for him to understand that she wanted him to keep fighting, which worked out fine in his view. The moon wanted him to keep fighting, too. Everything was perfectly in accord.

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Daemonis's fear was rolling through the air in waves, enhanced by the thin tendrils of smoke rising from his candles and the alien starkness of the symbol painted before him. It wasn't a pentagram or anything else Angel could recognize, but it was clearly meant for black magic, a spell that would never be cast. And the mighty Daemonis was already on his knees, overcome with more fear than he had likely felt in centuries. The demon in Angel loved it that he could sense fear. This time, the soul loved it too.

"Thought you were sick," Buffy continued.

A cough forced its way out of Daemonis's throat before words did. "Sick enough to die," he said. "Strong enough for one last ritual. The words will take but a moment to speak. Are you certain you can destroy me before I have it done?"

Buffy cocked her head, pretending to think. "Uh. Yeah, actually. I'm completely sure we can do that. Any more idle threats?"

"It could be that taking my life is the spell's trigger."

"Ahem," said Angel. "It isn't."

Buffy was still wearing his coat, and she squeezed his hand and then let it go, so that she could reach into the pocket. She found one of the stakes from his wrist sheaths that he had put there, and then shrugged out of the coat, letting it fall to the floor behind her. Angel noted that her clothes beneath it were still damp, and adhering to her curves in a very appealing way. He blinked as he realized the direction that his thoughts were taking. Admiring Buffy's body at inopportune moments like this was turning into a bad habit. More than that, though, he suddenly wondered if Daemonis was checking her out too, and that put his hackles back up and his attention back on the enemy where it belonged.

Daemonis had indeed been staring at Buffy, but not in admiration. He was in bad shape, hardly stable physically and probably losing it mentally too, but Angel thought back to his own experience with being poisoned and knew that Daemonis had not yet reached those final stages. These last efforts he was making were evidence enough. "Think," he croaked. "I can be of use to you. There is another Slayer, I know. Doesn't need to be your girl, Angelus."

"And now you're asking us to hand over Faith's blood instead of mine? ...And accept you as an ally?" Buffy asked incredulously. "Go back to the idle threats. Compared to this, they were working in your favor."

There was a silence. Angel assumed that Daemonis was beginning to see the true hopelessness of his situation, and wondered if Buffy was ready to end it. But the old vampire was looking at him, not her, and it was to Angel that he delivered his next words. "Amabo te," he pleaded. "Caritas. Habe caritatem, Angele."

Buffy narrowed her eyes and shot a questioning glance at Angel, mouthing the word "Incantation?" He shook his head and listened to what the old vampire was saying, and some part of Buffy must have been curious too, because she started to raise her stake but halted the motion when Daemonis saw it and reacted by talking faster and louder, although he still wasn't talking to her.


"Te non necabo," Angel started to reply, then stopped himself and switched to English, so Buffy would understand. "I'm not going to kill you," he repeated, and let some hope reach Daemonis's
desperate eyes before he concluded by pointing to Buffy and saying, "She is."

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The fall hadn't caused Willow any real damage, but it had left her legs and tailbone sore, and her mind distracted and grouchy. How had she managed to fall like that, anyway? The roof of the crypt was flat and she was still on top of it. Last she remembered, she had gone into her trance while sitting there cross-legged. She couldn't tell how much time had passed, but not much about her surroundings had changed except that the battle around her was now in full swing. From her vantage point she could see most of her friends, but there was too much going on to be sure about everyone's condition.

Her first thought was for Xander, who she hadn't seen since he had gone with Cordelia to watch over the dazed young vampire girl, but the three of them had evidently found some kind of shelter. Willow was still concerned. Knowing Xander, he would probably end up fighting just out of impatience, but she couldn't protect him if she couldn't see him. She had to concentrate on figuring out who needed her and how she could help them using what little energy she had left. She had pushed herself hard already tonight, and most of the spells she had at her disposal weren't designed for combat, anyway. Offensively, the most she could manage would be little more than a single hit to a single demon. Defensively, she might be able to put shields on some of the warriors, but she couldn't be sure that they would be more help than hindrance.

A black shape on four legs- or was it six?- slunk into the scene with its eyes on Father Tom. Willow's heart skipped a beat, but Anya had already seen the creature and yelled, "Wusufu beast, right behind you, go for the heart! No, its heart is in its back! That's right. Good job! And try not to ruin its teeth, they're valuable!"

The priest cast her an annoyed look as he held the fallen demon down with his foot and yanked his sword out of its back. "I need information on their weaknesses, not their collector's items." He tensed suddenly and pointed with the sword to something out of Willow's range of vision. "Do you recognize that one?"

"Sure," said Anya. "Just lop its head off, that'll take care of it." As he was advancing on it, ready to strike, she added, "Or stab it in the chest or hack it to pieces. Skizlors die pretty easily."

Father Tom froze right before bringing his sword down on the demon, whose humanoid shape was now visible though masked by shadows, and turned his move into a block instead. "Skizlors?" he demanded of Anya, loudly enough to make his anger clear over the growling of the creature in question. "Skizlors have no corporeal form! They possess humans!"

"So? You wanted to know its weaknesses!"

Without responding, the priest dropped his weapon and grabbed the cross he was wearing around his neck instead, brandishing it in front of him and emphatically reciting the words of a prayer. The Skizlor began to back off immediately, its discombobulated mutterings escalating into a series of pained howls, and before it retreated fully into the shadows with Father Tom on its heels, Willow could see that it was changing somehow. Something was trying to pull itself out of the body, which looked more and more human, but the end of the drama happened in the concealment of the trees and headstones.

"Oh," Anya called after him. "I guess you would want to do it that way, huh? No killing humans, and peace on earth, and all that." She turned to find something else to identify.

Willow was impressed by the way Father Tom had handled his last two opponents, but with his black clothing and solitary fighting style, he had melted away into the darkness and so had the
Skizlor he was pursuing, leaving Willow to wonder if he really had made a clean victory out of it. Anya had attached herself to Wesley and Gunn. It looked like they were doing fine in their own fight, but the field was so unpredictable right now. Nobody knew how long the demons would keep coming after them, or when, or from where, or what kinds they would be, and the terrain left all of them open to attacks from virtually every angle.

Inspiration struck Willow a split second after another wave of fear did. Gunn had just experienced a random strike from a hitherto unseen foe, just as she had been fearing, and though he deflected it skillfully, it was too close a call. The real problem was the darkness. The full moon was shining down on them brightly, but the trees and tombstones caused so many confusing shadows that the demons had no problem at all keeping themselves hidden until they had chosen a victim. Willow found her bag of magic supplies and pulled out the one small candle she had in there, along with the Zippo that she had decided she might as well keep. It was a little too late to give it back to Spike.

It was the work of a minute to light the candle, say the words she needed, and sprinkle a little sage over the flame. She closed her eyes and blew it out, and when she opened them, the graveyard around her was full of demons. No more than there had been before, of course, but now each one of them was emitting a substantial blue-white glow, making it impossible for them to use the darkness as concealment.

The gang made some sounds of surprise and alarm, but they all regained their bearings quickly, and it was evident that they saw the advantage in having their enemies so clearly labeled. If they were a little freaked out by the change, Willow couldn't blame them. It was one thing to know that dangerous things were lurking around every corner; it was another to see what they were up against, and to be able to count them. Willow herself resisted the temptation to count. It wasn't going to do any good, and she didn't have that many fingers anyway. Her waning strength meant that this was probably her last spell of the night, so she put all of her concentration into holding it and making it last.

A vicious snarl ripped through the air, and Willow didn't need to look down to know that it wasn't the voice of a demon. You tell 'em, Oz, she thought grimly as she got back into her meditative pose. These guys have nothing on us.

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Buffy was quick to take Angel's cue and step forward. "I can't believe you," she said. "You're as good as dead and you're still using the last bits of your strength to try casting evil spells? Okay, so points for perseverance, but I just heard you go through the worst string of verbal attempts to save your pathetic life that I've ever heard, and that was just the parts in English. I'm guessing that little old school style monologue was more of the same. Don't you have any dignity to try to salvage?"

It was rhetorical, of course, but she waited for an answer anyway, wondering if he would say anything else in English or whether something had snapped in his memory and he had lost the language. She felt like a cat with a mouse, keeping him alive out of a morbid fascination, but seeing him in person was so foreign, and ending his life would be so final. He had been at the forefront of her thoughts and fears for a long time, and it was giving her that unwelcome sense of closeness that she sometimes felt with her longer-lasting enemies. It almost seemed a waste to kill him before getting to know him.

"Dignity?" he answered at length. "I have a soul."

"And a fat lot of good it's done you," she snapped. "Stand up so I can fight you." He was still kneeling there in front of them, and it filled her with contempt. Darla had at least given her a few bruises.
He wouldn't stand. He stayed on his knees, his eyes fixed on hers, leaving every choice in the matter up to her. She knew he was playing some kind of mind game with her, possibly testing her to see if she could kill a foe who refused to hurt or attack her. She decided to make it very clear to him. "Cash in the dignity or die as a coward: that's the either/or, but it's for your sake, not mine. I am going to kill you no matter what. I hate you more than I have ever hated a vampire without a soul." Doubts entered her mind as soon as she had said the last sentence, but she pushed them away. She was under no obligation to be honest with Daemonis. "Before I even knew who you were, you had me chained up in a dungeon being eaten alive by your lackeys. You had my mother killed right before my eyes. You hunted me like an animal, and you threatened my friends, and oh yeah, looks like you were trying to end the world. But even that wasn't enough for you, was it?" She took a step closer, planted her foot in the middle of his chest, and pushed him down onto his back, meeting with little resistance aside from the uneven angle that his humped back gave his position. He stared up at her with those ugly eyes in that ugly face, wearing the one basic expression that a permanently vampiric face could take, but it seemed that his last words had already been chosen and spoken. "You just had to take it one step further," said Buffy softly. "You had to interrupt my honeymoon."

She dropped into a warrior's crouch, faster and more elegant than the move needed her to be, and swung her stake down and into his heart in one fluid motion. Before his last few seconds of unlife were up, she had already jumped back up to her feet, not wanting to be any closer to him than she had to be. Daemonis gagged, a sound as empty and meaningless as his soul, and then he was gone, leaving behind only an ashen skeleton. The Master had left bones, too, she recalled. In fact, she had personally smashed them to pieces. Daemonis must not have been as old or as powerful as the Master, though, because his were grey and disintegrating already. She felt no need to help them along this time, but there was one moment from that memory that she wanted to replay. She backed away for a few steps, turned around, and found Angel.

***

When the Rothkar demon that he was fighting began to give off an incandescent light along with its pungent smell, Giles thought that it was more surprised than he was. Simple deduction said that this was Willow's work, though it took a moment longer for him to realize that her aim was to make the demons more visible- he was so close to this one already that the glow did more to hurt his eyes than to delineate its shape. He didn't let his onslaught slacken, though the array of similarly lit forms appearing at the corners of his eyes brought on a strong temptation to take a closer look at them. He was especially interested in what was happening a few meters away on his left, because he could only guess at where it was headed. He also couldn't quite tell who was involved. The glowing white figure was obviously a demon, and one of the darkly dressed fighters engaging it was cursing in Gunn's voice, but the other was much smaller and moving with almost inhuman speed. Had Buffy already returned? No, whoever it was had a long mane of dark hair and was dressed all in black. In any case, she was evidently on their side and doing an acceptable job of keeping herself alive, which would be more than they could say for Giles if he didn't keep his mind on what he was doing.

"Stand back!"

Giles followed the cue without looking to see where it had come from. He recognized Wesley's voice, though the crisp, assured tone to it was still new to his ears, and he knew the command wasn't issued lightly. He yanked his sword from the Rothkar demon's glowing gut and danced backwards and out of the way. Instantly he saw holes appear in the demon's chest, accompanied by the loud blasts of a shotgun.

The echo from the shots seemed to carry on for longer than should have, and in a moment Giles realized that it was because everything else around them had gone silent. Wesley's fresh kill lying
before them with the light fading rapidly from its body was the last of them, aside from a few retreating rapidly from the scene and the one that Gunn felled just seconds after the Rothkar went down. Giles finally had the opportunity to look around himself, and he couldn't immediately see everything he wanted to see. He stepped into the moonlight of the clearing in front of the crypt and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Is anyone wounded? Is anyone missing?"

The girl who had been fighting alongside Gunn walked over and joined him in the clearing. It was the vampire, of course- Lydia. He had forgotten all about her presence after she had been instructed to stay with Xander and Cordelia and avoid combat. Before he even made the connection that she was supposed to be with them still, both of them emerged from their hiding spot, looking rumpled and wary but unscathed. Cordelia was rubbing her forehead and grimacing. Anya jumped up out of nowhere and launched herself into Xander's open arms, and Father Tom came next, walking with a limp and wincing after every few steps. Wesley met Giles's eyes as they were both looking over the group, and a spark of alarm passed between them in lieu of spoken words. They were both in leadership roles here, but the missing parties were from Giles's troops, not Wesley's, and he was the one who vocalized it: "Willow! Oz!"

A sharp growl, not the sound of a happy creature, preceded Willow's voice. She was no longer on top of the crypt, but nearby and out of sight, probably behind it. "We're fine," she called. "We just need a moment." Giles considered going to fetch her away from there anyway, but she didn't sound afraid or overwhelmed, just tired. And when she continued to speak, in a lowered voice that was obviously directed at the wolf and not them, he could have sworn that she was downright exasperated. If this was the kind of lovers' quarrel that the young couple had in the future of their relationship, he didn't envy them, but in a way Willow was in her element. There weren't too many girls her age who had the inner calm needed to talk down an agitated werewolf. When he overheard her urging Oz to think positive thoughts, he half-smiled and turned back to everyone else.

"Is there anyone who needs medical attention? Father?"

Father Tom shook his head. "It's just got a bit of a strain. Not my best ankle in the first place, anyway."

_We'll take a look at it once we're in some better light_, Giles thought, and the priest glanced over at him and nodded once. Giles addressed the others out loud: "Then we'll wait here for Buffy, unless there's any objection."

"Oh, right," said Xander sarcastically. "We can just leave her a post-it note on a headstone or something that says we got bored and started the recuperation without her."

"In any case, the option is open to those who need to rest," said Giles. "Provided you leave us with a vehicle, of course." He searched his mind for anything else that needed to be said to everyone, came up empty, and reviewed the possibilities for the next action he could take. The winning option was to sink down to the grass and take the time to breathe. Some of the others around him began to follow suit.

"So," ventured Lydia as she hugged her knees to her chest. "Good fight. Right?"

Giles took off his glasses- they seemed to be a bit dirty. "Hm?" he replied absently, searching himself for a pocket handkerchief. "Oh, yes. Very productive."
Almost there!

Angel could see that Buffy had momentarily forgotten her drenching in holy water, and he took the opportunity to keep her locked in his hug for a few moments so she could cry on his chest without distraction. At this point, only her hair was damp enough to cause him any real pain, but he laid his hand against the back of her head and tucked it beneath his chin anyway. She let herself go with a few shuddering sobs until she heard the hiss of burning skin and snapped back into awareness, disentangling herself from his arms and stepping back.

"Just when we got you all healed up from last time," she said reproachfully, her fingers hovering at the affected place on his jaw.

"It doesn't matter. Are you okay?"

She shrugged. "I guess. He's dead. I don't know what I was expecting to happen. Like my mom would miraculously come back to life, or there would be no more vampires to kill and we could retire and live together..." Her hand clenched around the fabric of his shirt and she bowed her head, sucking in air through her teeth. "Or like I could forget that he already had me beat, and they put those chains on me and they...I couldn't get out. Oh God, Angel, they won. I killed him this time, but I already lost. You had to come rescue me, and after I thought I was finally done with needing you..."

"Buffy," he said sternly, taking her chin in his hand to keep her eyes on his, "you don't need me."

She frowned up at him, sad and confused, but made no response.

"Don't think I'm denying you. I know you love me. But we learned how to live without each other, and if we have to, we'll do it again. You survived when I turned on you. You grieved and you recovered when I was dead. Every day there's something else being thrown at you, and you always handle it. With or without me. If I didn't know that about you, I could never leave your side for an instant. But I will, because you don't need me."

"But the dungeon-"

"I saved you. Sure. I wouldn't have been around to do it if you hadn't saved me first, more than once. And in more than one way. Things happen, Buffy. If it wasn't your own power that got you out of this one, that's just the way the world works out sometimes. It wasn't failure, it was chance. An act of God."

She nodded reluctantly and wiped her face with a sleeve, acquiescent but still seeming unhappy. No worse than could be expected, he supposed. She was shivering again a little bit too, and he stooped to pick up his coat from where she had dropped it on the floor. Her grateful smile as he helped her into it made the night lose some of its pressure. Before they left the room, he picked up the open bucket of paint from the floor and dumped it over the symbol that Daemonis had been using it for. All of the candles were still lit, and he chose the two longest ones to guide himself and Buffy out of
the darkness as they made their exit, through the lair and up the stairwell. They left the candles at the
hatch, and Buffy drew in a deep, long-awaited breath of the open air.

The walk back to the cemetery featured a lot of silence, but their hands stayed clasped together. At
one point, Buffy informed him in a low voice. "I understood some of what he was saying, you
know."

"What?"

"You taught me some Latin back when I was laid up. You taught me the word caritas. It means
mercy, doesn't it?"

Angel nodded slowly. He had forgotten about their impromptu language lessons, but her limited
lexicon had identified the word correctly. Daemonis's entire Latin speech had boiled down to little
more than could be summarized by caritas. He didn't need to fill her in on the details: that Daemonis
had spoken of his dead lover, the once-human woman who tied the histories of the two vampires
together more than Angel ever wanted to admit. That his last moments had been spent in an attempt
to cultivate enough brotherhood out of that connection to plant doubts in Angel's mind. "Yes," Angel
replied simply. "He asked for mercy."

Buffy kept walking, her eyes facing forward, her grip firm around his hand. "And I gave it to him,"
she said.

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It seemed like nothing was going to stir the group out of their drowsy victory gathering on the grass
by the crypt, but when Xander saw two figures emerging from the pre-dawn mist and announced,
"There they are!", everyone regained some animation. Willow reached them first, hurrying over with
a hug ready while Xander was still gently shaking Anya so that she would wake up and let him help
her up off of his shoulder. The others moved more slowly, stretching out stiff limbs and dusting
debris off of their clothing.

Buffy was much more solemn than Xander usually saw her, matching the quiet intensity that
generally characterized only Angel. Dead Boy, tricked out in his own quiet intensity, was walking
right there beside her, though, so Xander wasn't sure what could be upsetting her. Maybe she had
been forced to kill Spike, which would doubtlessly be difficult for her after she had refused to do it
for so long.

Whatever her preoccupation was, she responded to everyone's enthused welcome with only small
smiles and detached affection. Her eyes flickered around all of them and then she seemed to relax a
little, and he realized that she was doing a head count. Once she had ascertained that all of them were
alive and well, she didn't show much curiosity about anything else.

They filled her in on all the details anyway. The experience was too fresh with all of them to do
anything else with it. As they gathered up weapons and set off to the waiting cars, everyone was
talking at once, rediscovering all of the high points of the battle, which they had been too
overwhelmed and exhausted to discuss amongst themselves before the newcomers showed up.
Buffy's first real contribution to the conversation was to thank Willow for the hyperspeed spell, and
the recounting took off from there.

"You should have seen her," said Xander proudly, clasping Willow's shoulder. "Just sitting up there
on that crypt, cooler than bein' cool, and we're fighting and yelling and, you know, just generally
being noisy brutes, and she doesn't bat an eye. And the whole time? She's levitating."
"I was?" asked Willow, genuinely surprised.

Father Tom chuckled, and Lydia queried, "You didn't know?"

Xander was already taken by another memory. "Man, and Oz! Manic attack dog extraordinaire! He must have taken down like six of them, all by his lonesome."

"I did?" asked Oz, looking and sounding like nothing but a short laconic guy.

Gunn swiveled his head around to respond from where he was walking a few steps ahead of them. "Looks like we got the masters of memory loss here," he said. "But hey, I saw you cats tearing it up tonight and I got no complaints."

Willow beamed back at him. "Not so bad yourself, Mister Hubcap Axe! I saw you with that last one that tried to sneak up on you, and with the..." She mimed swinging an axe. "Wham! Take that! You were great."

"Coulda been a bust," said Gunn, starting to get into it. "Then my main girl Lydia here starts getting her slay on. Let's hear some respect for the creature of the night!"

"You fought with them?" said Buffy, finally showing some interest. Angel had his eyes on Lydia too, doing his glowering thing, but he hadn't asked yet about the stranger.

"Yeah," Lydia replied brightly. "Turns out I'm really strong."

Xander shook his head in wry amazement, but Angel's glower looked like it was getting deeper, and for some reason even Giles didn't seem too happy about the young vampire's self-confidence. In the interest of staving off arguments until everyone had a little bit more stamina for them, Xander decided to steer the topic back onto congratulating themselves. "Did anyone see Father Tom doing his thing? If anyone feels like writing his biography, I suggest titling it 101 Uses for a Psychic Battle Priest."

"Indeed," said Wesley, "I've never seen an exorcism performed in the field before. Most impressive. What do you suppose happened to the host body- ah- the victim?"

"He went running," replied Father Tom. "He was understandably frightened. And he'll have a devil of a headache in the morning, but assuming he made it home alright, we won't need to worry about him."

"I completely support the use of non-violent methods to dispel demons of possession who are, of course, dangerous," said Anya in a rush. "But to be practical, I think the rest of us should start arming ourselves with shotguns. Wesley killed a whole bunch of them with his shotgun, and it's entirely possible that if he hadn't done that, they would have ripped our livers out, and believe me, it's not pretty when demons rip livers out. Plus, he was badass."

Xander scowled subtly in Wesley's direction. "He didn't kill that many," he muttered. Anya raised her eyebrow at him in challenge, and finally he relented enough to add, "But alright, it was badass."

"Giles fought too," Willow told Buffy. "And Anya gave us tips, and Xander protected Lydia and Cordelia." That was generous of her, Xander thought, though it was only true under a certain interpretation. Mostly, he had kept Cordelia hidden. Lydia, of course, hadn't turned out to need any protection.

"And I did what I do best," said Cordelia acidly. "Had a brain-shattering vision at the most inconvenient time possible. One that had nothing to do with what was going on at the moment, no
less."

Everyone looked at her with varying levels of shock. Xander was the only one who had known about the vision until then, and he had been waiting for her to choose her own moment to make it public. She hadn't even told him what it was, and he didn't know if she planned to tell anyone except for her coworkers. She must have known she would be asked, though. Half of the people present were asking her already.

Angel stopped walking to talk to her, which stopped everyone else walking too because they all wanted to hear. Cordelia spoke directly to Angel and ignored everyone else, but she didn't keep her volume down enough to leave them out. "It's a job in LA," she explained. "There's your typical fiendish monster of unspeakable grossness, but it also involves a portal and the host of Caritas and some girl who wears a pendant that looks like an apple. Not the clearest set of instructions the PTBs have given me, but...this one's got your name on it, Angel, a whole-team deal. Our number's up."

Xander had seen Angel angry before, angry in the worst way, but seeing him curse out loud and snake a possessive arm around Buffy's shoulders was new. "How much time do we have?" he rumbled.

"A few days to get it all figured out, but not much leisure time included in between."

Buffy spiraled into the curve of Angel's arm, coming to rest with her forehead against his chest. He closed his hold on her with his other arm and kissed her head, and when he lifted his face, Xander could see that parts of it were discolored, or possibly dirty- it was hard to tell in the darkness. "We'll head back to LA tomorrow," said the vampire.

Cordy nodded, looking no less resigned than her boss did. "Wes and Gunn and I can go up in the morning and get started on the research while you get your life here packed up." She twitched suddenly and the irony in her voice gave way to sincere regret. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean for that to sound like..." She sighed heavily, but accepted the small nod of understanding that Angel gave her as Buffy peeked out from the shelter of his embrace. "Whatever you guys have been doing all night, it probably wasn't much more fun than we were having here. Not thrilled about capping it all off with a vision, but the supernatural abilities supply store was fresh out of the power that makes everything shiny with rainbows and ice cream. So there's the news. Angel, I'm cold, can we please get moving?"

As one, the group started walking again, with much less conversation than they had previously been sharing. Xander thought his capacity to feel sorry for Angel might have hit a milestone, but he was primarily concerned about Buffy. She looked so small, pressed beside her hulking lover and covered from neck to toe by his coat. It was always a trial for Xander to see Buffy, the leader, having any kind of emotional crisis, but he knew enough to leave her alone about it until she chose to take her worries to him and the others. Right now it was obvious that Angel was the only one she wanted.

It struck him that from now on, Angel might always be the only one she wanted. With him at her beck and call, she might never think to make use of the supportive circle that she had here in town. Xander had heard warnings of how marriage could cause friendships to drift apart, and he had assumed that the Scoobies were above that. Now he had time to doubt it. Now, after he had participated in the wedding with hardly a word of protest.

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"I don't want to get up," Buffy complained, her voice muffled against Angel's shoulder.

"You don't have to." He gently rolled her off of him and started peeling the covers from his body.
She snatched the blanket out of his hand and put it back in place, holding him down with an arm and a leg. "I don't want you to get up, either."

There was a brief pause, and then he unexpectedly relented with an, "Okay," and stayed where he was.

It was like a tennis game, sometimes, the way they passed their shared sense of responsibility back and forth. As soon as he submitted to her request, she would always feel guilty and turn it around. "No, you have to get up." She released him from her hold and gave his arm a half-hearted shove.

"Are you going to get up?"

She let out a long sigh. "Oh, alright."

The mutual agreement was enough to get them both out of bed, but after getting dressed and brushing her teeth, Buffy came back to the bedroom to watch Angel pack. It wasn't much of a production- the better part of his possessions was still at the hotel, and some were going to stay at the mansion to make future visits more convenient. Unable to find any way to help and unwilling to leave the room, Buffy sat down on the bed and lifted Tara's wedding gift, the enchanted glass flower, out of its vase on the night table. The suggestion of Angel's anima seemed to soak into her through her fingertips, even while she was looking right at him. "I wish we had two of these," she said wistfully. "Would be nice if you could take one with you, but I'm not sharing."

He looked up from his suitcase on the floor to see what she was talking about, then moved over to her and laid two fingers on one of the glass petals, just for a few seconds. They had discovered that when both of them touched the flower at the same time, it gave them a slightly daft feeling of euphoria, which could be both disorienting and distracting. His hand left the charm and wandered over her face, brushing back locks of her hair. "Maybe I could take something else instead," he suggested.

"Like what?"

His eyes swept around the room, but it was evident that he had already had something in mind even as he spoke. He picked up his chosen item from the shelf with both of his hands and raised a querulous eyebrow at Buffy, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

She raised her eyebrow right back at him. "You want to take my stuffed pig? Are you serious?"

He shrugged, holding the pig close to his face in an unbelievably adorable way. "It smells like you."

"You're so weird," she said fondly, setting the flower carefully back into the vase. "Always with the...smelling things."

"I know. So can I take it?"

She wiggled her fingers at the stuffed animal. "Bye bye, Mr. Gordo. Take good care of Angel, okay?"

Angel tossed Mr. Gordo lightly into the suitcase and sat down next to her on the bed. "Are you going to be okay here by yourself?" he said abruptly. "I mean, living by yourself. The whole reason you moved in here in the first place was so you wouldn't have to be alone, and now...is there any way I can make it better? Do you want a cat?"

"A cat?" She laughed. "No thanks. If I feel the need, I'll have Willow move Sippy over here. And I'll hang out at my old place with everyone. And you'll call me. A lot. Or else."
"I don't need to be threatened into that." He got up again and went back to packing. "I just wish I had a little time to keep an eye on the situation here. I don't think there's anyone left who's connected to Darla or Daemonis, but with all vampires having souls now, the underground is going to change. And who knows what that means for the Hellmouth."

"New logo, new coat of paint, same old hive of doom and destruction. What do you make of Lydia?"

His eyes flashed up to meet hers when he heard the name, his brow furrowing. "Unlikely circumstance. She was made right before the spell was cast, so she hardly has any soulless past to weigh her down. It's noticeable, just by listening to her talk."

"Yeah," mused Buffy. "She's pretty well-adjusted for a vampire."

"Too well-adjusted." Angel buckled his suitcase shut and set it up beside himself on the floor. His voice was full of disdain, and Buffy realized that she was about to find out why he had been acting so tense about the topic of Lydia. "She's still a vampire, and a month ago she wasn't. She still has to learn how to live on blood, and how to avoid sunlight, and what it means to be immortal. And she might not have had much time without a soul, but that time still matters. She might have killed—nowhere near my score, but murder is murder. She was evil, Buffy. She's going to have to deal with that before she moves on."

It was more information than Buffy had expected, and knowing that it came from Angel's unique perspective made her feel like she had looked at Lydia and not seen her at all. She had been subconsciously viewing the lively young ensouled vampire, who had willingly leaped into the battle with the gang the night before, as a sign of hope. Now she wondered if Angel had been working from a viewpoint completely opposite to that. "But she can move on, can't she?" Buffy ventured.

"I hope so. Her mind is still more human than vampire. It should help with keeping her demon down. But if she thinks she just gained some superpowers and a cool new image, she's going nowhere fast. And she's got nobody to teach her, now. Her sire's got to be dead. Does she know she can't go back to her family?"

"Whoa," said Buffy, holding up a hand. "Slow down the dire. Not everyone here has a vampiric past to help with comprehension of this stuff."

Angel looked down at the floor. "Sorry. I just...don't want to see her blow her chance."

"Yeah. Me either. Well, she's with Giles right now. We can check up on her before we leave for LA."

They had decided that Buffy would accompany Angel back home, to ease the parting. She wouldn't be able to stay long, but it was worth it. Thinking about the day's plan, though, made her start counting the minutes that she had left with him. She told herself, not for the first time, not to think that way, and ended up finding her way into Angel's arms as a spontaneous exercise in living in the now.

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Father Tom picked them up in the early afternoon in a comically large Buick that he said was owned by the local parish. He was still limping slightly, but hadn't needed any hospital work and insisted that he was capable of everyday tasks. Buffy rode shotgun and Angel lay down in the back with a blanket over him, listening with amused tolerance to her making jabs about it. Getting through the sunlight to Giles's door was a bit of a hassle, but the only thing that was really causing Angel any trepidation was the possibility of making a scene before he could get in. When Giles answered, Buffy breezed past him and into the house with a cheerful greeting, but Angel stood rooted to the
spot, not wanting to test his access even after Father Tom followed Buffy with his arms full of books and left him alone in the doorway.

Giles understood. "Come in, Angel," he said, promptly enough that Buffy might not have noticed the delay.

"Thank you," Angel said with sincere gratitude. Giles gave him a nod and dropped the subject. There was a chance, Angel thought, that there had been no barrier there in the first place, but he would never know now.

Lydia was sitting at Giles's table with an enormous leather-bound book open in front of her. She was dressed differently than she had been the night before, although how she had obtained clothes- and makeup- of her own was anyone's guess. She was still all in black, but now it was a long skirt and a frilly corset top, and her eyes and lips were painted in dark tones to match. Angel gritted his teeth. He didn't think this style was a new development for her. Not every teenager who dressed in dramatic black clothing was a vampire-worshiper, but there were plenty of them who unwittingly mimicked the undead, and sometimes the undead noticed. He could imagine Lydia, with her delicate features and spunky disposition, being selected by some older vampire who wanted to make a pet out of her. If things had proceeded normally, she would have been tutored and protected by her sire for years, but without him and without the timely entrance of Buffy and the others, she wouldn't have survived a week on her own. And maybe that would have been kinder.

She glanced at him when he came in, but neither of them spoke to each other. Angel didn't know what she had been told about him, but she already seemed to be holding him up as some kind of authority figure, and she probably wasn't the type to accept authority too easily. The theory was advanced when Father Tom greeted her by name and got only an uneasy nod in return. Buffy, on the other hand, received a ready smile and "Hi!"

Buffy returned the smile and pulled out a chair across from her. "We brought you some blood," she said, holding up a container she had taken from the mansion's refrigerator.

"Thanks. I am so hungry." Lydia reached out to take the blood, but Giles took it out of Buffy's hand before she could.

"I'll put it in a cup," he said, taking it into the kitchen with him. "I'd like to see some table manners, as long as you're here." Lydia frowned, but made no objection.

Buffy regained her attention quickly, asking, "So how are you doing? Still kind of spun?"

"I'm okay," said Lydia noncommittally. "Except everyone is treating me like a kid."

Angel held back a growl. He was leaning on the wall near the entrance to the kitchen, some distance from the table, but Lydia would be able to hear even sub-vocalized sounds from him, even if she didn't understand what she was hearing. "How old are you?" he asked instead, not moving from his spot.

She gazed back at him with dark, suspicious eyes. "Sixteen. Going on eternal."

"Sweetie," said Buffy, "even for a human, that's pretty young. We're not trying to be condescending, but we really need you to listen to us. You might think we don't know anything about what happened to you, but we've got Angel on our side and he's an old pro at this. And Giles is an old pro at knowing stuff about everything."

Giles passed Angel at the doorway and came back into the room with the blood in an opaque
tumbler. "Buffy, was that a compliment?" he said, sounding mildly astonished.

Angel's attention was divided when he saw Father Tom studying the spines of the books he had carried in and shelving them carefully with Giles's collection. It occurred to him that he might not be seeing this particular ally again, and he crossed the room to speak to him. "You borrowed all of those?" he asked, gesturing at the books.

"Yes," Father Tom replied, grinning. "And I confess that they were mostly for my own entertainment."

Angel laughed. "So your tenure in California wasn't entertaining enough as it was?"

"Oh, it was a welcome change of pace. And I can't say I got the job done, but the job got done." It had almost escaped Angel's mind that Father Tom had come all the way out here to kill a master vampire, and now he wondered if leaving the kill for Buffy had caused any regret. "I'm...sorry for what Daemonis did to you. The friends you lost to him. I hope that it helps to know he won't be killing anyone else."

"Indubitably. It wasn't self-satisfaction I was seeking from the mission." He paused, watching Buffy as she talked to Giles and Lydia at the table. "And she needed to be the one wielding the stake this time, didn't she?"

Angel's eyes ran parallel to his, but he tore them away before Buffy could notice she was being scrutinized. "She did," he said in a near-whisper. "I hope it's enough."

"I know an unhealthy mind when I hear one," the psychic replied. "And hers is the mind of an exceptionally resilient woman."

"Exceptional all around," Angel agreed as both of them noticed at the same time where the conversation at the table was going.

Lydia was ignoring their presence in the room, but had just asked Buffy, "So you're a human, but, like, you and Angel seemed pretty cozy last night. Is he really, you know, your boyfriend?"

"He's my husband," Buffy corrected smoothly, holding up her ringed hand like a badge.

Father Tom raised his voice to address Lydia. "He's her vampire," he said with openly evident mirth. "That's what she told me."

"That too." Buffy drew Angel back to her side with a warm smile, and he put his hands on her shoulders.

The phone rang, and Giles excused himself to answer it. In his absence, Father Tom came up to the table and stood over Lydia, examining the book she had in front of her. "What's this you're studying?" he asked.

She flipped through a few pages with her thumb to show him the illustrations. "Mr. Giles said I should read about some occult history. Things vampires have done, and stuff. This one says it's a collection of written accounts of attacks in London from the last couple hundred years."

"I see," said Father Tom. "Learn anything interesting so far?"

"Sort of. Mostly it's just really morbid, but I guess that's kind of inevitable. And some of the people writing it didn't actually believe in vampires, so you have to know what you're looking for." She sighed. "I think he wants me to keep reading it until I have some kind of revelation and tell him I
vow to only use my powers for the good of mankind. Or he's trying to freak me out. I mean, some of this stuff is just sick. There's this transcript of a letter that some woman wrote to the Mother Superior of a local convent in eighteen hundred something...here, let me find it."

Angel looked around at the others as Lydia searched the book for the passage in question. Giles was still on the phone, and Father Tom was absorbed in the book. Buffy didn't look up at Angel's face, but she did reach for his hand and lace her fingers through his.

"Here it is," said Lydia. "There's some boring stuff about preparing to take holy orders, and then, 'The stranger still torments my days and haunts my nightmares, leaving me not a moment of rest, but the true horror he brings is one that I must hold secret. None would believe- even now, the townspeople whisper that I am becoming a madwoman- but I have seen the marks defiling his victims, and the whiteness of bodies drained of their blood. He is a son of Cain, a demon that walks the earth, and he has chosen me as his prey. I beg you for sanctuary, Mother, by the grace of God. No other can help me...' See, if you guys think I'm going to be that kind of vampire, you've got a screw loose."

Angel felt hoarse when he spoke in response. "Is the letter signed?"

She blinked at him and turned the page to look. "No, but it has the response from the Mother Superior, and that one starts, 'Dear Elizabeth'..."

"Elizabeth." He felt as if a floodgate had opened on him, and he sagged forward, gripping Buffy's chair to hold himself steady. "That was her name. Of course it was."

Buffy peered up at him, slipped out of the chair, and grabbed him by the wrist. "We'll be right back," she informed the priest and the vampiress, and marched him out the door.

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There was a shadow cast behind Giles's house, big enough to comfortably shelter a vampire and his wife while the sun still shone over them. Angel looked at Buffy expectantly as they sat down against the wall, and she wondered suddenly why she had brought him out there. It was plain to see that this wasn't another meltdown moment, but she was still getting the feeling that it was private. If Angel didn't want to explain the significance of Elizabeth, well, she didn't want him to be asked about it, and besides, she had the right to want to keep him to herself today.

"Was that a coincidence?" he asked. The question sounded rhetorical, but still curious.

"You mean, that Lydia was interested in that passage?"

"That she was reading it in the first place. Did Giles give it to her because he wanted me to hear it?"

Buffy frowned. Angel and Giles always seemed to have some kind of passive-aggressive war game going on beneath the radar, and she wondered suddenly why she had brought him out there. It was plain to see that this wasn't another meltdown moment, but she was still getting the feeling that it was private. If Angel didn't want to explain the significance of Elizabeth, well, she didn't want him to be asked about it, and besides, she had the right to want to keep him to herself today.

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"You mean, that Lydia was interested in that passage?"

"That she was reading it in the first place. Did Giles give it to her because he wanted me to hear it?"

Buffy frowned. Angel and Giles always seemed to have some kind of passive-aggressive war game going on beneath the radar, and she wondered if she was ever going to be in on it. "I don't think he knows enough about you to want you to hear it."

He nodded, still deep in his thoughts but accepting of her reasoning. "Had to be coincidence, then." He stretched out his legs, just skirting the edge of the shade. "It's good he's making her read up on the past. Our past. Gets her acquainted with the reality of it. She can't stay with him forever, though."

"I was thinking the same thing. They'll drive each other off the Cliffs of Insanity. But she probably shouldn't go with you, either."

There was little surprise in his eyes, or in his unnecessary exhalation, but definitely some relief. He
had to have been wondering if they were going to saddle him with a protegee despite his discomfort with her. Angel being Angel, though, he questioned the free pass Buffy was giving him anyway. "Why not? I mean...I know what she needs, and it's not like I don't have room for her."

"Because she thinks you're mean and scary and she doesn't like you. Duh." She locked her hands around her knees and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm not saying you're not our number one expert on vampires with souls, but she isn't going to be the only penitent-in-training that the spell churns out, and most of them are probably going to be in worse shape than she is. I'd rather have you open to deal with the ones who need you the most."

Angel's expression was full of distaste, but he made a sound of agreement. "I may have to open the hotel," he said, resigned.

There was no point in trying to coax him into a more positive outlook- or in trying to find other options. Angel was always prepared to take on the tasks that suited him best, and she had to be prepared to assign them to him. If he didn't like vampires, and of course he didn't, all she could do was sympathize. So far, she had only found one vampire that she liked, herself. Maybe that would all change in the future, though. They would have to compare notes.

She felt an involuntary smile coming on at the thought, and decided it was time to change the subject. Ever since they had woken up, it had been Lydia, Lydia, vampires, souls, questionable futures. Today was supposed to be strictly Buffy and Angel Time. "So," she said. "Into the S&M stuff, huh?"

It was a question geared to get a memorable reaction out of him, and she wasn't disappointed. She had considered waiting to spring this one on him until they were walking somewhere so she could see if she could get him to walk into a tree, but this would do. "What?" he sputtered. "Who- how did you ask that?"

She shrugged, feigning a casual interest. "Had a talk with an old girlfriend of yours. It might have come up."

"Buffy," he protested, still entertainingly flustered, "I was evil. Are you really going to put any stock in what I did with Darla when I was evil?"

"Ha!" she exclaimed. "So it's true! You were into it!"

He looked truly mortified. "I can't believe we're even talking about this."

"Yeah, it's always a shocker to find yourself actually talking about something, isn't it? Come on, isn't this the kind of thing we're supposed to discuss as a couple? And don't try to tell me it was only fun when you were evil. I'm not that naive."

For a moment it seemed as though he had settled into his stubborn silence and wasn't going to budge. Then he switched to sullen defiance and muttered, "What kind of spell could you be under that would make you get engaged to Spike, anyway?"

Buffy soon lost track of how long they had been out there. She was too busy winning the argument to notice that the shade's coverage was extending. A quick recap of Willow's temporary loss of control over her magic the previous year was enough to clear the air of any compromising stories involving Buffy's first engagement, and then she commandeered the conversation again and demanded some straight answers on Angel's less conventional appetites. She felt guilty at first for pushing the issue, but as she gradually convinced him that she wasn't about to run away screaming, his responses became more and more riveting. Naturally, that was when someone opened the door...
beside them.

Her alarm at seeing this particular person at that particular moment was eased quickly when she realized that he couldn't have heard anything incriminating, and then it returned tenfold when she remembered the talent that belonged to the man. "Father Tom!" she squeaked. "Hi! Um, were you reading my mind just now? Because you really shouldn't bother. My thoughts, they...weren't very interesting. Dry, even. Totally inane girly stuff. You'd just get annoyed."

The priest looked stoic as ever. Buffy wondered if being born telepathic gave him some kind of built-in immunity to embarrassment. "I wasn't listening in on you," he said. "As a rule I do my best to entirely block out the thoughts of newlyweds. I just came to inform you that some other visitors have arrived." He moved to go back inside, then paused, looked back at her with an expression of idle curiosity, and asked, "Why? What does shibari mean?"

Buffy's face went as hot as she had ever felt it, and she hastened to get to her feet. "I'm sorry, I really need to not be around a psychic priest right now," she said as she stepped over Angel's legs and squeezed past Father Tom to get back into the house, not making eye contact with either of them. They gave her some space before following, but behind her she heard Father Tom telling Angel, with some chagrin, "I didn't mean to rattle her."

"Nah," Angel replied in an amused voice, apparently enjoying the benefits of his own unflappability. "She completely deserved that."

Buffy's cheeks got a few impossible degrees warmer. _Damn_ that man and his resistance to telepathy-making _her_ look like the one with a dirty mind! Angel ought to be forced to explain the whole conversation to Father Tom. In fact, Angel ought to be stuck in a room with Father Tom and forced to tell him _everything_ he'd done during his unlife. No, wait. That had already happened. Maybe the whole idea was a lost cause. Buffy stalked down the hall, glaring at the floor, and ducked into the bathroom to splash some water on her face before she had to actually talk to anyone.

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Willow and Oz had stopped by Giles's house to say goodbye; Xander and Anya, Angel suspected, had stopped by to say good riddance. It had been a while since Xander said or did anything openly obnoxious, but he wasn't that hard to read and there was definitely some lingering animosity there. Angel still didn't know what to make of Anya. He had thought he would be able to relate to an ex-demon, but he at least had lived among people during his evil past, and he at least regretted the evil past. In comparison to her he felt almost human, and that was without even accounting for her inexplicable attraction to Xander.

Both were civil, though, and Angel even suspected that Xander had been coaching Anya in how to pretend that you were going to miss someone. He thanked them both for their participation in defeating Daemonis and the others, and for witnessing at the wedding, and they returned the same sentiments. Buffy saw that he was playing nice and rewarded him with a charmed smile and a kiss on the cheek. Ever since she emerged from the bathroom, she had been trying so hard to keep herself from thinking inappropriate thoughts that it took some effort to restrain himself from whispering something lewd in her ear. She was just too cute when she blushed.

The other farewells were harder for Angel. Willow looked piteously sad at the thought of him leaving town, and exacted promises about visitation as if she really thought he could stay away. He knew that her distress was mostly on behalf of Buffy, but he also sensed that she had a deep-seated fear of losing the people in her life, any of them. High school in Sunnydale must have been especially hard on her. He gave her an affectionate hug and invited her to come up to Los Angeles with Buffy sometime and spend a weekend at the hotel, and she smiled and reminded him that his
top priority was taking Buffy on vacation as soon as possible.

Oz didn't require any sentimentality, seemingly content to send Angel off with a simple, "Keep it real, man." Angel hesitated to leave it at that, though. He remembered that he had talked the werewolf into staying in town, and offered to work with him on the control issues. The offer had been earnest, but time had been so sparse with everything else going on, and it had slipped Angel's mind. Obviously, Oz had done well enough on his own, but Angel still wished he could make it up to him somehow. He had just opened his mouth to voice an apology when he saw Oz shake his head, almost imperceptibly, while the corner of his lips twitched in amusement. The intentions of the gesture weren't totally clear, but the message was. Angel nodded and matched his silence.

Giles gave him a handshake and a stern, wordless look of warning. Father Tom gave him a phone number and a request to be kept updated on how things progressed in LA. As the sun was setting, Buffy asked Angel if he had anyone else he wanted to see before they left. "One," he answered, "if you don't mind."

The two of them set out on foot, leaving the sidewalk when they reached the cemetery's borders and using its roads to get to the headstone they sought. Buffy knelt in front of it and touched her fingertips to its smooth surface. "Hi Mom," she said. "Look who I brought. Your son-in-law."

She spoke so naturally, radiating such love and serenity, that Angel had a hard time finding his voice. "I wish I had some flowers," he said.

"Oh, she gets lots of flowers. I'll bring some more next time." Buffy stood up and took her place next to him, sliding her hand into his. "Did you want to, um, say anything?"

"Just wanted to be here with you. To show her I meant it."

"Meant what?"

Angel considered before answering. He had promised to keep Buffy safe and happy, and a safe and happy Buffy was what he wanted Joyce, wherever she was, to see. It could be risky to speak openly to Buffy about protecting her, though, so he went back further in his memory to find the words to explain the silent pact he had made with her mother. "She told me I would have to make choices. And I did. And I'm going to stand by them."

Buffy gave him an appraising look and then a sound of affirmation. For long moments they stood there, taking in the chirp of crickets and the smell of earth and the first stars appearing in a sky that had not yet lost its color. Then Buffy murmured, evenly and without judgment, "You know, Jenny Calendar is buried here too."

He hadn't known that, and he felt his whole body stiffen when he heard the name. Buffy felt it too, through his hand that she was holding, and she leaned her head comfortingly into the crook of his neck. "Left at the fork, past the crematorium, third stone on the right. If you want to."

"I think I'd better," he said gravely. "You'll be-?"

"Right here," she assured him. "Just start yelling if you run into a pack of feral zombies."

There were no walking dead, of that kind, out tonight to distract him from his purpose, and he found the stone easily. This time, he didn't have even a few paltry words to offer, but he didn't try to find any. All he wanted was to stand over the body, to see the name carved out in stark letters- and to be alone at the site, with nobody to witness his presence there and misinterpret it as an affectation of grief. Most of his victims would never receive even this much in the way of a tribute, but she was unique among them. She was part of the culture that had instilled a soul in him, part of the deceit that
had led him to lose it again, and part of the efforts that had ultimately saved him. A moment of silence was the very least that she deserved.

But even the solitude he needed to accomplish that much didn't last long. Angel didn't know which of his senses first tipped him off, but he wasn't alone anymore and the other presence wasn't Buffy. He let himself be watched for a few minutes, gauging the threat and then keeping his focus on the reason he had come. Finally the other stepped out of hiding and came up behind Angel, stopping a few feet away and waiting silently for acknowledgment.

Angel obliged, not bothering to look up, his voice low and toneless. "Hello, Spike."

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Giles looked at his watch, didn't believe it, looked at the wall clock for confirmation, and said, "Oh my." It wasn't the first time he had lost track of the hour while reading in the store, but this time it had especially caught him by surprise, as he had subconsciously been expecting Willow to leave long before it got this late. She had been sitting at the table, playing idly with the Moisipi spirit, and when he looked over at her for the first time in at least an hour, she was doing exactly the same thing. The spirit was emitting a faint glow, currently the only source of light in the store aside from Giles's own desk lamp, and the red shine of the young witch's hair was just barely visible under it.

"Willow," he said to her, "don't you want to get home?"

"Hm?" She glanced up and shook her head to clear it, then looked at the clock. "Oh. It's late, huh? Sorry, I was just...thinking about prophecies."

That was an odd thing to be thinking about, he thought. They had all been through a lot lately, but prophecies had no part in it that he could remember. "Why is that?" he asked.

She straightened in her chair and rubbed her eyes, and when she spoke again, she was awake and forthright. "Have you heard about Angel's Sanshu- uh, Shansu- okay, call it, Shanshu? Buffy told me, but I don't think it's supposed to be a secret."

Giles nodded, remembering. "He's meant to become human. Wesley told me."

"But it doesn't mention him by name, so now...which vampire with a soul?"

"Very perplexing. There's no way to know until it happens, I suppose, but as far as I know, Wesley is still convinced that it refers to Angel, and he seems to have made himself the expert on the subject."

Willow propped her elbows up on the table and set her face in her hands. "That's not much."

"I know," said Giles gravely.

"And then, he's supposed to stop an apocalypse, right? I just can't stop thinking. Daemonis had an apocalypse brewing, and Buffy and Angel stopped him while he was casting the spell, so that seems like it should count. But Buffy was the one who killed him, they said. What if it was supposed to be Angel? What if that was his big chance?"

No wonder she had been so lost in thought. These were questions that could indeed keep one up all night. "A prophecy is a powerful force," Giles said carefully. "I think it would take more than that to thwart it, if it truly speaks of Angel's destiny. And if it doesn't, everyone is prepared for that, Angel most of all. The best we can do for him is give him hope that one day the world will no longer need him."
"Yeah. Well, we'll do that, then." Willow frowned, reaching out and absently stroking the Moisipi spirit, which let out an entirely unexpected purr. Later on he would have to ask her how she had managed to make it do that. She didn't even seem to notice. "Do you think Buffy still thinks he's going to turn human?"

He thought about the most positive spin he could put on it, some token words about Buffy's acceptance of her husband as he was, or the unpredictability of life and prophecies and what they could be hiding. In the end, though, he had to opt for honesty. "No."

***

"So who's this bird, then?" asked Spike as he stepped up to Jenny's headstone, unscrewing the cap of a silver hip flask he had just taken from a pocket inside his coat. "Friend of yours?"

"I killed her." It was easier saying that then it would have been to admit that she had, in fact, been a friend of sorts. Angel finally raised his eyes to glance over at Spike. "You don't remember?"

The younger vampire took a swig from his flask before leaning forward to read the dates on the stone. "Ninety-eight? Oh. The Watcher's squeeze, i'n't it? Had your soul all lined up for you, and you offed her before she could finish the deed. Good times. Too bad she's not here to see what a trend she kicked off. Souls being all the rage now."

All the rage indeed. All the rage was bubbling just beneath the surface of Spike's indifference, manifesting in the slightly drunken cascade of his words only through the hard edge on a few scattered syllables. There could be no doubt that he knew what had happened to his girlfriend, and thus no doubt about why he was there now, but Angel didn't force the topic. "That they are," he said. "How's yours?"

"It's a putrid, senseless, worm-eaten, vitriolic ball and chain. Standard issue, I'll wager. And for some reason I'm feeling compelled to hang onto it anyway. Lucky stroke I've got you around to blame for everything, or I'd have to just wallow in guilt."

"Compelled?" Angel didn't want to say it explicitly, but that word worried him. Spike wasn't supposed to have a choice about whether or not he was going to hang onto his soul.

"I was in with the bad crowd, Peaches. Darla didn't fancy us being soulful, didn't you notice that? She had her latest sugar daddy's technique all ready to be tested on you and me, and trade secrets get passed around."

"Then you know how to get your soul removed."

Spike lifted his flask to his lips for another chug before answering. "Not yet. But I'm probably the only one on this bloody planet who knows where to start. So! Is that going to make this a cause for justifiable homicide, or, let me guess, you're 'not here to fight me'?"

"No," said Angel affably. "This time I'll fight you." He proved his words by spinning around as soon as they were out of his mouth and landing the first strike, a vicious backhand to Spike's face. His movements were too sudden for Spike to dodge or counter, and the flask went flying, dribbling whiskey out onto the ground, as Angel's fist connected with flesh.

Spike didn't fall, but he staggered backwards and let out a stream of curses before straightening and facing Angel. He had vamped out as soon as he was hit, and he had an angry growl to go with it. Angel kept his face the way it was. He was willing to provide as much violence as Spike wanted or needed from him, but his body knew that fury wasn't part of this and neither was survival. Unlike his
opponent, he was sober in every sense of the word.

The fight escalated quickly, Spike making up for Angel's initial advantage with a nonstop flurry of punches and kicks. Angel blocked what he could and pressed the attack when he had the opening, but for the first few minutes his main goal was to move the conflict away from Jenny's grave. He had already snapped the woman's neck; he didn't need to add a botched attempt at respecting her to that. Spike didn't seem to notice the maneuver, or care. His intentions were much more pure, and when he started talking, it was to emphasize the blows, not distract from them.

"You think I'm going to ask you why you did it, don't you? And you've got your speech ready, all dressing yourself up as the bleeding-heart martyr with the golden hand of mercy. Well, save it, because I'm the original phantom from your past and I know the truth. You killed Dru for the same bloody reason you killed Gypsy Calendar. The same reason you had for every last one of your kills since the day you dug your way out of the ground." Spike broke off from his onslaught at that point, both physical and verbal, and he put a few paces of distance between himself and Angel, who allowed it, realizing against his will that he wanted to hear what Spike was going to say next.

The answer came out as an absolute condemnation. "You kill because you've never met a person living or dead who you didn't think belonged to you. It wasn't lives you were ending, it was your own property, isn't that right? And it didn't stop with the soul, oh no. Now you're just invested in keeping your property safe, no less than you did for us when we were wanted. The Slayer, your Team Angel, all those thousands of innocent lives you strive to safeguard...they're just toys on your shelf, and you don't want anyone else touching." He hissed through his fangs, his eyes flashing with the reflection of the almost-full moon. "And if one should happen to break, why then you've got to be the one to take off her head and leave your signature in her ashes, with all its ironic artistry."

Angel shook his head. "You're wrong. I don't own anyone."

"No, see, I'm aware of that. But you're about to be." With that, he lunged, and the fight began anew. Angel met the attack easily and returned it. He didn't know where this was going, but he knew from experience that the two of them could keep it up for hours. If he let it happen, anyway.

"So that's your plan? Kill me and you'll be free? I don't think so." Something occurred to him as he caught Spike's fist and turned it away. "You didn't even bring a stake, did you?"

"Oh, sod it." Spike put the scuffle on hold again as he blocked a hit and then raised his hands. "Called my bluff, eh? Well, if you came prepared, then the victory goes to you, the better man." He dropped to his knees and held his hands over his heart, a pose that seemed at first to be pure mockery but carried an unmistakable overtone of true spiritual defeat. His eyes closed, a second before his face turned back to its human guise. "Let's have it. Thus fell William the Bloody. I regret that I have but one life to give for my pathetic inferiority complex."

Angel rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. He actually didn't have a stake himself, which felt like it was careless of him even though he was sure Buffy had one and he didn't want to use a stake right now anyway. Spike's misery was the last thing he wanted to deal with during these last few moments he had in Sunnydale, but not all of his problems could be solved by turning them to dust. He hovered over his grandchild, almost offering him a hand up, and then thought better of it and sat down on the ground beside him instead. Spike opened his eyes, and his lips curled into a sneer before he changed his kneeling position to sitting like Angel was. He felt inside his coat for his flask, then apparently remembered that it was already out and spilled, and gave up.

"I killed her because she was hurting me," said Angel, "and I had to make it stop. That's all."

"Well, now she's hurting me, and you've left me no one to kill."
"There's me. But you didn't bring a stake."

As a taunt that went much farther than Angel would have gone with anyone else, but Spike just chuckled as if they were sharing a joke. "Wouldn't help anything to kill you. Never really wanted to, truth be told, unless it was the only way to move up and see the end of you. I always fooled myself that sooner or later you would stride off into the setting moon and let the younger lion take over the pride, and all I had to do was wait for it."

Maybe it was Spike's sense of humor catching on, but Angel had to laugh at that. "Some pride."

"No," Spike agreed, "there wasn't really much to be proud of, was there? Just an old bitch, a crazy bitch, a son of a bitch, and me." He sighed and met Angel's eyes for the first time since his own had gone back to their usual pale blue, and his voice dropped an octave, less intoxicated than it had been before and with an underlying current of fear. "The soul's making a difference. I've been trying to ignore it this whole time, but it's changing something. Eating away at me. Got this little chorus in the back of my head singing Oh, evil Spikey, what have you done, over and over, and they never get past that part or stop long enough to let me actually think about what it's supposed to mean."

"Yeah, that...that never really goes away."

Spike snorted disdainfully. "That's my chum, knew you'd have a word or two of encouragement for me. Look, here's the Cracker Jack prize: I'm keeping the soul and I'm keeping the secret. And we can skip the threats about what you'll do to me if I break my word on that. I don't fancy spending any more time in your basement, so you can slay me or you can believe I'm not off to do anything stupid with magic."

"Alright." It was an answer given too easily, Angel knew, but there wasn't anywhere else to go with it other than killing Spike, and he wanted that less and less. Darla and Drusilla were dead without a chance to make something of themselves. Penn was dead, along with a fair number of other failed disciples. Even the Master, Angel's own grandsire, was dead. Spike was the last gasp of the Order of Aurelius. "So what are you going to do?"

"I dunno. What's the rum thing to do for an undead bloke who's got nothing left to lose?"

Angel shrugged. "You mean, other than living on the streets and eating rats? My suggestion is to leave town."

Spike rolled his eyes. "Right, right, clear myself off your territory and keep my distance from your girl. What was I thinking, implying that you were possessive."

"You don't want to be around me or her anyway. Just go take a journey. You know, to find yourself, or whatever they call it."

Unrestrained laughter rang out into the stillness of the cemetery. "They call it soul-searching, nitwit."

Angel pondered the phrase for a few moments in silence. It wasn't long before he ran out of ways to find a deeper meaning in it, and he looked over at Spike, who was now opening a pack of cigarettes.

"You want to fight some more?"

"No, I think I'm good."

"Then I better get back to Buffy." Angel got to his feet.

Spike was concentrating on lighting his cigarette- with a flimsy disposable lighter, Angel noticed, for
some reason- and didn't bother to glance up at him, though he did have a remark to offer. "You're completely whipped."

"Oh? I thought I was possessive."

"You're both, granddad, and that's the key to just one of those special neuroses that make you so irresistible to the ladies." Spike got the cigarette lit after a few annoyed flicks of the lighter, and then stood up. After one long drag and exhalation, he looked at Angel and said, "Ah, hell. One for the road."

Angel reeled as Spike's fist shot out and caught him on the jaw. Immediately following the punch, Spike turned and set off at an easy gait, and Angel glared at his back without attempting to retaliate. He didn't have a chance to follow anyway, as the sound of Buffy's exasperated voice behind him swiftly brought his attention off of the departing vampire.

"I leave you alone for five minutes and you get in a fight!"
The prospect of seeing the Hyperion for the first time was an effective tool for making herself ignore the prospect of leaving it on her own, Buffy found. There were still quite a few things that she and Angel had never done together, and checking one off, even something as insignificant as driving from Sunnydale to LA, was a good feeling. As they got closer to the city she began seeing the familiar sights in a different light, picturing Angel living among them, and she pointed out her old haunts to him and chattered about her youth there, making him chuckle and offer a few of his more recent stories in exchange.

She hadn't known exactly what to expect from the hotel, but it had her speechless anyway. It was big, cavernous in the lobby alone, and old-fashioned in all the right ways. Even if Angel and his team had had nothing to do with the decor, it still would have reminded her of him. He smiled as he ushered her in, and then stood back and let her revolve slowly in the center of the lobby, craning her head upwards to take in every last detail.

Cordelia was seated at the front desk, paging through a magazine. "'Bout time," she said cheerfully when they entered. "I was about to call it a night. Well, actually I called it a night hours ago, but I was about to go home without giving you the latest skinny in person."

"And what's that?" said Angel.

"We're meeting with the host of Caritas tomorrow. Didn't find anything about the apple-necklace girl. And Wesley turned up some info on portals. Look at how much he narrowed it down to fit our case." She thumped her hand on the top of a huge pile of books and papers sitting on the counter. "Have fun with these. And, well..." She cast Buffy a sympathetic smile. "Sleep tight."

Buffy bid her goodnight, but in the meantime, she had discovered the weapons cabinet. As the door clicked shut behind Cordelia, she selected a rapier and went through a few practice forms with it, then noticed that there was a glaive in the case and tried that out instead. It had a nice balance to it, and she considered asking Giles for one. It had been a long time since she had gotten any new weapons, although in all fairness, her fragile relationship with the Watcher's Council and their formidable finances probably had something to do with that. Also, exotic weapons tended to be more fun than they were practical for her line of work, so maybe she should just make a point of playing with Angel's collection every time she was up here.

She slashed at the air with the glaive and then spun into a mock battle pose, facing Angel, who she had sensed standing just behind and to the side of her. He didn't flinch, despite having the point of the blade a few inches from his throat, and she wondered exactly what it would take to startle him. "Aren't you going to tell me to watch where I'm pointing that thing?" she inquired with a pout.

"That's my warrior woman," he murmured in satisfaction, and then in a normal tone, "You can point it wherever you want."

It was nice, she thought, having a man who didn't only expect her to kick ass, but counted on it. She
wasn't blind; she knew he was afraid for her, having experienced firsthand the kind of dangers she faced daily and was likely to face for the rest of her life. But he had learned somewhere along the way that his protection over her could only go so far, and in his absence he was passing the duty on to the person he trusted the most, and that was Buffy herself. Keeping that in mind was going to be a help when he was gone, since the only thing she feared about losing his protection was loneliness.

"I've been thinking," she said, swinging out of the pose and placing the glaive back into the cabinet. "Lydia ought to stay with me at the mansion."

His dark eyes were momentarily unreadable as they studied her face. "You want her there?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Could be fun. I'd have some company. She'd have somewhere to come home to. The house would have its traditional resident vampire. And you can't tell me we don't have the room."

"You'd be good for her," he said, albeit reluctantly.

"Yeah, she'd be like my little sis, of the eternally little persuasion. I could train her in slaying, and yell at her for leaving the windows open, and stuff." Buffy wandered away from the weapons and sat down on the weird-looking round couch that they had in the lobby. "But, Angel," she continued, making it clear with her voice that she was serious. "I'm not going to do it unless it's okay with you. It's our house. Our decision."

She was pleased that he didn't deny that, or claim that any decision she made was okay with him. He followed her to the couch and sat down beside her, considering it. Then he nodded and said, "One condition."

"What?"

"Lock your door when you're asleep. At least until you know she's in control of herself."

The thought of exuberant, naive Lydia managing to take the Slayer in a surprise attack, even in her sleep, was almost humorous. But it was clear that Angel meant what he was saying, and it wasn't a condition worth disputing. "Deal."

He kissed her temple. "Want to see the suite?"

Angel's suite! She had forgotten that she had yet to see the best part of the Hyperion. "Yeah! Show me!"

He brought her up the stairs and opened up the door to room 217, and she stepped in eagerly. "Ooh, I like the purple! Look, you've got another whole kitchen you have no use for! And a balcony! It's-"

She broke off as she turned to look at him and found that he hadn't followed her in.

He was leaning in the doorway, smiling broadly but making no move to come closer. "Here we go again."

"Oh," she said, realizing what it was that held him there. "Do I live here too now?"

"Of course you do." If the barrier at the entrance hadn't proved it, the affection in his voice did, and she looked around again at her new home until he prompted her to return her focus to him. "So are you going to invite me in?"

Instead of answering, she kicked off her shoes and slipped her blouse over her head. Instantly, Angel's hands flew up in front of him and pressed against the invisible barrier, his eyes wide with
incredulity. Buffy noted that the question of how to startle him had just been answered, and she couldn't contain a giggle. Teasing was still relatively new territory for them—it would have been downright cruel to tease him during the curse days, and since then she hadn't had much patience for it herself. This was an opportunity too good to pass up, though. She shimmed out of her skirt and performed a twirl, casting him a coy smile.

Angel looked frantically from side to side, as if he really thought there could be anyone out there to see her. "Buffy," he said, his voice wavering somewhere between command and plea. "Let me in."

She hooked a finger under her bra strap and slowly lowered it off her shoulder. "Why?" she inquired. "What are you going to do in here?"

Just as she was feeling smug about her position of power, he started taking out the weapons in his own arsenal, beginning with the growl she liked so much. It came from deep in his chest, a drawn-out, dangerous rumble, and she suddenly remembered that she was dealing with this era's crowned master of manipulation. "I'm going to make you beg," he vowed, his eyes boring into her, and before she knew it he was shedding his own clothes right there in the corridor.

For one ridiculous moment she hoped that one of them remembered to pick them up before they were discovered the next morning by someone else, and then she made her best attempt to regain the upper hand. "Intriguing. You really want me?" she said, trying to make it sound sultry, but her breath hitched and only her own desire came through.

"Yes," growled the shirtless vampire in the doorway. "Yes, I want you."

"Then come and get me."

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Willow came downstairs and opened the refrigerator, looking for breakfast. She was the first one awake, and the house had a kind of deathly stillness to it which didn't make any sense at all. The other three current residents were all at home, and if none of them happened to be up as early as she was, well, that was nothing new. But Father Tom had said his final goodbyes, and Angel had taken Buffy away to LA, and hadn't Willow decided at the beginning that moving into her friend's room at Revello Drive was only supposed to be temporary? She closed the refrigerator door without having paid any attention to its contents, and went back upstairs to the bedroom.

"Oz," she said, leaning over the bed and shaking her boyfriend's shoulder. "Wake up. We have to invite Giles over for pancakes."

Obediently he opened his bleary eyes, but the waking process didn't seem to be complete yet. "Okay, but, can't. 'Cause, sleeping."

"No, you have to get up. It's vitally important that all of us have breakfast together today. I'll do all the work, you just have to wake up and come to the table washed and hungry. Come on, you're not in a band anymore so you have no excuse for sleeping in all the time. I'm going to go call Giles."

"Busy head," he accused in a sleepy mumble, but he sat up and scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Why Giles?"

"Because he's been stuck in his house with a gothed-out teenage girl and he's never going to admit he's lonely. Plus, I'm not sure if they have pancakes in England."

Willow's resolve was eventually enough to get all of her roommates to cooperate, and it wasn't long before they were all at the table making generally positive comments about breakfast. The invitation
she had extended to Giles was also successful, and once he arrived, he didn't even bother hiding his
relief at being away from Lydia for a while. "A rebellious sixteen-year-old Slayer has nothing on a
rebellious sixteen-year-old vampire," he groused. "Every Watcher should be required to contend
with one in his training. She's still giggling every time she looks in a mirror."

"So she's happy she's a vampire? What's wrong with that?" asked Anya. She looked at Xander for
help. "I thought we liked when people were happy."

"Not like this, we don't," said Oz.

Giles lifted an eyebrow in his direction, as if surprised that someone like Oz could identify the
problem. Willow wasn't surprised. She had identified it too. "She hasn't really come to grips with it,
has she?" she said.

Giles shook his head. "I suspect she feels her conscience is clean, and if she doesn't consider herself
evil, it shouldn't be." He stopped and looked at the piece of pancake he had on his fork. "Did you put
yogurt in these? That's very innovative."

"Yeah, they're better this way," said Xander. "So what's your plan for Miss Babyvamp? Send her to
Angel for brooding lessons?"

"Actually," said Willow, "I heard a rumor that Buffy's going to take her in. Which is kind of, you
know, can you think of a spiffier sidekick for the Vampire Slayer?"

Anya let out a huge sigh of relief. "Thank God! I thought you were going to insist she move in here,
and with everyone already taking up so much space! I vehemently dislike living with roommates."
She looked around the table in the following silence and added, "I don't intentionally give offense."

"We've all pretty much built up an immunity to it at this point," Oz assured her. He poked around in
his food and then said nonchalantly, "But I've been thinking maybe the free ride has gone on long
enough."

"You have?" asked Willow, taken aback by the echo of the thought she'd had earlier. Then she
realized what his words could mean for the future. "You want to move out? With me? Or without
me? It's okay if you don't want- I mean, as long as you stay in town- but I'm not holding you here or-
"

He cut her off with a quick kiss to the lips that tasted faintly of syrup. "Living like grown-ups doesn't
mean not living with you. But I kind of like it here. It has good cupboards."

"Some of the hinges are improperly secured," said Xander, possibly in an automatic reaction.

"We should get our own place!" said Anya excitedly. "You can work harder and afford one with
high rent!"

Giles cleared his throat before anyone could react to that. "If I may. Buffy owns this house and has
no need for it. I'm certain she would be willing to sell it to any one of you, or any combination of
you, on a payment plan that would work with your income. It may be the easiest way for her to keep
her mother's house in her life without living in it."

Willow's heart fluttered a little, and she met Oz's eyes in silence. Yes, he was smiling. He reached
under the table and squeezed her knee, and she dared to hope.

They put the topic away for the rest of the morning; it would need to be discussed with Buffy before
anything was decided, and calling her in LA was strictly off-limits except for emergencies. Willow
was content just knowing that they were starting to work something out. She and Oz in their own place, maybe Xander and Anya in another, separate but comfortably accessible place, and Buffy nearby in the mansion with Angel's heart and Lydia. And, of course, the usual omnipresent assortment of horrifying monsters that made Sunnydale their home.

"So what's your pipeline been telling you?" she asked Giles as they cleared the dishes from the table. "How is the world outside of our little one-dead-horse town reacting to the new state of vampirehood?"

"Well," he replied, "news has been, ah, scattered. Not everyone has seen the evidence yet, or made any comment on it. But Father Tom informs us that Church officials are shaking their heads and stroking their chins, probably right now as we speak." He smiled ruefully. "Mystical energies surrounding the Hellmouth are reportedly unchanged. And as a matter of fact, this very morning I received some correspondence from one Agent Finn, though he tells me it's off the record and he hopes it will remain that way."

Xander joined them in the kitchen after hearing that last part. "You heard from Riley? What did he say?"

"He said that the US military, or at least the special operations branch to which he belongs, is aware of the spell and its, ah, effects. However, their policy states that there is no quantifiable difference between a, a 'hostile subterrestrial' with a soul and one without, and their course of action regarding them will remain the same."

Willow scoffed. "Typical! They don't have any gadgets that can detect a soul, so they decide it doesn't matter."

Xander made an impatient gesture. "Yeah, yeah, but tell us the important stuff. Does he know about Buffy and Dead Spouse?"

"I'm not running a tabloid, Xander," said Giles, sending him a disapproving look over the top of his glasses. "Willow, it seems to me that your own channels may actually be a better source of information than my own in this regard. What seems to be the overall reaction on the, ah, the internet?"

Even mentioning computer stuff seemed to make him uncomfortable, Willow noted with amusement. "Mostly everyone's just asking each other if it's true," she said. "And, well, asking me if I'm really the one who authored it. I've already had to change my email address twice. I'm not into the online fame game."

"Kinda defeats the whole purpose of anonymity," agreed Oz, coming up behind her and slipping an arm around her waist. He looked at Giles. "So, I'm comprehending there's a lot of wringing hands and brandishing weapons among the big players, but I think you missed one. What's the Watcher's Council got to say on this?"

"Good point," said Xander. "After everything that went down with Daemonis, are they still convinced they did the right thing? Come to think of it, were they really convinced of that in the first place?"

Giles coughed, covering a resigned sigh. "I've written them a strongly worded letter."

Willow had to hold back a smile, but when Xander started laughing, she let it go. Eventually Giles was chuckling along with them. There wasn't much more to say about the Watcher's Council. If they only knew.
Buffy moved slower with each step, but she couldn't prevent her feet from reaching the place where Angel stopped them, in a dark alley between brick walls. "This is it," he said reluctantly. "Caritas is right around the corner. Do you want to see it?"

She shook her head. She did want to see it, but another day. His team would already be in there waiting for him, and if she heard the case unfolding she would want to join them instead of catching her bus, and if she didn't get used to making herself go home on schedule, the whole system was going to fall apart. "I can hear it," she said. "They must be pretty serious about their karaoke in there."

They both stopped speaking and strained to hear. The words being sung weren't clear, but Buffy recognized the tune and supplied the lyrics mentally:

I had a mind to try and stop you. Let me in. Let me in.
But I've got tar on my feet, and I can't see.
All the birds look down and laugh at me,
Clumsy, crawling out of my skin.

Buffy turned away from the sound and pressed her face into Angel's chest. "So this is where I get off," she murmured. "It's always dark alleys, isn't it?"

"Better than sewers," he replied, enveloping her in his arms and cradling her head in his hand, as he now did so naturally whenever they were close.

She laughed. "I guess."

It was one thing to resist the urge to stall by entering Caritas with Angel, another entirely to separate herself from his embrace. Just a little longer, she thought. We deserve it. We've been good. But with the contours of his body lined up against hers, and the pang of her imminent departure, all she could think about was that night at the prom. It had been so hard, at the time, to keep herself from asking him to stay. It had been hard to say anything at all, for fear that it would lead her into tears and she would ruin what she had thought would be her last dance with Angel, so she had mostly kept silent and so had he. But silence hadn't staved off the inevitable then, and it wouldn't now. It would be too easy to ask him to come back with her to their home in Sunnydale, or tell him she was staying with him at their home in Los Angeles. She could erase the choices she had already made, mirror them all back to him and see what happened, stand there in the alley and refuse to be the first one to budge.

It would be too easy - for her. For Angel it was already harder than he was ever going to tell her. She lifted her cheek from his motionless chest and looked him in the eye. "No goodbyes, right?" she said softly. Her voice barely faltered.

"No." Sadness was etched into his face more deeply than the remaining mark of the holy water, and she wished she could reach out her hand and smooth it all away. "I'm still too weak for that," he admitted.

"Weak," she agreed. "But I can make you stronger." Without further discussion she moved her hand up to the back of his head and pressed it forward, gently but firmly, until he gave in and let her guide his face to where her neck met her shoulder. He lingered there, frozen in indecision, but she held him in place and finally there was a subtle shift of skin against skin as his features changed. Seconds later, she felt his lips parting, and then the unique sensation of fangs puncturing her old scar.

She let out a long breath and threaded her fingers through his hair, relying on his support now just to
keep her feet. Fortunately, this time he was steady as a rock and held her mindfully, and for the too-brief moment that they were connected, everything fell into sync and she had no need to exercise any of the power that made her what she was. The rush of her blood being pulled seemed to affect every part of her body at once, and there was no way to lessen the wave of dizziness it brought, but it was Angel, just Angel, just her one love giving her a goodbye kiss. She felt rather than heard him swallow, once, twice, and then he released her neck and swabbed the holes with his cool tongue.

By the time he had raised his face to look into hers again, he was back in his human features and she inspected him closely for changes. The last trace of the holy water's damage was gone. His expression had gone from sad to disbelieving, almost fearful, and she lay her hand on his cheek to reassure him. "I love you. I'm always with you."

There was no taste of her own blood in his mouth when they kissed, long and thoroughly. "And I'm here," he said, placing his hand on her heart, "at home with you."

She caught her bus back to Sunnydale. It was a long, dark ride, but at least she wasn't on it alone.

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