Bring Me To Life : A Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Angel Crossover Event

by Jean_theGuardian

Summary

Buffy tVS & Angel Crossover! When Connor defies 'Cordelia', the chain of events unite both SunnyDale & L.A's heroes for the explosive final battle with Jasmine and the First Evil. Who will survive the End of Days? Set during Buffy Season 7 / Angel Season 4
The End is here.

Not just the end to a conflict seven years in the making. Not only to a sacred tradition countless generations old. Not just the end to an order of Watchers as ancient as humanity itself, or the fall of a dark empire that dates back to the very beginnings of Time. This is the culmination of a tale of triumph and tragedy. Brotherhood and rivalry. Love and hate. The defining moments that bring out the very best and absolute worst of humanity.

Ironic, isn't it?

We have witnessed this struggle for seven long years, yet it is a struggle that has been taking place for eons. In distant times un-witnessed by human eyes, on countless worlds, in realms beyond our wildest imagination. It is a struggle that we need look no further than our own selves, within our own hearts, to find.

Right versus Wrong.

Good versus Evil.

Light versus Dark.

This is the end of a story of champions…

…not only of the one girl in all the world known as the Chosen One…

…but a Champion out to make amends for past misdeeds…

…but many brave, unique souls, champions in their own right, who come forth as our last hope, the final barrier that stands between salvation and destruction, the only lifeline in the last, desperate battle between our world and the clutches of an evil as ancient as time itself. Between life…and eternal damnation.

But be forewarned; the cost of war is great. And for every victory, there is - there must be - a price to pay. Champions will rise, heroes shall fall, darkness shall descend, and our civilization as we know it shall be pushed to the brink of extinction.

Remember…war will never decide who is right…

…only who is left.

Prepare, dear reader. And be afraid.

Omnium Finis Imminet.

The End of Days is here.

The End begins…

Now.
Bring Me To Life - A Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Angel Crossover Event
Bring Me to Life

By JeantheGuardian

Spoilers: ANGEL- Season 4 and BUFFY- Season 7.

P.S. I read up on a few spoilers for the grand finales of BUFFY and Angel's Season I don't know if they're wrong or not, but I just had to do something about how AtS's "Inside Out" ended. It didn't do Darla and Angel justice. And I'm not sure if Buffy's end will do so either, this is!

Summary: Connor makes a different choice than to sacrifice the girl for his "child", and this leads to Buffy, Darla and Angel banding together for a war for Cordy's against Jasmine and the First Evil. Who will survive the End of Days?


Disclaimer: Joss owns them all, to my everlasting chagrin. So don't sue.

Feedback: Cool. Always great to hear from the people I write this for...YOU guys!

Distribution: Feel free to take this story and use it, just let me know where, though, okay? Okay! Enough of this legal mumbo jumbo. On to the story!

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Bring Me To Life
Part 1- The Road Not Taken

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Choice there is not, unless the thing which we take
be so in our power...that we might have refused it.
-Hooker.

Choice.

Everything begins with choice. The ability to decide, to choose for ourselves. We do it in the morning, when we decide between rolling over and staying in the bliss of sleep, or to waken through the pains and groggly stumble to work. We do it when we decide on how we spend our monthly paychecks. Whether we're going to step up and ask out that special someone we've had our eyes on, or stand back in quiet fear as someone else takes your place. Whether we're going to try to give to this world, or to take from it.

Choice is what defines us. And in turn, we are defined by our choices.

Which brings us to this one crucial moment in time. Where in L.A., the City of Angels, the City of Lost Souls, in a abandoned meat packing factory, whose death-soaked stench of dead animals
stills fills the air, a troubled young man, his heart tormented with despair, loneliness, and rage, must make one such choice. As two women, one bathed in the light of goodness and salvation, the other drenched in the darkness of evil and fear, struggle in a desperate tug-of-war for his soul, he holds the life of a young girl, no older than his own tender age, in his unsure hands. And now the boy must make a decision that may hold yet more heartache for him regardless of his choice. A choice that is complicated for so many reasons, and yet is as simple as black or white.

Life or death...which would he decide?

"Connor, listen to me!" Darla couldn't waste anymore time. She had to reach her son.
"It's not her", Cordelia calmly uttered to her mate. The calm was a mask, hiding the growing exasperation, the fear of losing control over her most powerful pawn...her champion.

"You have to let her go!"

"It's your father. This is how much he hates you...", Cordelia urged him on, the nervousness rising to the surface, betraying the smug look on her face earlier.

Darla's eyes brimmed with tears. "I love you. Please...", she pleaded softly to her only son.

As he heard his mother's desperate pleas, he felt his own heart begin to break. How could he refuse her?

"Torturing you with this sad imitation of your dead mother!"

But God, what if Cordy was right? The group always loved to use that disgusting magic. What if this was all a lie, what if...what if he was being tricked into killing their baby?

HIS baby?

"Don't let her do this!"

"Are you going to let them do this to us? Are you going to let them kill our baby!"

"Connor, Listen to me!", she pleaded one last time, her beautiful blue eyes brimming with tears.

Connor felt his head spin in circles. The swirling began to consume him.

His mother. His family.

Mother.

Family.

...now the words didn't even make sense!...His thoughts became muddled into one, and God help him, he did not know what to do.

Above all of that, he heard the girl's quiet sobbing. "Please...I wanna go home...I didn't do anything, I wanna go home, please...."

Her cries broke his heart, the poor girl couldn't have been, what, 15,16? She was probably on her way home from school, just trying to get to her home, her family.

Family.
Connor had a family to think about, didn't he? A child, who everyone was hunting, who needed him. A woman he cared for, maybe even loved, desperate for her child. HIS child. He wondered if his own mother, standing right there next to him, felt the same way…before she died.

Before he was born.

Born.

So peaceful, so blissfully unaware of the cruelty the world would show him, what horrors awaited him. So innocent.

Innocent.

"I didn't do anything, please...", the girl's voice echoed in his head. And that's when the voice in his heart began to reach his mind.

She DIDN'T do anything.

She was innocent. She was just trying to go home, and she was lost and scared and crying. What had she done to deserve this? She shouldn't have to die...just for his child. Or anyone. She didn't do anything! She was innocent!

His own mind roared out over the sea of voices, over the calls of the women around him, the thought his mother tried to convince him of, of the thought that, at his very core, he knew to be right, to be just-

This.

Is.

WRONG!

"NO!", he bellowed at Cordelia, his eyes filled with pain, and righteous rage. He picked up the whimpering girl by her bonds and jerked her to her feet.

"She didn't do anything! This is wrong, Cordelia!", he said as his eyes brimmed with tears.

He felt his mother sigh with relief next to him. "Good boy, Connor", she smiled, proud of her son.

Cordelia's face lit up with rage. "What are you saying!", she demanded, her fists balled up, shaking with unbridled anger. "You'd let our baby DIE because of one stupid, meaningless little girl? YOUR BABY ?"

As he spoke, he gained even more conviction. "No child of mine will ever be baptized with blood...led alone the blood of an innocent."

"You idiot!", she shrieked at him, leaning in dangerously close to his face. "Don't you realize what they're doing? Angel's turned you against me with this...this...pathetic excuse of a vision of your dead mother-"

"She's real enough to me!", he snapped back, not noticing the way Darla's eyes lit up when he said that. Love and hope filled her soul down to the very root of her being.

"There'll have to be another way, but not like this!", he continued. "I'm taking her home. Now!"

He started to take steps away from her, dragging the bound girl behind him.
"You dare defy ME?", Cordelia growled.

He stopped short, and turned to look at her.

'Defy?'

That wasn't a very Cordelia-esque thing for her to say. He took a closer look, peering deep into his mistress's eyes.

Those eyes that once could captivate him to no end. Those beautiful brown eyes that could have commanded him to leap from the highest summit to the deepest ocean. They were still brown, just as beautiful...

But something about them was just wrong.

There as no warmth and kindness reflected off those orbs, only rage and desperation. No compassion and caring, but demand and callousness.

No good and purity, but something...

...Something...

"Evil?", Darla finished her son's thought. "Yes, baby. She's been lying to you all this time."

Cordelia whirled on the angelic vision of Darla, her eyes narrowed. "Nobody's talking to you, Casper", she sneered. "You might be dead, but keep interfering in my business and you're going to wish you never existed!"

"The only one who doesn't exist is you...'Cordelia'", Darla retorted back, calmly giving a knowing smile to the Dark Queen in front of her.

'Cordelia' snorted. "And here I thought Drusilla was the crazy one in your line."

"You see, Connor?", she turned back to the confused boy. "You see how they use lies with the truth? You see how they're manipulating you even as we speak?"

"Manipulating?", Darla's image balled her fists to her sides and held them there. "All this time, doing the things you've done? The Rain of Fire? Stealing Angel's soul? Telling MY son to kill his own father? Murdering that family of priestesses? And you have the gall to accuse me of manipulating?"

Connor's eyes widened. "Th…th-that family...you did that?" He flashed back to that night the gang came upon the sickening finding of those poor children alongside their parents, cut to pieces and lying in that horrible pool of blood.

Darla grimly nodded. "Yes, Connor. She did that. And much, much worse."

"LIES!", Cordelia roared. "Connor, are you going to allow this...thing to commit this blasphemy against me?"

"Blasphemy?", Darla chuckled, raising one golden eyebrow. "Why, 'Cordelia', you speak as if you were...oh, I don't know...a God, or something?"

This time, Cordelia smiled. And it was a dark, sinister smile. She let out a chuckle that was filled with such malice that it chilled Connor right to the bone. He had never heard Cordelia laugh like
"A God?", she sneered. "Honey, I'm beyond a god....I'm your master!"

Connor noticed too late a dullish red light glowing from her right hand. He hadn't seen Cordy do that, either. Well, she glowed, sometimes, but not that kind of glow. Not that kind of evil, creepy glow that was coming out of her right now...

His instincts kicked in at the last moment, everything in his body telling him to get himself, his mother away from.

"MOM, LOOK OUT!", the boy cried.

But it was too late. The hand had snaked out and grabbed Darla's image by the throat. Darla immediately gave a gasp of air, as a brilliant reddish light glowed around her. Darla cried out in pain, gasping for air, her eyes shut...looking as if she were actually choking.

"It's impossible, Connor thought. She can't be choking; she'd have to be ali-

Oh, my God

Darla reeled as suddenly, she found herself pulled into a chokehold, 'Cordelia' wrapping her free forearm around Darla's neck, pulling her around in front. With the other arm, she pulled the meat cleaver against the stunned blonde's clavicle, causing her to gasp in fright.

"MOM!", Connor cried out, his other hand still on the kidnapped girl, who gasped in horror at the scene before her.

'Cordelia' glared at Connor, her eyes burning with cruelty and fury. "I tried to get you to do this the easy way", she glowered. "But, oh, no! Not Broody Junior. I guess it's true what they say. 'Like father, like son'."

"Let her go!", Connor gritted his teeth in anger.

"Awww, isn't that sweet?", 'Cordelia sneered at her ex-lover. "Showing concern for Mommy Dearest? Just too damn bad you couldn't apply the same concern to the woman expecting your child!" As she said this, she nudged the cleaver against Darla's delicate skin, making her gag and wince in pain.

Connor was near-panicked. His first thought was that his mother, the woman who gave him life, was being held at knifepoint. His second thought was that his mother, the woman who gave him life, was being held at knifepoint...by Cordelia, the woman expecting his child.

How could she do this, he thought.

"Cordelia", he finally said, an appeasing, rational tone finding its way into his voice. A true rarity in itself. "Come on...this isn't what you want-"

"I'm not a psycho, you twit! So stop talking to me like you're on the bomb squad!", she shrilled. "You wanna talk, Junior? Fine. I have something you want....you have something I NEED."

At that, the girl in Connor's grasp let out a cry of fear and stumbled back, but Connor's superhuman grip on her bonds kept her at his side.

"Cordy, please...don't make me do this.", Connor implored the brunnete, a small tear beginning to trail down his left cheek.
"Connor, Connor, Connor", she shook her head at him in pity. "I thought you of all people would've learned by now...life's about choices. The ones we make...and the ones we don't...it's simple really. You want your mother back? Fine. All you have to do...is slit the girl's throat."

"Connor, don't listen!", Darla rasped out from beneath the murderess's grip. "Get the girl out of here, nothing else matters, not even my..."

'Cordelia' pressed the meat cleaver further into her skin, this time drawing a thin crimson line of blood. Darla let out a small moan of pain, cursing herself as she did so.

"STOP IT! You're hurting her!", Connor cried out, his eyes wide with fear and indecision.

"No one's talking to you, Blondie!",' Cordelia whispered fiercely in her ear. "Now be a good little dead girl and keep quiet unless you want to end up with a new throat hole...just like Lilah."

Darla looked up at her captor and laughed a breathy giggle. "Thank you. Guess you forgot about how 'special' my little boy is, didn't you... 'Cordy'?"

'Cordelia' frowned in confusion until she looked up at Connor. His face was a mask of shock and disbelief.

"What?", he drew a shaky breath, obviously stunned by something.

'Cordy' was puzzled, until it dawned on her. Super-hearing! Damn it! I forgot about the brat's super-hearing! Cursing herself for not remembering such an important detail, she could only muster out, "You-you weren't supposed to hear that!"

"It was you all this time, wasn't it?", Connor realized, beginning to shake with uncontrolled rage. "The Rain of fire, blocking out the sun, stealing my da-- Angel's soul, all those innocent people... you planned all of this, didn't you?"

After a beat, 'Cordelia's' face slacked down and she rolled her eyes. "Well, it's about time the monkey grew a brain", she snapped. "And to think, all this time I had you under my control, the answer was under you all along...literally."

"Why?", Connor managed to breathe out, his anger building up inside him like a churning volcano. "Why are you doing this?"

'Cordelia' snorted. "It didn't take much, did it? All a girl's gotta do is tell you how 'special' you are, fill that tiny little brain of yours with visions of fatherhood, a happy little family...throw in some T&A and you've got one whipped little super freak." Noting the hurt appearing in Connor's eyes, she gleefully continued. "Did you really believe that I could actually grow to love you? You shouldn't be loved...you should be locked up. Thrown away with the other murdering misfits in some rubber-padded room. Oh, and when I called you 'special'? I meant the way you call a little child with Down's Syndrome special. Or some autistic brat. Or a retarded kid. The fact that you let me take you this far backs that up, Connor. The fact is...you're a creepy, self-absorbed, whiny, confused, sad little boy." She paused for a beat, beaming a sickeningly sweet smile. "And nobody loves you."

Connor averted his eyes, a futile attempt to conceal the pain that those remarks made in him, of how deeply those words wounded his soul.

"Connor. Look at me", he heard his mother's soft voice beckon to him. He turned his eyes up to the beautiful woman, who he had never met up until now. To save him from his darkest hour.

"Look at my eyes, baby." He did as instructed, his dark brown eyes meeting Darla's blue-green
orbs, which radiated nothing but pure love and affection.

"I love you. Always remember that", she said calmly, though her eyes began to spill tears. "I gave up my life for you because I love you so much….I'll always love you, Connor. No matter what." She gradually lowered her gaze. "But do the right thing now…listen to your heart…trust me, Connor, but most of all…"

As she spoke, Connor noted that her eyes began to follow a downward pattern. He followed her loving stare….all the way down…to the floor…near his foot.

Where the water bottle lay. The one that Connor offered to the girl.

"Trust your heart."

He understood.

'Cordelia' rolled her eyes. "Oh, geez, soap-opera, much? Make your decision, Connor. What's it gonna be? Your mother, or the girl? Time's a wasting, and I've got a baby to deliver."

Connor nodded. "Okay...okay, Cordelia. You win. I'll give you the girl."

"No, please!", the girl tried to squirm away from him, but he jerked her back towards him. She sobbed, mumbling indecipherable words.

'Cordelia' smiled triumphantly. "Smart boy. I knew you'd see things my way."

Connor paused. "Just...one question, though."

'Cordelia' frowned. "Don't wanna answer. In a hurry. Kill her, please!"

"It'll just take a second", he reasoned.

'Cordelia' let out a forced breath. "Fine. Make it fast!"

Connor smiled. "Why are your lips so chapped?"

'Cordelia' was thoroughly offended. "Excuse me?"

"Well", the boy shrugged. "I've got a little theory on that…you've probably been so busy planning out this well-laid chaos…you haven't had time to sit down, cool your heels….have a DRINK!..."

With incredible speed, Connor lashed out at the water bottle, kicking it through the air, open bottle and all, heading straight for 'Cordelia'.

The pregnant 'Cordy' was struck right in the head with the projectile, letting out a startled cry before spazing out and jerking backwards into the wall, loosing her footing, balance….and her grip on Darla.

In a flash of vampire-like speed, Connor reached a hold of his mother's wrist and began tugging her away from the room, the frightened captive girl in tow.

"Door. Hurry", was all Darla could manage as she, Connor and the girl ran as fast as their legs could carry them.

"Seiza jah n'hast ka lest. Seiza jah n'hast ka lest" Cordy began chanting, her eyes growing a dull milky white.
The door slammed about a half second before the three of them could reach the exit…and their freedom.

"Open it! OPEN IT!", the girl began shrieking.

"I'm trying!", was all Connor could manage, his muscles straining against the handle of the metal door, which refused to budge.

"She sealed us inside, Connor", Darla realized. "There's no way out through there."

The clip-clop of heels echoed only a few feet from them. The girl squealed in surprise as 'Cordelia' began to walk towards them, meat cleaver in hand, a malevolent resolve on her face.

"Gave you a chance, Connor", she hissed. "Your mother or the girl…now…you can watch them BOTH die."

Darla suddenly grabbed hold of Connor's hand. She reached out and clasped her other hand to the girl's wrist.

Connor was perplexed as to what Darla was doing. "Mom, what are you-"

"Trust me, baby, just hold on!", she said with determination etched into her gorgeous features.

And, for the first time in his life, Connor did as he was told.

Darla looked head on at the approaching 'Cordelia, only a few steps away from them, and scowled. "Domini, sacrum, recursum spiritum Angelus!", she chanted at the top of her voice.

The last thing Connor remembered was a howling, cold wind, his tight grip on his mother's soft hand, and a bright flash of light before everything went white…

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TBC....
The first thing that she felt was cool hands against her face. Darla nudged her head to one side, before nudging back to her original location.

"Darla?" She heard a familiar voice. A man's voice.

Slowly, her eyes fluttered open, and she came face-to-face with the one being on earth, aside from her son, that could still make her heart go pitter-pat.

"A….Angel," she whispered softly.

She knew it was him before her eyes came into focus. For 150 years, they had traveled everywhere together. Even without her vampiric senses, she could still feel his presence before she could lay eyes on him.

Her eyes came into focus as she found Angel, peering down over her, surrounded by his team. Gunn, Fred and Wesley to his left, while Lorne and Connor stood to his right.

"Connor", she breathed, relief washing over her face. "Are you alright?"

Connor nodded, walking over and placing a hand on his mother's shoulder. "I'm fine. What about you?"

Darla leaned her cheek against her son's lukewarm hand, savoring the feeling of her little boy's touch against her skin. Connor's heart warmed with comfort as his mother leaned into his touch so easily, so naturally.

The sight gave Angel a little jolt up his system. His son. Finally reunited with his mother.

It was one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen, and in his 247 years of life, he had seen pretty much everything there was.

Darla's hand raised up to her pounding forehead. "Mmmnnng…wh-what…what happened?"

"You tell us", Gunn shrugged. "We were just interrogatin' Hubcap-Boy over there…"He pointed to an annoyed Skip, still trapped in his red force field. "…..when all of a sudden, the lights turn up about a billion watts, and you, Boy-Junior here, and some girl we've never seen before drop out of the ceiling."
At that, Darla's eyes widened in concern. "The girl…Angel, where is she? I- -"

"She's fine, Darla", Angel reassured her gently. "She's upstairs right now, resting. A little bruised, but she'll live."

Darla let a sigh of relief flow from her.

"Darla", Wesley's voice and called to her, and she locked eyes with the former Watcher. She noted that his gaze seemed much more different than the last time she saw him. His gaze spoke of a deep, dark pain. Of shadows within himself, within his own heart. But there were still the flashes of light that played amongst those shadows.

He was still a fighter. A warrior of light.

"Darla, and, believe me, I don't mean this with any malice, but what are you doing here?", he said, carefully picking his words.

For some strange reason, he felt it necessary not to hurt her feelings. He couldn't quite pick out the reason for that. Perhaps it was because of Darla's incredible sacrifice for Connor's birth. Then again, it may have been the English gentleman in him that compelled him to act as such. It struck him with amazement, still, that he had seen Darla several times over the years, on many a perilous occasion. And yet, he had never yet noticed how…beautiful she was. Wesley was not blind. He knew Darla was a ravishing, sensual woman, both by appearance and by the readings in the Watcher Diaries. But the type of beauty she showed now was different than ever before. Pure. Calmed. Serene.

Precious.

Shaking his head slightly, the ex-Watcher continued. "You've been dead for a little more than a year."

"I…the Powers…they sent me", Darla said.

Everyone turned to look at each other with shock on their faces at the name she mentioned. It was clear that this was the last answer they expected.

"The Powers That BE?" an amazed Angel said, gripping her hands, softly, but firmly. "They sent you here?"

Darla nodded gently. "Yes."

"Why? How?", the souled vampire fired away his questions.

Darla paused for a minute, then a strange expression came on her face. As if she had remembered something. She said as she sat up, "I-I don't know how, but this wasn't what I was sent back for…at least, not like this."

"Not like what?", Fred asked, puzzled.

"Human, sugarplum", Lorne answered the Texan beauty. "Our little nightingale's turned human."

Gunn, Wesley and Fred turned to the Host with wide-eyed surprise, before turning to their leader.

"Angel?", Gunn asked. "'Zat true?"

Angel nodded, without taking his eyes off his Sire. "It's true. I smelled it when she first dropped in
Even though he sounded calm and rational, Angel's mind was still reeling from the mysterious drop-in by Darla...as a human again. He wasn't sure how or why, but somehow, the mother of his son had made her way back from the dead once again. He shook his head.

She's got more lives than a cat, he thought. Or Buffy, for that matter. And that's a lot of lives.

"Some...something that she did. Cordelia", she thought back, trying to recreate in her photographic memory what exactly happened. "Or, at least, something old and evil pretending to be Cordelia. I don't know, she...did something to me. I was just a spirit. A...a vision."

"So you...weren't supposed to...come back? As a mortal?", Wesley asked, intrigued.

"Oh, for the love of Pete! Haven't you been listening, you ninny!", Skip groaned as all eyes turned to him. "If 'Queen of the Damned' here says she doesn't know what happened, shouldn't the little light bulb in your tiny little mortal brain be going off right about now? Of COURSE she wasn't supposed to come back as a mortal! Hell, she shouldn't even be here right now!"

Angel's eyes flashed yellow for a moment, clearly not in the mood to deal with the renegade demon's antics. "Fred, if Tin Woodsman over there says another word without permission, get out that Infinite Agony do-hickey", he scowled in his razor-edged, dangerously low voice.

"Why wait? I've heard preventive medicine can be the best solution", Fred glared at the imprisoned demon, before making towards the book with the spell to produce the sphere of Infinite Agony.

"No,no,no,no!", Skip amended quickly, looking ever so nervous. "Um...th-th-that's okay. Pretend I'm not here, or something! I'm just a piece of furniture, or a new lamp, or—"

"Are you still talking?", Darla snapped at the mercenary demon. Skip wisely clammed up.

"God. Minions. Never know when to shut up." Sighing, the beautiful ex-vampire resumed talking. "I can't...understand what happened, myself, but...I was sent here. To Connor", her gaze looked up at her son as she said this. "I was supposed to...prevent..."

"Prevent what?", Angel asked, gently.

Suddenly, Darla took on a new face. A more resolved face. "Angel, you have to trust me on this. Something unbelievable is about to happen, and it's not for the better. We have to stop this thing."

"We will", he assured her, his voice firm. "Whatever it takes, that...thing inside Cordelia is going to pay for what it's done."

"It goes deeper than that, Angel", she said, her eyes hinting a powerful knowledge hidden to all of them. And a great fear, as well. "Way deeper."

"How much deeper?", Connor asked, his face scrunched in concern.

"'End of the World' deeper, baby", she replied, turning to her son for a moment, before turning back to Angel. "We need help, Angel. I need you to make a phone call, okay?"

"A phone call?" Angel looked puzzled. "To who?"

"And why?", Wesley asked, equally as baffled.
Darla took a deep breath, ready to deliver the bombshell. "Sunnydale. We need the Slayer".

"Faith?", Connor asked, his eyes lighting up slightly at the prospect of seeing the curvaceous dark-haired beauty again.

"No", his mother shook her head, before returning her gaze to Angel's "The other slayer."

Angel's face dropped in shock. "Buffy?"

Connor frowned before turning to Wesley. "Who's Buffy?"

"The Slayer before Faith", Wesley answered, though looking almost as surprised as Angel was.

"The one who died and came back to life a bunch of times?", Gunn asked.

"The one with the goofy name?", Fred added.

Darla nodded. "Yes. What's going on right here, what's happening to Cordelia, is all tied up with Sunnydale's problem"

"Darla, what is this all about?" Wesley asked, mystified by her news.

"I wasn't allowed to say much before", Darla said, pursing her lips together, so she could wet them. "I don't know if I still am, but I don't care…This all involves the Tro-Clon."

"The Tro-Clon?", Fred asked in amazement, clearly remembering the reference.

"One Born of Darkness…", Wesley remembered the first part of the prophecy.

"…..To Bring Darkness", Lorne finished. "Well, that's gonna be just dandy. What, with Mother Love still running around out there, hatchet-crazy and all, and all she needs is the blood of one virgin to do all that."

"She can't finish the ritual by herself", Darla assured the Host. "She needs a second person to do that…and seeing as how Angelus killed the Beast, and Connor is with us, I don't think she'll be able to find help on such short notice."

"Good. That's one less thing we need to worry about", Angel sighed. "Now, Darla, what does this have to do with the Tro-Clon?"

"This IS the Tro-Clon, Angel", Darla said. "The final arc of it is underway."

The gang exchanged looks of concern.

"Then this is the thing we're supposed to be fighting?", Connor asked.

"Yes", Darla nodded, "but only part of it. That's only one half of the whole problem."

"What's the other half?", Angel asked, puzzled at the sudden turn of events.

She met his gaze, taking a deep breath before delivering the news. "The First Evil. It's back."

Angel's face went blank with disbelief. Images of that horrid Christmas Eve flashed through his mind, when he met the Thing the Darkness Fears for the very first time. It had tormented him with the images of all his memorable kills as the sadistic Angelus, especially that of Jenny Calendar, the first love of Rupert Giles's life, a sub-member of the Scooby Gang. The First Evil had tried to revert Angel back into Angelus by tormenting him endlessly; instead, it drove the iron-willed
Angel to his breaking point, risking to burn in the sunrise than to ever hurt Buffy like that again. Only a miraculous snowstorm, courtesy of the Powers That Be, saved him from the oblivion he desired.

"The First?", the Champion asked, disbelief tinged in his voice. "He-it's back?"

"The First-what?", Gunn asked, baffled by what Angel and Darla were talking about.

"The First Evil", Wesley explained. "The original source of all evil. Created all evil, human and demon alike, in existence."

"Get outta town!", Gunn exclaimed incredulously. "Y'all mean evil actually has a source?"

"Yes. And it's power is immeasurably great", Wesley added. "Beyond sin…beyond death."

"And it's beyond insane, to boot", Angel grimaced at the memory of the First's mind games.

"But I don't understand", Fred asked. "What would this…First Evil…want with Cordelia's baby? What's the connection?"

Wesley suddenly looked up, understanding in his eyes. "It could want to use it for the same purpose the thing in Cordelia has for itself."

"To use it as a vessel", Angel realized. "To become flesh."

Skip opened his mouth to say something sarcastic, but swallowed his words back when Fred said "Infinite Agony!" with a smoldering warning look in her eyes.

"This thing…is it working with the First, or is it a separate entity?", Wesley asked the blonde beauty.

"I…don't remember", Darla said. "I knew…I KNOW the plan, but the force 'Cordelia' used in making me mortal again must've blindsided my memory. At least for the moment."

"But you'll remember, won't you?", Angel asked, a tinge of desperation edging in his voice.

Darla nodded. "Of course. I might just need a little rest."

"Do you remember anything about the First's plan?", Fred asked. "What it wants? Hat it's doing?"

"I'm afraid that this time, it's really decided to take the gloves off", Darla said, a hint of worry in her voice. "All this time while you've been chasing the Beast in L.A., the First has been launching an all-out assault on the entire Slayer line. It won't stop until Buffy, Faith and all other potential Slayers have been destroyed, and the power of the Slayer is lost forever."

"This thing's going after Buffy?", Angel's voice became tinged with concern.

"And her friends, family and anyone else who sides with her", she confirmed.

Immediately, Angel's protective instincts kicked in. No one was going to hurt his Buffy, he determined. All-powerful or not.

"We have to help her", Angel said in a gritty, determined voice.

Wesley nodded. "Well, surely the Council must be aware. I still maintain a few contacts there… I'm sure if we contacted them, they might be willing to share with us the information that they've collected on the First. Perhaps they might even have information regarding Cordelia's pregnancy-"
"Wesley", Darla stopped him, a sad, pitying look drawn on her features. He knew something was amiss; he had seen that look before.

Right before the bad news.

"What?", he asked, puzzled.

"You mean you didn't know?", she asked, that sad look still upon her face.

"Know about what?", Wesley asked, sensing a dread creeping up on him.

"The Watcher's Council is dead, nimrod," Skip sneered. "Blown to smithereenies by a nice little bomb package. They've been dead for over a month."

Wesley's eyes shot to Skip, then turned back to Darla. A look of disbelief and terror coursed his rugged good looks. He stared at Darla, for what, of him, seemed like an eternity, to confirm what the mercenary demon so gleefully told him. The sympathetic look on her face gave him all the validation to Skip's claim that he needed.

Angel's face displayed his shock, as well.

Darla reached out and gently took Wesley's hand. Her heart bled for him in this hour, his grieving hour. She could truly feel his pain, his denial, his sense of loss. "Wesley, I'm so sorry…I know you had friends working there…I know they were close to you…"

Wesley stared at her, almost as if in a daze, too enraptured in his own pain to fully appreciate Darla's warm hand on his, or the shiver he felt in his system when she touched him, leaving that to a smaller part of his mind. He shook his head and looked back up at Darla, his psyche reeling. "Robson?…Blake?…Eliza?…Conroy?"

Angel realized that those were British names. No doubt the names of all of Wesley's deceased colleagues. Dead Watchers.

"All gone", Darla bit her lip in pity.

"Mr. Giles?", he suddenly asked, feeling knots in his stomach, the man in him wanting to vomit until there was nothing left inside, but the Englishman in him trying to compose himself.

At the mention of the name, Angel looked up in fear and concern. He knew how much Giles meant to Buffy. If he, too, had fallen, it would destroy her…the pain might-

"No, he's alive", Darla shook her head. "He was the only Watcher to have survived the attack. You and he are all that's left of the Council."

At that, Angel let out a relieved sigh.

As the realization of Darla's words hit home, Wesley felt his knees start to buckle, and he forced himself to find a nearby chair and slump into it. He truly felt for the first time, like he was trapped in a freefall. He had been banished by his friends, had his throat slit, had the woman he…Lilah…been murdered in his own working place, faced a slew of unimaginable evil over the last few months…but now he felt the first waves of nausea truly begin to grip him.

For years, as a young fledgling Watcher, as early as the days of his "Head Boy"- winning training at the Watcher's Academy in Devonshire, he had been brought up with the ideal that the Council was invincible. Through times of upheaval, through World Wars, through great peril and
conquest, though generations of men would fall and cities would be lost…the walls of the Council, he was trained to think, would always stand. Their foundations unshakeable, their presence irreplaceable…their legacy always existing.

And now they were gone…they were all gone…

"How?", he finally croaked out.

"I think we covered that, didn't we?", a rather insensitive Skip smirked. "When something goes 'ka-blooey!', it pretty much stays—"

"Fred, get the sphere and shut that oversized trash can up, would ya?", Gunn snapped.

"Will do", Fred quickly said, standing to get the book.

"No,no,no! I'll be good from now on, I promise!", Skip pleaded.

"This is your last warning." Angel snarled at him. Turning back to his Sire, he calmly said, "Sorry about that. Go on."

Darla sadly continued. "There was an explosion, when they were all in session…they had information on the First. They were debating whether or not to give it to Buffy for use…" She paused for a beat. "Actually, they were more like preparing for a war with the First…every Watcher from around the world—"

"Around the world?", Wesley looked up, his eyes wide. "There was a Code Red-1 Alert? They were…ALL there?"

Angel recognized Wes's Council-speak. Back when he was Angelus, during his romp in Sunnydale, he had stolen a few copies of Giles's Watcher Diaries. The Diaries contained entries on vampires, monsters, spells, fighting tactics, and Council activities. He recognized Code Red-1 to be the highest level of alert on the Council's defense protocol list. It meant that an event so powerful, so unprecedented had occurred so as to require a meeting, or a calling in of every Watcher, black-op and Council-employed personnel on Earth to the main headquarters in London for an emergency briefing. The demon in him figured it would be good to keep tabs on the Brits…in case he ever wanted to destroy them himself.

"From England to Rome to even Melbourne," Darla said, the left corner of her mouth turned slightly. "They were in the session at their Headquarters when it happened. A bomb exploded in the center of the Boardroom…There were no survivors."

"The First?", Angel asked, the look in his eyes revealing the detective inside him trying to piece all this together.

"Its minions", Darla corrected. "The Harbingers…they compromised the security of the Headquarters somehow…one of them must've planted the bomb."

"They were all wiped out", Wesley breathed heavily, and then looked at Darla with a question that dared not leave his mouth. "They were…ALL there? Every …one of them? Every…last…Watcher?"

Darla knew what he wanted to ask. Although she knew it would cause him unbearable pain, she knew he had to know. "I'm sorry, Wesley", she said softly. "Your father was one of the first to enter the session…I'm truly sorry for your loss."

Fred gasped as she realized what Darla was saying. "Oh, Wesley", she breathed, stunned by the
news that one of her closest friends had just suffered an unspeakable tragedy.

Wesley sat there, his gaze lowered to the floor. He said nothing, changed not his expression. But it was clear to everyone what he was feeling. What anyone could be feeling after hearing that news.

Angel knew Wesley had never been close with his father. In fact, the father seemed almost ashamed of him, judging on what he heard and saw of the relationship. But still…it was his father. The man who gave him life. And the man who, as much as Wesley tried to downplay it, deep down, he had always admired. And respected.

Gunn came over and placed a hand on his crest-fallen friend's shoulder. The Watcher looked up, his glasses slightly fogged, at his one-time love rival.

"I'm sorry, man", he said simply, but his voice thick with empathy. Gunn knew what it was like to lose family. All too well. His sister's flashed through his mind.

Alonna, her name flashing through his thoughts, painfully remembering his sister, her sweet smile, her constant jokes. So young, he thought. So young to die so soon…

Connor spoke up. "He died a noble death, Wesley", he suddenly said. "He died fighting evil. He was a hero. If you want to honor him, we must take up his fight. Don't let his death mean nothing." His mother's earlier pleas rung in his mind as he said this.

All turned to the usually stoic boy, stunned by his words. Connor was never much for talking, and now suddenly, he was a younger, slimmer Winston Churchill-incarnate.

Angel had to force a small smile. This was a side of Connor that he had yet to see. The motivator. The inspiring warrior.

The words had their desired effect. Wesley's eyes became hardened, his jaw set. Suddenly, his legs found new strength, his soul new purpose.

"He's right", Wesley said, standing up. "All other things aside, we have to figure out the connection between the two anomalies. We have to find them…and obliterate them. Both this creature inside Cordelia AND the First Evil."

"We will", Angel said quietly. Raising his voice a tone, he took command. "Fred, get Sunnydale on the phone. Call Willow. Tell her to bring Buffy and the others down here right away. Also, tell Willow to tell Giles to bring any research material, Council or otherwise, he can get his hands on regarding the First or Higher Beings and any prophecies he might have regarding the Tro-Clon."

"Connor, Gunn, keep a close eye on Rust-Bucket over there", he motioned to Skip. "He so much as hiccups, call Fred, get her to do the sphere-thing."

"Can do", Gunn said as he shot a glare at Skip. Connor gave the demon an equally disgusted stare before walking to the weapons cabinet to select a weapon.

He turned to Wesley, suddenly freezing up. How could he expect him to work now, when he just had a large part of his life destroyed to him within a matter of minutes?

"Look, Wes", he began hesitantly. "Um, you don't...if you want...you can take a walk, get your head cleared, or - -"

"I think I'll consult my books", Wesley said, folding his arms. "I'll see if anything with these events are related or connected. Perhaps there's something that I missed in my old research based on last year's pregnancy."
Stiff upper lip. A trademark British tradition. One that Wesley had proudly practiced all his life. And he certainly wasn't about to stop now…no matter the circumstances.

He turned to go, when Darla's hand laid on his bicep. He turned to see the smaller woman's empathic gaze, reaching to him.

"Wesley", she said softly.

His eyes met hers, softening slightly, despite himself. What was it about her that…made him calmer when he should be dying inside? Or that could comfort him, when he would know no such thing?

After a beat, Darla sighed. "You'll be okay", she said simply, smiling comfortably.

Wesley looked stunned for a moment, before regaining himself. "Y-Yes...th-thank you, Darla." He reached out and gently lowered her hand back to her side. For a moment, he slid his hand down to her own, not holding it entirely, but simply feeling it.

"Thank you…", he trailed off, before turning and returning to his study.

Darla followed his form as he disappeared behind the closing door of the study. She wasn't sure what she was feeling right now…sympathy, yes, but something else. There was something in his eyes, his dark, lonely eyes that made her want to cry, to hold him against her and comfort him…do anything to give him a moment's peace. That, at the very least, was what he deserved.

"Darla?", Angel's voice woke her from her reverie.

He turned to Darla. "You look a bit tired. Maybe you upstairs, get some rest?"

Darla nodded, smiling. "Maybe a quick nap would suffice. I'm still a bit drained from that teleportation spell."

"About that", Angel said, stroking his chin in interest. "How'd you all of a sudden learn magick? You never bothered to use any when we were together, last I recalled."

Darla chuckled. "I'll explain everything once I get a little rest." She crooked her head a tad at the tall vampire. "Unless...you'd like to show me where my room is?....Maybe give us a chance to catch up?"

Angel considered for a moment. After a beat, he relented. "All right, I guess. I'll take you upstairs, then."

All heads turned to the former lovers, some eyebrows raised. Connor gave a most suspicious look to both his father and mother.

Clearly a very awkward moment for the teen.

Angel rolled his eyes. "For God's sake, people, get your minds out of the gutter, will ya? I'm just going up to talk."

"Naked! cough cough", Gunn feigned a cough.

"I heard that, Gunn", Angel growled, before escorting Darla upstairs.

"You don't really think they'll...you know...?" Fred asked the Host while making unusual up-and-down hand gestures.
"Dry their nails?", Lorne smirked.

"You know what I mean", Fred frowned.

Lorne sighed. "Can't tell. Hard to say when it comes to those two."

"They'd better not", Gunn said. "It's them doin' that which got us to this point in the first place."

Little did he know, that the comment he made was taken in by Connor. He knew exactly what Gunn meant.

His birth.

This had all started with him. The Rain of Fire, the sun blocking out, all those innocent people murdered…it was started with the day he came out of Darla. Into the world.

A world which, he thought, neither wanted nor accepted him.

A world in which he could never belong to.

The world would've been better, he thought, dejectedly, if I was never born at all.

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To Be Continued…
A/N: Welcome to the latest chapter!

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Bring Me To Life - A Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Angel Crossover Event
Part 3 - Revisiting

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The Story of the Human Race is War
- Winston Churchill

------------------------------------------------------------------------------

1630 Revello Drive - Sunnydale, CA
Later that Day

------------------------------------------------------------------------------

"Cross-block! Kick!"

"YAAH!" the echo of dozens of teenage girls sounded throughout the backyard of the Summers residence.

"Left-block COMBO!" Kennedy barked, marching along the line of Slayers-in-Training, or Potential Slayers, as she surveyed each individual girl. Examined their weaknesses, and their strengths.


Potential Slayers - girls of different cultures, who normally would have never given each other the time of day; who would have grown up hating each other, in some cases even killing each other. They were here, now, though…working side by side.

Training with each other. Eating with each other. Preparing each other for the biggest task of their young adolescent lives: the battle for survival.

For themselves. For the Slayer legacy. For the fate of the world itself.

For total war. Against the ultimate evil.
"All right, hold it!" Kennedy made a slashing hand signal. Immediately, the other girls ceased their actions, and fell into a military-like attention stance.

Kennedy walked up to one of the S-i-Ts, an Irish girl named Sandra, and crinkled her nose in disgust. "You call that training, Potential? That combo was weak!" Kennedy shouted into the stoic face of the younger girl, who was perhaps no older than fifteen.

"Ma'am! Sorry, ma'am!" the younger girl shouted back, her Irish brogue coloring her voice. "Me foot's fallen asleep from the angle I slept in last night, ma'am!"

Kennedy, nodding her head, smirked. "Oh, I see...do you know the kind of angle you sleep in when you die, Potential?"

"No, ma'am!" the younger girl barked back, her voice sounding slightly confused.

"Doesn't matter...'cause you're DEAD!" Kennedy yelled, leaning into Sandra's face. "We're not here to kiss your boo-boo! We're here to train for WAR!

"If you hurt, TRAIN HURT! If you're scared, TRAIN SCARED! If you're tired, TRAIN TIRED! If I EVER see you do another half-assed combo like that again, I will personally bury my foot SO far up your ass, your CHILDREN will be born tasting sneakers!"

The younger girl gulped, nervously, yet remained with her stoic face. "Yes ma'am! Sorry, ma'am! Won't happen again, ma'am!"

Kennedy returned to the head of the group. "All right! The rest of you, pair off with your usual partners. Exercise Number 657, Block-Roundhouse-elbow smash-arm throw! And I better see some DAMN good executions, or there's gonna be some MAJOR ass-kicking!"

The girls quickly formed into their pairs and began the exercises. Not far away at the Summers porch, Willow sat there, next to her new compatriot.

"So, whaddaya think?" the redhead asked. "Every S-i-T from around the world is holed up here in casa del Summers."

Faith sat there, looking pensive, taking in the scene before her. "Hmm."

"Hmm?" Willow echoed. "Is that a 'wow, we got a great army' hmm, or 'this-is-the-saddest-group-of-little-girls-I've-ever-seen' hmm?"

"More like a 'what-the-hell-are-those-girls-going-through?' hmm," Faith said. "Boy. This First guy must've really stuck it to you people, huh?"

"Well, technically, the First Evil doesn't have a gender," Willow sighed. "But yeah, the last six months have been pretty rough. Not just for those girls, for all of us."

"I can relate," the dark-haired Slayer nodded, thinking back to her actions in LA just a few days earlier.

Willow smiled teasingly. "Yeah, well, considering that up until a week ago, you were locked up in a maximum security prison while we've been fighting the ultimate Big Bad this whole time, I'd say you got off easy, little lady."

"Screw off, Rosenberg," Faith jokingly replied. "At least you haven't been thrown around by a
giant walking, talking, horn-headed demonic slag-heap 'til your ribs broke, THEN gotten the living hell beat out of you by the psycho vampire alter-ego of your best friend, THEN had to fight for your life in a drug-induced mental mindwalk in said best friend's mind, while your Jiminy Cricket is said best friend's psycho vampire alter-ego. All in just the first hundred hours of freedom."

"Still think you got off easy," Willow chuckled.

It had surprised Willow how easily she had bonded with Faith in the long drive back to Sunnydale. Because all things considered, the former rogue Slayer and the powerful witch had never had a good relationship.

Especially considering how Faith had slept with Willow's life-long crush, Xander, and sided with the Mayor before and after his Ascension, not to mention stealing Buffy's body when she came out of an eight-month coma…and, of course, there was that whole bit where Faith had held a knife to Willow's throat and threatened to kill her, not the kind a thing a girl forgets.

But they had both convened in LA with a common goal: to save their friend Angel's soul and defeat his murderous alter-ego, Angelus. Coupled with the fact that they had a common enemy in the First, and that it had been three years since they last saw each other, the car had been a chatter-box all the way back to the Hellmouth.

Willow clearly saw that Faith had changed. Gone was the sleazy, care-free, hump-anything-that-walks vixen she remembered from high school. Well, more or less, anyway. Instead, she was calmer, less cocky, more sensitive to feelings...hell, Willow was even starting to like the Boston girl.

"Still," Faith returned her gaze back to the Potentials. "I'm getting the idea why B's über-freaked." She paused, looking out towards the sea of teenage Potentials. "Those girls look scared, Red. And if this thing's really trying to get rid of the Slayer sisterhood like you said, then they're gonna have to get real good, real fast."

"Buffy's theme of the day," Willow sighed. "Well, it'll get better. Now that you're here. I mean, I know you had that whole bit when you were, y'know, evil, but you're still a good fighter. A great fighter. I mean, you took down Angelus...and Angel's son, Connor. Not bad for someone who's been incarcerated for three years, huh?"

"Willow, what do ya think I've been doing in jail all this time? Sitting on my well-toned ass and baking cookies?" Faith asked incredulously. "Let me tell you...all of that stuff you've heard about women's prisons? All that crap on 'Oz' that they show on HBO? Add that, plus a couple of special knife weapons, and you'll be closer to the truth."

"Everything?" Willow's voice teemed with curiosity. There was a question that played on her lips. "So...in the shower...?"

"Big time," Faith snorted. "The first few weeks I was there, every lesbo and mullet-head was trying to make a fish diet outta me...had to put about ten of 'em in the Emergency Room before everyone else got the point that I was off the menu."

"Wow," Willow whistled. "Remind me never to hit on you."

"Not unless you want to get hit on," Faith smirked playfully.

Both girls chuckled, then paused, realizing the double-entendre of that last comment. Both shook their heads quickly.
"Wait, back up a second. Special knife weapons?" Willow raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah," Faith shrugged. "Some burly bitch named Deb tried to off me the day before I escaped. First time that's happened in a while... she snuck in some weirdo fancy knife. Not just any old knife, either. It had a gold handle, some rubies on it... looked pretty expensive."

Willow's inner alarm went off immediately. "Wait a minute," she said, opening up her palm, facing Faith. "The knife... did it look anything like this?"

As she said this, an image magically appeared in the Wiccan's palm. An image of a sharp, curved knife with a golden handle and rubies adorning the sides.

Faith's eyes widened. "That's it! Damn, Red, how did you know that?"

Willow sighed. "Uh, Faith, it looks like the First targeted you after all. That knife this 'Deb' person used... it's the exact same one the Bringers use."

Faith's eyes narrowed, realizing the implication of the statement. "So the First did try to off me," she mused quietly, feeling rather annoyed that no one had bothered to warn her that she might be a target.

"Like a burned out light switch," Willow said. "Yeah, uh, we should have warned you, I guess? Sorry. B-but... at least you made it here okay... unlike some Potentials who... weren't quite so lucky."

"It should have chosen someone better to finish me off," Faith said, maintaining a calm face, but a gleam in her eyes indicating smoldering rage. "'Cause now that I'm here... I'm gonna kick its incorporeal ass all the way back to where it came from."

"Assuming we ever find out where that might be," Willow sighed again.

"We'll find out," Faith said, a hint of optimism creeping into her voice. "And when we do..." she trailed off, gently pounding her left fist into the open palm of her right hand.

"You'll go all 'Chosen One' on its ass?" Willow smiled impishly.

"Like it was an overweight vamp with a limp," Faith nodded. "Say, I'm kinda thirsty. There anything to drink in the fridge?"

"There's soda, enough water to last for a year... oh! And we have some fruit punch squished in the back," Willow replied. "Help yourself."

"Will do," Faith nodded, standing up. "You sure the others aren't back yet?"

"Yeah. But they'll be back soon, though," Willow said. "Faith... watch yourself, okay? I'd rather you be with me when I explain that you're... you know... not in jail anymore, and you've come here to help us fight the First. In retrospect, it probably woulda been a better idea to let Buffy know where I was going and, uh, who I was bringing back..."

Faith wryly grinned. "Works in theory, Red. You want anything to drink?"

"No, thanks. I'm good," Willow smiled.


Willow barely had time to grin at Faith's unexpected compliment, before a girl's wailing called her
"That's what happens when you don't move FAST enough, maggot!" Kennedy snarled. She stood over the fallen body of a quivering Potential, clutching her stomach on the ground in obvious pain.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sooo sorry, I'll do it better next time -"

Her sentence was cut off as Kennedy blasted her foot into the girl's stomach, making her squeal in pain and fright.

"What makes you think you'll GET a next time, Potential?" Kennedy barked down on her. "You try that in the field, and you're DEAD! You DON'T get second chances to do it RIGHT!"

Molly, the British Potential, spoke up, feeling concerned about the beating one of her peers was taking. "Kennedy, don't you think you're being a bit hard on her? I mean, this is verging on being barbaric -"

"SHUT UP!" Kennedy whirled on the pretty Slayer-in-Training. "You just focus on your exercise, Molly! And that had better be the last time you EVER address me by name while you're training!"

Rona had had just about enough. "Chill out, Kennedy!" the black Potential spoke up. "She wasn't even that slow to begin with. I get that you're in charge of the workouts, but you don't have the right to -"

"When I'm training the rest of you PISSANTS, I have the right to do whatever the hell I want!" Kennedy glowered at her fellow Potential. "You've got something to say about that, Rona?"

"Yeah, maybe I do," the dark-skinned girl stared back, unflinchingly, at the taller girl.

KR-AACK!

Rona crumpled like a sack of dead leaves onto the ground, clutching her jaw. The other girls gasped in horror as Kennedy cracked her knuckles, scowling over the black girl.

"That change your perspective?" Kennedy demanded.

"Kennedy! What the hell are you doing?" Willow asked, aghast at her girlfriend's behavior. "You're taking this way too far -"

"Stay out of this, Willow!" Kennedy snapped back at the object of her affections. "Just because we're dating now DOESN'T mean you can just stick your nose in business that doesn't concern you! This is Slayer business!"

Willow flinched at the harshness of the comment, obviously hurt.

Kennedy turned back to the rest of the Potentials. "Anyone else? Huh?" she challenged them, her fists up ready for an attack. "Anyone of you sorry bunch of pansy-asses think you can take me? C'MON! Speak UP, already!"

"Speaking," a female voice drawled from behind her.

Kennedy turned to find a girl she had never seen before standing near the porch, on the steps, just a notch or two below where Willow was standing. Dark hair, tight black leather pants, burgundy red top and a black jean jacket were her attire. Her arms were folded against her chest, but she casually leaned against the pillar of the porch. And the glint in her eyes displayed a sort of
cockiness that could be almost intimidating.

"Who the hell are you?" Kennedy spat out in disgust.

Willow opened her mouth to tell her, but Faith shot her a look and shook her head. Getting the message, Willow closed her mouth and stayed silent.

"Not a pansy-ass, that's for sure, cherry," Faith said in a lazy drawl.

"What did you just call me?" the 19-year-old girl asked as she stepped forward, her fists balled at her sides.

Faith chuckled, shaking her head, clearly unimpressed. "Listen, uh…Kennedy, right? You might want to ease up on the attitude here, you know? I mean, look at 'em. You got those girls so scared they probably can't even pee right."

Kennedy's eyes narrowed. "I don't know who you are, or who in the hell you think you are, but I'm not taking instructions on how to run my training sessions from some leather-clad slut who couldn't find her street corner to work at!"

Faith raised an eyebrow. "Slut, huh?" she said, her voice still with that laid-back South Boston twang. "Well, you know where I come from…we've got a saying. 'One rotten apple spoils the bunch. Two rotten apples…and the picker's the rotten one'."

Kennedy's eyes widened in anger. "You got something to say to -"

"Just said it, sweet thang," Faith smirked.

Willow finally moved to break up the potential brawl between the two alpha females. "Hey, hey, hey!" the redhead interjected with a pleading look on her face. "Guys, come on, I-I-I mean… Kennedy, I'm sure that Faith was just offering some constructive, albeit slightly instigative, criticism. I mean, we all want to make these girls bet -"

"Faith?" Kennedy scoffed, interrupting. "What kind of granola-crunching, New Age crappy name is that? What, were Moonbeam and Charity taken already?"

Faith still didn't alter that lazy grin she'd managed to perfect over time. "Ooooh! We got us a wildcat on our hands here, Will." She took a step closer to the younger, slightly taller girl. "But you know what they say, hot stuff…."

Faith stopped only when she got within a hair's breath of Kennedy. "Don't go talkin' the talk if you can't be walkin' the walk."

"You want a piece of me, skankwad?" Kennedy's voice gained an edge.

"Hell, yeah…rookie," Faith emphasized the last part with as much irritating arrogance as she could muster.

Kennedy saw red. "Rookie, huh?" And then she lashed out with a strong punch at Faith's face… …who simply ducked out of the way with effortless ease.

"C'mon, K! I've seen one-armed vamps punch faster than that!" Faith snorted.

Kennedy responded by throwing another punch, with the same useless result. Kennedy moved towards the Slayer, throwing a series of punches, jabs, uppercuts, cross-kicks, back kicks,
sidekicks and roundhouse kicks. Faith nimbly avoided every attempt at physical attack, her grin never leaving her face.

The other Potentials watched in awe as this new girl, someone whom none of them had ever seen before, held her own, and maybe more so, against their trainer, the strongest of all the Potential Slayers.

Letting out a frustrated cry, the hot-headed S-i-T launched herself at Faith with a flying kick aimed right at the Slayer's head. Faith effortlessly ducked under it, resulting in Kennedy's foot connecting with…

…the bark of the big tree rooted in the Summers backyard.

Kennedy's foot was deeply lodged into the tree. Her eyes widened in surprise and her face reddened with embarrassment as she budged and pulled at her foot, attempting to get it free from the bark.

Faith casually leaned against the tree, chuckling. "Way to go there, rookie. That tree never knew what hit it! Ever consider a career as a lumberjack? I'd bet you'd really be a terror up in the Great White North -"

Kennedy grunted angrily as she dislodged her foot and resumed her fast-paced, but futile attack on the more experienced, powerful Faith.

Willow shook her head in embarrassment for Kennedy. Her girlfriend honestly didn't know who and what she was up against. When at the top of her game, Faith could tangle with the best of them - Buffy, Angel, even the Beast - and have a shot at winning. As good as Kennedy was for her age, there was a reason why she was a Potential Slayer…and why Faith was The Slayer.

The younger girl began to slow down, obviously getting tired keeping up with Faith's high-energy pace. Eventually Kennedy tried a backhanded forearm, which Faith caught with one hand.

"My turn, now," Faith grinned wickedly.

She gave a swift kick to the girl's left kneecap, causing Kennedy to cry out in pain. Faith followed up with a quick twist of the girl's right arm she'd blocked, bending it back - not enough to break it, but enough to cause Kennedy uncomfortable pain. Faith then sent two hard, swift roundhouse kicks to the girl's stomach and upper torso before flipping Kennedy onto her back.

Kennedy was obviously dazed, Faith noted. "Maybe you oughta think about calling it a day, huh, K?"

Kennedy flipped up on her feet, and threw a wild sidekick at the girl. Faith caught it, again. "Girl's got spunk -"

And then she swept the other leg out from under her, knocking the Potential back down, groaning in pain.

"But not a lotta brains," Faith shrugged.

No sooner had the words left her mouth, than a powerful blow smashed across her face, crumpling the curvaceous brunette Slayer to the ground.

Faith shook her head quickly, before looking up at her attacker. When she saw who it was, all she could do was smirk.
"Hey, B," Faith grinned slyly, wiping a trickle of blood away from her nose. "Been a long time."

Above her, standing with her arms folded across her chest, stood an intimidating, scowling Buffy Summers. Faith made a mental note as to how Buffy still had a killer fashion sense. Decked out in her gray silk shirt, tight black jeans and platforms, Buffy had a look easily made for either "Bronzing it" with her friends, or patrolling for vamps.

"For some of us, maybe," the blonde Slayer said dangerously.

The two former foes stared at each other from their respective positions for a while, a number of expressions passing across the blonde's face before she turned to face Willow; and upon seeing the redhead's expression of combined guilt and apprehension, Buffy rolled her eyes, made an educated guess and then extended her hand to Faith. The dark-haired Slayer accepted with ease.

"Well, it's nice to see you started off the same way you did in Sunnydale the last time," Buffy sardonically told her sister Slayer. "Causing fights and leaving a mess in your wake. In MY house. Again." The Slayer's eyes slid to the busted open tree trunk.

"Hey, hey, I didn't actually start anything," Faith raised her hands defensively. "G.I. Jane here attacked me."

"That is SO not true!" Kennedy said, lifting herself off the grass, clutching the small of her back. "She started it, Buffy! She came after me! Willow can back me up, she saw everything!"

All eyes turned to Willow, whose expression resembled something of a deer trapped in headlights. "Huh?" she squeaked out.

"Willow? Is that true?" Buffy looked to her best friend for the deciding vote.

Willow's mouth curved up into the right corner. She had her 'thoughtful face' on. She had learned how to perfect many faces over the years. Like her 'resolve face' and her 'cranky face'.

"Well, uh...you DID kinda throw the first punch, Kennedy," Willow said hesitantly. "Not to mention your beating up on the trainees..."

"Willow!" Kennedy exclaimed, shocked.

"Told ya," Faith smiled.

Buffy sighed. "Okay, whatever. Can we please NOT smash any more things on my property while we're preparing for the ultimate battle?"

"Buffy, are you just going to let some Potential slut-bag walk in here and treat me like that?" Kennedy demanded hot-headedly.

Buffy and Faith exchanged a look with each other, before both started snickering slightly. Kennedy was confused as to what they found to be so amusing, while she was aching all over.

"What the hell is so funny?" demanded the irritated Potential.

"Look, Kennedy? Next time you try starting a fight with someone - first off, make sure she's not a Slayer," Buffy snorted.

Kennedy's jaw dropped and her eyes looked like they were ready to pop out of their sockets. She did a very good impersonation of a fish out of water, actually.
"A Slay…d-d-did you just say -" the normally bold girl stammered.


The other Potentials let out a gasp and murmurs ran through the crowd of underage girls.

"No, no way," Kennedy shook her head in denial. "There is no way in hell this piece of…this trailer-park white trash can be a Slayer!"

Buffy stepped closer to Kennedy, her grin instantly gone and her taking-care-of-business face slipped on. Kennedy had to gulp at the expression on Buffy's face.

"Faith and I aren't exactly friends, not anymore. But whatever she may have done in the past, she's still one of the Chosen crowd, just like me. So I strongly suggest you NEVER address a Slayer like that again…Potential," Buffy said, her voice hard like tempered steel.

"Listen carefully, Kennedy. You're not in charge here; I am. You're only in charge of training the Potentials, and even that's only until I say otherwise. I'm all for you helping out….but don't think for one second that I'm going to take any attitude from you. I didn't take it from the Council, and I'm certainly not going to take it from some girl who I could beat the crap out of just as easily as any vamp I meet at night," Buffy said in a no-nonsense tone.

"But I -"

"I'm still talking!" Buffy snapped, cutting her off. "Because I didn't appreciate how you stood up and said your piece the other night…about me being out of line? When I was addressing everyone to raise their game, after Chloe killed herself? Plus you tangling with Faith - maybe you don't get how close you came to a humiliating ass-kicking...but you should."

Kennedy stared back at her, still defiant but acknowledging someone else now had the power in this situation. Buffy continued, "The only one out of line here is you, Kennedy. Beating up your trainees? Mouthing off to me? Insulting someone you just met, and don't even know? All that stops right here, right now. You're in serious need of a reality check. And here it comes."

Kennedy looked on, listening intently, but her voice betraying nervousness. "What do you mean? What are you saying, exactly?"

"That I want you to focus more on your own training. You're the strongest of the girls here. Which is why you need to start developing faster, if I'm going to be able to count on you in battle." Buffy sighed. "Effective at the end of this session, you are no longer in charge of training the Potentials."

Kennedy took a step back, shocked. "Wh-what? You, you can't -"

"Can. Did." Buffy's tone of voice left no tone for argument. She glanced at Faith, and seemed to be satisfied with what she saw there. Turning back to Kennedy the senior Slayer said, "As good as you've gotten these girls, Kennedy, it's not enough. Not for what we're going up against. I need you, ALL of you, to start taking the training up to the next level. Which means I need someone else to train you and the rest. Someone with more experience. Someone who's a REAL Slayer."

"You?" Kennedy asked, her voice starting to thicken with hurt.

"Not me," Buffy shook her head. "I've got too much else happening right now, too many other things to do and prepare for."

Kennedy's eyes widened and she emphatically shook her head. "No…no, no, no, NO! Buffy,
But the elder Slayer was way ahead of her. "Everyone!" Buffy announced to the rest of the girls, who stood at attention. "I'd like you to meet your new trainer…" She turned to her sister Slayer. "Faith. The Vampire Slayer."

Faith stood there, speechless, as all eyes were trained to her. The brunette took a moment, surveyed the crowd, before grinning and saying the only thing she could thing to say at the moment.

"Wicked."

And despite knowing that Kennedy would freak out later on when they were alone, Willow couldn't help but to shake her head and smile.

Training had finished early for the day, it was decided. Afterwards Buffy, Willow, and Faith entered the kitchen of the Summers home, where Xander was busy making sandwiches for himself and Dawn.

Needless to say, when he saw Faith, Harris dropped the sandwich in shock.

"Faith. FAITH! Buffy, look out! Faith's escaped from jail!" he tried to warn his hero.

"You can relax, Xander," Willow chuckled nervously. "She's, uh…Faith's on our side now."

Harris blinked. "Really? Gosh, switching sides again?" Xander suddenly sneered, placing his hands in his pockets and rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. "Well, that makes me feel so much better. But hey, Faith, do me a favor? When you decide to go evil again, drop me a memo or something so that I know to lock my doors at night."

"Aw, gee. There was a time you didn't complain about being alone with me, boy-toy," Faith drawled, a seductive tone in her voice. "Even if it was only for around seven minutes or so."

Xander's face reddened and he scooped up the sandwich he'd dropped, nervously taking a big, Shaggy-sized bite of his sandwich. There was nothing he could say that would help there, and he knew it.

Buffy turned back to Faith. "What are you doing here, Faith?"

Faith raised an eyebrow, puzzled. "Uh…helping you out?"

"You're supposed to be in prison," Buffy pointed out, her voice even. "Somehow, I'm thinking Stockton Penitentiary didn't just decide to let you out for a leisurely stroll around town and some rasslin', while you're serving twenty-five-to-life for Murder Two."

"Alright, okay, so I had to bail," Faith sighed, before quickly adding, "But it was only because Angel needed my help."

Buffy's eyes widened at the name. Even just the mention of her ex-lover's name could make her heart start pounding a little quicker, her skin a little warmer.

"A-Angel?" she asked, stunned. "He's in trouble?"
"Was in trouble," Willow said quickly and reassuringly. "Faith…I…we helped him out."

Confusion set on Buffy's face, and then it hit her. "L.A. That's where you went two days ago." Her face soured. "Thanks for telling me about that, by the way. Way to keep me informed, Will!"

Willow fought the urge to cringe. "Well, I-I know that it was wrong, and-and that it goes completely against the first commandment in the Code-of-Best-Friends Handbook - but you said it yourself, Buffy. This is war time. You have to be focused. And we both know if I'd told you that Angel was in trouble, the first thing that you would've done was go to him. Leaving everyone here wide open for an attack by the Bringers."

Buffy took all of this in, and reluctantly nodded. She hated to admit it, but Willow was right. That would have been her first impulse. Whenever Angel was mentioned, even after all this time, she still had a tendency to get loopy. It was like Kendra had told her years ago: concern for Angel clouded her judgment.

"Is he…okay?" Buffy asked slowly.

Faith responded, "Angel? He's fine. He says 'hey'."

"Really?" Buffy felt a small smile appear on her lips.

Xander rolled his eyes. "Great. First Faith shows up, now greetings from Dead Boy. Add in all the insults from Anya, and it's just makin' this my best day ever!"

Ignoring him, Buffy turned back to Faith. "Look, Faith. It's not that I don't want you here…"

Then Buffy rethought that statement. "Well, actually, I don't, but that's beside the issue. Now that you're here, we've got this whole other problem on our hands. You're an escaped convict. If the police come barging in here, find you holed up with a bunch of girls with weapons all over the place? Not going to go well. Especially for me."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that, Buffy," Willow said far too easily and quickly.

The blonde Slayer turned to her best friend. "Why's that, Will?" she asked suspiciously.

Willow fidgeted a little, something she did when she was nervous. Or when she knew she'd done something wrong. "W-well, I sorta…kinda…hacked into the Sunnydale and L.A police department computers, deleted all their records on Faith and destroyed her file at Stockton as well, before we headed back to town. Angel gave me the names of some people who'll take care of the paper trail, too."

"WHAT?" Xander and Buffy exclaimed.

"Oh, yeah," Faith chortled. "Free as a bird, people. And loving it."

"Great googley-moogley, Willow, have you gone insane?" Xander blurted out. "You just gave Psycho Slayer a get-out-of-jail-free card!"

"Willow, what were you thinking?" Buffy disbelievingly asked.

"I was thinking - that we need her. And that's more important than paying her debt to society," Willow said, her resolved face on. "Buffy, Faith helped Angel out of a serious jam. She even saved his life, and almost got killed while she was doing it! And besides, if we want to take the First Evil out of commission, if we want to survive, we need the best warriors we can get. And Faith is one of the best there is!"
Willow paused, before saying, "Look, Buff, I know you have issues with Faith, and rightfully so, hell, so do I…but that doesn't matter now. We're fighting for our lives here. So, if you have problems with this, you're-you're just going to have to deal with them, face them. We need her, Buffy." Willow looked outside to the rest of the girls, who were idly standing around, chatting. "They need her."

"For what? Lessons on how to get strangled, if they turn up at her hotel room at the wrong time?" Xander's voice was dark and cold, as he glared at Faith.

Buffy noticed Faith look away at that, she too was reminded of that night when everything had gone so terribly wrong. "Now's not the best time for us to get into that, Xander -"

"If not now, then when? 'Cause some of us don't have Slayer strength to defend ourselves, Buffy," Xander insisted, before he relented at the look the blonde was sending him. "Alright, look, I trust your judgment - if you think she should stay, then that's good enough for me. Just think about it real carefully, okay?"

Buffy stared at Xander, then Willow for a moment, and then Faith. After a short time to digest everything that had just happened, she nodded.

"Fine," Buffy said. "You can stay, Faith. But, you're on a very short leash. You have almost no leash. You mess up just once, you give me ANY reason to think I can't trust you under the same roof as my family, friends and the Potentials…and you're out faster than Mariah Carey's last album."

Faith nodded. "Hey, don't sweat it, B. I'm one of the good guys now."

"For now," Xander snidely tossed at her.

A flip-flop of tennis sneakers preceded Dawn's entrance into the kitchen. "Hey, Xander, where's my sandwich? I haven't eaten anything in -"

She stopped when she noticed Faith standing in the kitchen, opposite her sister.

"Faith?" the female teen exclaimed. "Buffy, look out! It's Faith! She's escaped!"

Buffy turned towards her younger sister. "I know, Dawnie. It's - complicated. Uh, I guess Faith is…going to be staying with us for a while..."

Dawn looked like she was going to explode. "WHAT? Buffy, are you high on crack or something? She can't stay here! Or need I remind you that the last time Faith came to our house, she tried to, oh, I don't know…kill me AND Mom!"

"I know," Buffy said, her memories adjusted from the truth of what had really happened back then, just like everyone else's. "I know. But we need all the help we can get, Dawn. You know that. Besides, Faith knows she's on a short leash. Right?" She gave a poignant stare to the dark-haired Slayer. "Promise to behave?"

"Cross my heart, hope to die," Faith recited the schoolyard promise.

"You're not the only one," Dawn sarcastically spat at her.

"Well, check it out; the brat's all woman-sized, now, huh?" Faith grinned. "Man, I have been away too long."

Dawn stared at Faith for a moment, before turning back to Buffy. "I really hope you know what
you're doing, Buffy." She sent one last icy look at Faith before leaving the room.

Shrugging off the awkward feeling creeping up on her, Faith let out a small whistle. "Guess Dawnie's not on the welcome-home wagon, huh?"

"Wagon? There's a welcome wagon? Where?" Xander spat out one last parting shot, before exiting the kitchen with his sandwich in hand.

Willow was quick to try and smooth things over. "They'll come around, Faith. They, uh, just need some time to adjust and get to know the new and improved, non-homicidal you."

Faith sighed, a trace of sadness in her eyes. "How about twenty-five-to-life? That enough time, you think?"

"Well, maybe with good behavior?" Willow smiled brightly. And Faith's amused chuckle came right back on her face.

At the same moment, Andrew entered the room, stopping short when he saw Faith.

"Willow, there's a…wow…heh, you're pretty," the blonde geek almost stammered incomprehensibly.

Faith looked at Buffy, who shrugged. "That's Andrew. You'll get used to him. Or not. Take your pick."

After a few moments, when the girls noted that Andrew wouldn't stop staring at Faith, Willow took the initiative. "Andrew? You had a message for me or something?"

"Huh?" Andrew finally snapped out of his daze. "Oh…oh, yeah! That Fred guy is on the phone again. Said it's urgent."

Willow's eyes widened and looked to Faith, before quickly nodding. "Oh…OH! Fred. Right. I got it. Thanks, Andrew."

"Could you take him with you?" Buffy pointed at the sci-fi nerd.

Willow rolled her eyes and dragged Andrew out of the room, while he whimpered at being taken away from the vision of loveliness that was Faith.

Faith turned to Buffy, the smirk gone, her face totally serious. "Look, B, I don't want to be causing any more tension around here. God knows you have enough of that to deal with, so I can just be on my way -"

"No." Buffy shook her head, sighing. "No, it's…just a little unexpected that you popped in here when you did. But…I'm okay with the fact that you're here, Faith. It's…okay."

"Good," Faith said, turning up a smile. "By the way, you look great. Nice to know the years have been good to some of us."

"If only by looks," Buffy said dryly. "Aside from my mom dying, ME dying, working crappy minimum wage jobs until I got lucky with the high school counselor gig, and losing several friends in the last few years, yeah, everything's peachy."

"Well, look at it this way - things can only get better," Faith offered. "God knows it couldn't get much worse than it's been over these last few weeks, with that Permanent Midnight thing in L.A."
Buffy sighed. "Yeah, well, I hope not. If there's one thing I'm not up for right now, it's more surprises."

As if on cue, Willow re-entered the room. She had on a very grave face.

"Willow?" Buffy asked, noting her friend's look. She took a step closer. "Will, what's wrong?"

"Buffy…I was just on the phone with Fred."

"Who's this Fred guy?" Buffy wondered, recalling what Andrew had said just now.

"Nah, Fred - it's short for Winifred. She's a friend of Angel's. In LA," Faith explained.

Buffy's face morphed from concern to slight panic. "Angel? I-is he okay?"

"No. Buffy, Faith, we need to gather the others. Dawn, Giles, Anya, Spike, Xander, all the Potentials. We need to go to LA. Now."

"What?" Buffy demanded.

"Willow, what's happened to Angel?" Faith asked, the worry written all over her face.

The Wiccan's eyes locked with Buffy's. "Fred said something about…the End of Days. That it's coming. No, that it's practically here already. And it concerns what's been happening here in Sunnydale."

The look in the blonde Slayer's eyes was filled with dread, and understanding. So with that, she proceeded to do what she did best in times like these. Take command.

"All right. Willow, find Spike. Tell him to get dressed and get that Winnebago we used way back when, ASAP. Faith, round up the Potentials in the living room, tell them I've called an emergency meeting. I want everyone ready to go, and I want it five minutes ago."

"I've already notified Giles," Willow said. "He's grabbing all his research and magic stuff and putting it in his car. Xander, Andrew and Dawn will take care of loading the van with supplies, weapons, the whole nine yards."

"Good. That leaves us my car and Xander's. But that won't be enough to transport thirty-odd Potentials between them -"

"Ooh! Why not contact Principal Wood?" Willow suggested. "He's got access to some school transportation, like the school district bus. Maybe he can lend it to us. That should be enough to hold the rest of the girls."

Buffy smiled at Willow. "Good idea. Thanks, Will."

"Looks like we're road-trippin', huh, B?" Faith said lazily, rotating her neck muscles.

"Looks like," Buffy said absently, as she exited the room. But she could feel something in the pit of her stomach nagging at her. She could feel it. The same exact feeling she'd gotten in her stomach, right before her final battle with Glory. A terrifying feeling that somehow, the worst was yet to come, that she hadn't even begun to fight yet…

That the End was near…and it was nearer than she thought.

But at least this time, she had Angel waiting for her on the other side. She just had to make it to Los Angeles.
Buffy suddenly raised an eyebrow at that. She didn't know what was more terrifying…going down to LA to face the apocalypse…or going to face the one being on Earth she loved more than anything she would ever love in this life…

God, isn't being the Slayer great? Buffy mused sarcastically to herself.
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TBC…
Crash Landing

So, I've been thinking a lot about your requests with the couples. And I'll only say this: a few of those suggestions are pretty much on the money! But I'm gonna try and keep you guessing as to who ends up with who. Oh, and keep your eyes peeled. You never know when a surprise visit is going to happen, somewhere in the story! (And yes, that WAS a hint.) So, without further ado, I present to you….

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Bring Me to Life -- A Buffy the Vampire Slayer / Angel Crossover Event

Part 5 -- Crash Landing

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Downtown LA - Meatpacking District, Abandoned Factory

Now

In the back alley of the meatpacking district, 'Cordelia' gasped.

She was quite winded from the latest turn of events. Grasping against the brick wall of the alley, she fumbled for control of her balance. She could feel her baby growing within her every passing second. It was coming.

Losing Connor and her sacrifice definitely were complications she hadn't counted on. No doubt in her mind that Darla had taken them back to Angel's.

Darla, she thought, seething as the perspiration began to trickle down her forehead. That little bitch! She couldn't just stay dead, could she? I bet it was the Powers that sent her…morons. And I had to be stupid enough to make her human.

It was a gamble, at best. She figured that the boy would have gladly done her bidding if it meant saving his precious mother. She could feel her control on him waning even before Darla's unwanted interjection. Now, there was little doubt that 'Cordy' had lost her grip on The Destroyer completely.

This was all Darla's fault. She took her sacrifice, she took her mate…and now she was going to help Angel try to take her baby, too.

Oh, she's gotta go, she thought maliciously as she managed to find her way back into the abandoned building.
She stumbled back onto the makeshift mattress she had set up for her delivery. She knew she needed another sacrifice soon. It was only a matter of time before Angel found her. She needed time.

Time for the baby.

The baby.

That was all that mattered.

But first, she had to take care of Darla. She probably knew too much. If the Powers sent her, then they probably told her how to stop the baby from being born. And that made Darla dangerous.

Too dangerous to live.

Shakily, she drew a breath as she held out her palms. A small, red glowing amber appeared in her hands.

*Ok, Darla,* she smiled, wickedly. *Think you can just waltz back in here and ruin the birth of a new world? Well, don't worry honey...'cause Mama's saved the last dance...just for you.*

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**Hyperion Hotel - Research Room**

**Now**

Wesley sat, pensive, gazing at the piles of books and papers in his office.

Or at least, the room that was once his office.

Not much had changed in that dark green room. There were still a formidable library of books on demonology, vampiredom, mystical phenomena and Watcher’s Diaries he had pilfered from the Council…when they still existed.

But he knew, he felt somewhere deep down that it was no longer his office to reside in. He had lost that privilege nearly a year ago, when he made the decision that had altered his life, and in the process, altered many lives now hanging precariously in the balance…

To steal a still-infant Connor from his father.

He could play back in his keen mind the events as if they had just happened five minutes ago. He could still feel the icy chill of Justine’s blade sliding across his throat, as she stole the boy to Holtz, leaving him lying in the middle of nowhere, life pouring out of him.

And the fright of impending death, the clamping of his nostrils as Angel, his long-time friend, maybe even his best friend, tried to suffocate him with his own pillow as he lay dying in a hospital bed, the souled vampire enraged over his betrayal and kidnapping of his only son. Whom Wesley was only trying to protect from what was, what he thought, a death sentence, foretold by a fake prophecy, to be executed by his own father.

*You Son of a BITCH! You're gonna PAY for what you did!...You took my son!...You expect me to*
forgive you! NO! I'll NEVER forgive you! You took my son!... You're a dead man, Pryce! You're DEAD! YOU HEAR ME! DEAD! DEAD!

And the crack of his breaking heart as Fred, a woman he had become very fond of, perhaps even...telling him with hurt in her eyes, and anger in her southern-laced voice to never come back to the hotel. That he no longer had a place there. He was no longer welcome back in the place that was, for the longest time, his home. With the only people he had ever truly known as family. He could still recall her uncharacteristically frosty words ringing in his head...

If Angel sees you again, he'll kill you, Wesley. This time for real....Don't come back to the hotel. Ever...The prophecy was a fake. Angel was never gonna hurt Connor.... It was all for nothing.

For the longest time, even until now, he was unable to forgive himself for that mistake. For putting Angel through a grief no parent should ever have to go through, for subjecting poor little Connor to that God-awful dimension Quor-tooth. For betraying those he loved and siding with a lunatic's reasoning. For being the pathetic failure his...now departed father, always accused him of being.

Of course, guilt slowly converted to bitterness. After complete isolation from the AI team, without so much as a second thought on their part, and living alone like a hermit, only to be constantly tempted by Lilah to join Wolfram & Hart, he did the only thing a pissed-off, lonely, heart-broken man could do...

He made his own rules. And played his own game.

So much had happened to him since tapping into the darker side of his nature, the side he never knew existed...or perhaps, on some level, he always knew, but was too afraid to look. Gone were the rumpled, bookish clothes, replaced by a darker, more practical (and apparently cooler) apparel. Already versed in the fighting arts from his days in the Council, he had kicked up his repertoire to include axes, knives, pressure points, torture tactics (some of which he, with shocking pleasure, extended unto Justine when he held her captive in his closet)...

And guns.

Lots and lots of guns.

Calling in some favors from England, recruiting able-bodied men and women on the street who knew the score, but where powerless to stop it, until now, and shacking up with a skilled weapons designer and expert named Emil, using his powerful mental acumen to get information on everything and everyone in the City of Los Angeles...

And voila. He had himself his own rogue demon hunting operation.

No longer answering to anyone but himself, he ran his operation quite efficiently. Saving quite a few lives, in the process. With every demon, every obstacle, every situation that required his strength, leadership and intellect, he grew more confident, more daring. Stronger.

Within those few short months, he had more "field training" than any of the Watcher's Council could ever hope for. He had the respect and admiration of those he led. He had a purpose. A mission. Finally, he had everything that, professionally, and to an extent, personally, that he ever wanted.

To an extent.

Although his bed was never cold at night, thanks to Lilah, there was still the empty feeling of longing within him. Of friendship needed. Of understanding.
Something that Lilah, for all her surprisingly warm and sincere attempts, simply couldn't give him. However endearing she may…might have been.

He still wasn't sure what exactly compelled him to return to Angel Investigations. Sure, logic dictated it was the Beast situation, the impending apocalypse, the fact that even Wesley Wyndham-Pryce, for all his otherworldly knowledge and mind-blowing weapons arsenal, couldn't do what a Champion like Angel could do. Or that, maybe in the end, it really was Angel's battle, after all, and all he could do was to help the vampire through it. Why else would he have bothered to fish Angel out of his watery Pacific Ocean prison?

But Wesley could have simply stayed on the sidelines, helping from a distance, as he had done so recently. So, what changed? Why did he have to be here, of all places? Now?

In the same place where he had gotten the destructive news that the Council was gone, that his father had perished, the same place he had stolen baby Connor, the same place he came to blows with Gunn, a man he once took a bullet for, without thought…the same place where Lilah was…

He shook his head, lifting the glasses off of the sore bridge of his nose. *Don't go there, Pryce*, he told himself. *There'll be plenty of time to grieve later…*

Later? He snorted to himself. He hadn't even begun to properly mourn for Lilah since the night they found her lifeless body in the hotel, her throat torn open, blood seeping out of her.

Wesley unconsciously ran a finger across his own scar. *It seems we had even more in common than I thought, Lilah*, he mused. *In a morbid sort of way, I guess you could call us soul mates…*

He stopped himself right there, frowning. She couldn't have loved him. *No, it wasn't possible. She was Lilah Morgan. Cold-hearted, vicious, manipulative. Wolfram & Hart to the core. People like her couldn't love, right? They can't. They don't know how… They couldn't possibly even know what love is.*

But then again…neither did he.

And in the back of his mind, he was beginning to wonder if he would ever know…

-(Knock Knock)-

He looked up, blearily from his paper work, sighing. "Come in", he answered, his voice betraying his exhaustion.

Gently, the door gave way to reveal a smiling, yet somewhat timid-looking Darla.

For a moment, Wesley felt his breath hitch. But, God, she was beautiful. Had he not known better, he could've mistaken Darla for an angel fallen from heaven. Which in a way she was, considering the unceremonious way she dropped it the Hotel, literally.

"I don't suppose you'd buy the line that I was selling Girl Scout cookies, would you?", she smiled, a soft chuckle escaping from her lips.

"With that face, I'd wager you'd have sold out a few times over by now", Wesley said, to his own surprise, smiling…somewhat.

"Can I come in?", Darla asked, a bit hesitant.

"I don't see why not", Wesley shrugged. "You're not a vampire anymore. You need no invitation."
She cast her gaze down, the smile gone. Wesley cursed himself or being so stupid for making a remark like that.

"Darla…I-I didn't- -", he began.

"It's all right", Darla shrugged. "It's pretty clear that everyone's still freaked about me being here."

Wes hesitated for a moment. "I don't think that 'freaked' is the operative word."

The blonde stared back at him, her eyebrow arched.

"Or then again, maybe it can be", the ex-Watcher relented.

She sighed, taking a moment before she walked in, closing the door behind her.

Pausing a beat, Wesley said, "H-Have you spoken to Connor yet?"

Darla shook her head. "Not yet. I guess I'm still a bit tired…besides, I'm kinda nervous about that one."

"Nervous?", he said, puzzled. "Why? You saved him and the girl from certain death…he seems to have an obvious affection towards you, which is more than I can say for Angel…and besides, you're his mother."

"Still", Darla shrugged. "There's so much I want to say to him. I just…I'm going to go downstairs in a bit. I'm feeling a little more like my old self." She paused for a moment, considering the statement. "But not in the wanting-to-rip-out-your-throat capacity."

"That's always a positive", Wesley said as he stood and walked around the desk. He leaned casually against it, arms folded over his chest, resting his gaze on Darla.

"Not that I mind…" he trailed off as his eyes wandered up Darla's curvy form up to her angelic face, stopping right at her deep blue eyes. She noticed his stare, and blushed a becoming pink. "I…really don't mind", he corrected himself, clearing his throat. "But, is there some reason why you decided to stop by here?"

Darla gave the ex-Watcher a soft look before stepping a few inches closer. "I…know about what's been going on…with you." She took a beat. "I know it must've been hard receiving the news about your father and the Council like that…and already on top of everything…I thought maybe you'd like to talk about it."

Wesley looked down at the carpeted floor, and then raised his eyes back to the ex-vampire. "I appreciate your concern, Darla, believe me…"

"But you don't want to talk", Darla finished, sighing with disappointment.

"I'm rather busy", Wesley sighed in return. "With all this new information to digest…" He picked up one of the books, thumbing through it mindlessly. "Especially concerning the First Evil…there's very little written about it…and I'm afraid I'm drawing something of a blank on this…entity possessing Cordelia…"

She reached out and gently placed a hand on his arm. "Wesley", she said softly.

"Darla, please, not now", he said, sterner than he had intended. Sighing, he corrected. "I'm…really not in the mood to talk, thank you."
"You need to talk about this", she pressed, gently. She lifted her hand and turned his gaze to meet her eyes. He knew he should've started to bat her hands away, hide behind the walls he had built around himself in what seemed like a lifetime ago...and yet he couldn't do it. He saw the affection, the concern, the care in her eyes and he was nearly breathless. No one had ever looked at him like that. Not even Lilah. He felt a small lump in his throat start to shape.

"You've been through so much in these last few months", she said, biting her lip in empathy for him.

She traced a finger along the scar adorning his neck, a bitter reminder of Justine. Wesley let her touch it, which surprised even himself. That scar was something he never let anyone touch. Even while sleeping with Lilah, he never let her kiss that side of his neck, never let her hands touch it, try as she may. She once mentioned that to him, but he changed the subject rather slyly. Perhaps Lilah really did care for him, but still…that scar was a reminder, of what he had become, of what he lost. It was a reminder of his own pain, and the pain he inadvertently caused those he loved.

That was a mark that was his and his alone.

And now, he was letting this woman, who he had only seen a few hours earlier, touch that which he never let anyone touch. It frightened him.

"You lost your friends…you lost your hope…your sense of self…her", she said.

He scrunched his eyes in confusion, before the realization hit him. "Lilah", he said in a sotto voice, the word bringing him a dull pain.

"And now your own father, and the place you once worshipped as the center of your existence… You've lost so much and yet you still haven't lost your will to fight. That in itself is a testament to the kind of man you really are", she smiled gently. "But you bear all that pain, that anger, that bitterness inside you, and it's only gotten heavier to hold."

"It's for me to hold. And me alone", he said, grimly, his voice thickening with emotion.

She shook her head. "Not for you alone. You have your - -"

"Friends? The same ones who abandoned me?", he said, his eyes hardening with bitterness. "The same ones who banished me from their lives without a second thought? The same ones who wouldn't even give me the time of day when I needed comfort most of all?" He frowned. "I'm doing just fine. I'm here, back at the hotel, helping out again…that's all that matters."

"Wesley, you haven't even had time to mourn", Darla reasoned. "You're only human, not some robot for labor. We have to let those emotions out, or they'll keep filling our minds until we explode- -"

Suddenly, she gasped as a red flash of light threw her back against the wall.

"Darla!", Wesley cried, alarmed and far more scared than he had ever been. He rushed to her side, catching her before she could hit the floor, gently cradling her.

Your time has come, Darla! Your meddling shall not be tolerated any longer, a deep voice growled inside her head.

Darla slumped onto the ground, moaning in pain, clutching both sides of her head as the echo of the voice reverberated.

"What is it?", Wesley asked.
"It's 'Cordelia'" , Darla rasped out. "She's in my head!"

Did you really think I would let you continue on in this world knowing what you know, the voice sneered.

Back in the alley, Cordelia talked directly to the glowing red amber, an evil glint in her brown eyes. "Do you really think that anything the Powers That Be sent you here with will make a difference?"

HA! That's disappointing. You can tell them that when I send you back to them, the voice roared inside Darla's head.

Struggling to regain her footing, Darla sucked in her breath. "Cut the James Earl Jones-voice-over crap, 'Cordelia'!", she bravely taunted. "I know it's you! And I'm not going anywhere… not until I make sure your sick plans are done for!"

FOOL! You have no idea what you're up against, the voice shouted back, angrily, making Darla wince in pain.

Wesley clutched her closer, his eyes wide in panic. 'Cordelia' had already taken Lilah from him, and now she was intent on taking Darla. He couldn't let that happen.

"You clearly have no comprehension of the true limits of my power!", 'Cordelia' gloated as she grew louder in her rival's head.

"And you…have clearly underestimated mine!", she panted, but with a fury in her eyes. "Disperse!"

A white jolt shot back at 'Cordelia', stunning her. But the Dark Queen recovered. "Is that all you've got, Dear One? Because I'm just warming up", she chuckled darkly before raising her hand and smashing it down hard.

With a scream, the Bringer fell to the ground, unmercifully landing in the path of the wheels of the oncoming bus.

"They're still coming, B!", Faith said as she let loose an arrow right through the head of a horseback-riding Bringer, who fell sloppily over his horse.

"Getting that", Buffy shouted as she lashed out at one of the Bringers who had climbed to the top of the Winebago with a roundhouse kick that knocked it off balance and onto the rapidly moving earth below.

In the Winnebago, Anya yelped as an arrow skidded past her head, just missing her.

"A little more speed would help, you know!", she shouted over at Spike.

"Working on it, Anya! Just keep down and hold on!", he shouted as he slammed his foot down on the acceleration pedal.

"Giles, isn't there some magic trick you know to get us outta here?", Dawn frantically asked, crawling along the floor to the weapons cabinet. "Didn't the Coven give you any sort of extra mojo?"

"I'm afraid I'm all…mojo-ed out, so to speak", Giles told the young girl as he crawled alongside
her, shielding her body with his. The Watcher grabbed two crossbows from the cabinet, tossing one to Wood.

"Thanks", he said briefly, before smashing a window of the van, and getting a bird's eye view of one of the Bringers clawing at one of the Potential-filled buses, making a grab for a screaming Amanda.

"Roughing up students? Not on my watch, Blind-Boy", the principal scowled before firing a direct hit into the back of the Bringer. The minion flailed about in pain before stumbling down to meet his fate at the hands, or rather, wheels of the 80-mph-moving schoolbus.

Amanda looked up ahead at her savior, mouthing a relieved "Thank You!" before helping Kennedy and Rona hack away at two Bringers coming up the sides of the bus.

"Nice shot", Willow whistled, impressed.

"All in a day's work", Wood shrugged, reloading his crossbow quickly.

Spike cast the principal a dark eye, before looking back at the road. "Willow, how's that protection mojo going?", he asked.

"Not going", the witch shook her head. "It'll take at least a half-hour before I can work up the energies to shield every car and every person."

"We don't have half an hour, luv!", he said sternly, swerving the van into an oncoming sect of Bringers approaching from the left side, leveling the whole lot. "Either protect us or get us the hell outta here before we're ka-bobbed on those bloody arrows!"

"I can't just poof everyone out of here like that, Spike!", Willow argued. "I'm not that strong, not anymore- -"

"That's a load of bunk, Red, and you know it!", Spike glared up at her. "You and I know that there's a world of power inside you. But you're still scared to cut loose! Too afraid you'll go over the edge again!"

"Said the vampire-with-a-soul who won't even hurt ants anymore!", Xander sniped, shielding Anya, Molly, Vi and Chao-Ahn with his own body from the flying arrows piercing the glass around them.

"Sod off, Harris! I can cut loose when I need to. I bloody well would if I could go up there and not go up in flames like a dried twig!", the vampire shot back. He turned back to Willow. "Come on, Red…focus. There's got to be some new trick up in that pretty little head of yours you can still try. We need you, or we'll all be dead in a few minutes."

Willow looked uncertain, fear sparked in her eyes. "I…I can't…"

"Down!", Giles bellowed as he tackled Willow to the floor in a rush that made the witch see stars. Only a fraction of a second later, a flaming arrow shot crashed though the right hand side of the driver's pit, embedding itself deep in Spike's left hand, still on the wheel.

The vampire howled in agony.

Another red jolt smashed into Darla, the impact nearly making her bounce off the floor.

She gasped in extraordinary pain.
"Someone! Come quick! We need help!", Wesley shouted down the hallway.

He turned back to a panting, pain-racked Darla, clinging to him desperately.

He grabbed her shoulders. "Darla, listen to me. You have to fight her."

"I'm...mnngh...trying!...", she wheezed before shaking her head, yelling, "Malefactoris departem!"

A white bolt smashed into 'Cordelia', this one more powerful than the last. Shaking her head in daze, she shot daggers into her red orb, glowing brighter and redder with each pulsating moment. "Oh, no you don't, you little bitch!", she snarled, sending another attack towards her victim, this one with extra kick.

The jolt hit Darla with full force, making her cry out in raw pain.

"Darla, stay with me", Wesley gently said. "Please, don't stop fighting. Just hold on..."

Her eyes flew open and weakly met his intense, anxious gaze. "Wesley...", she whimpered. "It hurts..."

"I know", Wesley said, his voice gaining strength. "But you have to keep fighting! If we lose you, we lose everything. You're the key to this, Darla. And she knows that. Don't leave us now..." He searched for the words to say, trying to find something, anything that could raise her strength, her spirit, against this lack evil attempting to destroy her. "Think of what your death will do to Connor...to Angel...we...we need you."

He grasped her hand, clutching it tight. "Please, Darla, you have to-"

"What's going on?" familiar voices ring down the corridor. Wesley looked up just as Fred, Lorne and Gunn entered the room. The trio stopped cold in their tracks as they saw Darla laying in Wesley's arms, obviously in great pain, looking like she was half-conscious, or barely alive.

"Wesley, what's wrong with her?", Fred asked, kneeling down at his side.

"It's the thing inside Cordelia", Wesley responded, never tearing his eyes off Darla. "It's attempting to kill her using its magicks."

"Like she did with Willow", Fred realized in horror.

"Well, how do we stop her?", Lorne asked.

"We can't", Wesley said grittily. "This is a battle Darla must fight alone."

"But aren't there any spells we can use?", Gunn asked, rushing to the book shelf. "Any kind of anti-mojo-mojo to keep Queen Bee-yotch outta Darla's head?"

"There's nothing in those books that's strong enough to counter that kind of power", Wesley shook his head.

"Wait!", Fred's eyes lit up with an idea. "Willow banished 'Cordy' from her head with a spell, didn't she? What if we give Darla the same spell to use? Won't that have the same effects?"

Wesley looked up at Fred, eyes wide. "Yes, of course! That might do - -"

"What's going on?", Connor burst the door. Everyone turned to look at the boy, standing there in
shock as he gazed at his mother's writhing form in the arms of Wesley.

And they watched as the shock melted away into a dark scowl…

"Spike! Are you okay?", Dawn yelped as she rushed to the vampire's side, grabbing the wounded hand.

"Get down, Dawn!", he ordered her as he yanked the arrow from his flesh, letting out a strangled cry as he did.

"Thanks, Giles", Willow panted as she steadied herself off the floor.

"You're quite welcome", he responded before turning to Spike. "You won't be able to drive, now. Get to the back, grab a weapon if you can. Avoid the sun beams."

"No kidding", Spike smirked sarcastically as Dawn propped him up and to the back of the car.

"Can you still fight?", she asked him.

"Like the dogs of hell, L'il Bit", he said with boastful pride. "Hand me a crossbow, and a couple of those throwing knives, huh?"

He positioned himself at the window, peaking out carefully behind the sheet of tinfoil now flapping in the wind through the smashed glass. Dawn tossed him a loaded crossbow, which the vampire took with one swift motion. With his good hand, that is.

"Spike, don't you want me to bandage that?", Dawn asked, worried.

"No thanks, Nibblet. Vampire threshold to pain an' all…. Just keep your head down", he said, peeking the crossbow out the window. His eyes met dead on with a Bringer, armed with a crossbow and taking aim right at Spike himself.

"All right, Bright Eyes", the souled vampire chuckled darkly. "Draw."

In a blink of an eye, said Bringer was dead on the ground, Spike arrow protruding from his chest.

"Bull's-eye, mate", he smirked, quickly reloading the crossbow and finding his next target. Plucking off Bringer after Bringer with glee, reloading, taking aim, firing, repeating. William the Bloody was like a machine when he got into the heat of battle. Powerful. Constant. Indiscriminate. Merciless.

"Hmm, the boy loves his work", Anya noted from her place on the ground next to the other potentials.

"Is there any chance of us getting out of here soon?", Molly asked nervously. "I don't much fancy the idea of being shot with an arrow."

"We don't fancy that idea, either, sweetheart", Xander said. "But Willow's got it covered." He looked over at Willow, still in the driver's cockpit, with Giles taking the wheel. "I hope."

"What did you do to my mother?" Connor asked menacingly, his eyes filled with fear and anger.

"She's being attacked by 'Cordelia', Connor", Fred told him. "Wesley's trying to save her."

"Cordy? But she's not even here", he asked, still not trusting.
"She's doing the same thing to your mother that she did to Willow", Wesley said, not even looking at the boy, still fixated on Darla, clutching her tightly.

At that, Connor's eyes lit up in realization. "She's in her head." He rushed down to Darla's side, opposite Wesley. "Wesley, make this stop."

"I can't interfere", he told the boy sternly. "Darla and Cordelia are far more powerful than I, and there's nothing in the books that can help her. This is a magickal battle, and it can only be fought by magick."

Darla cried out in pain again as another red bolt made her spasm, bucking upwards as her eyes flew wide open in awe and anguish.

*Magick*, Connor thought, angrily. *I knew nothing good could ever come of that junk. And now it's killing my mother…*

"We gotta do something, English!", Gunn insisted. "She can't take another hit like that for much longer!"

"The spell, Wesley!", Fred said. "The one Willow used! That might be able to save Darla!"

"No, it would only delay the inevitable", Wesley said. "That spell only repelled 'Cordelia' for a short time."

"Wait a second!", exclaimed Lorne. "What if we get some more juice? There are four of us, plus Darla that makes five! That's a power number in magick, right?"

"Right! We could all channel our energy into Darla and that could give her the boost she needs to beat back 'Cordy'!", Fred said, looking to Wesley.

"But what was the spell?", Wesley asked. "It was uh…vetcshe…vicksay….?"

"Vaporub!", exclaimed Lorne. All heads turned to him, shaking.

"Worth a shot", he shrugged.

"Yeah, if Darla was about to get killed by a demon chest cold, maybe", Gunn smirked.

"Could you focus for a second?", Connor snapped. "My mother's being killed here!"

Darla's hand crept out and clutched her son's hand. Connor's eyes widened.

*Connor…*, she rasped out softly, smiling despite the blinding pain.

"Mom", he said almost as softly. He held her hand tightly. "Mom, please…"

"I…love you", she said, coughing as she did.

"Then don't leave me", her son pleaded, a tear trickling down his cheek. "You left me before… don't leave me again. Fight, Mom."

Darla let a sob escape her just before another bolt of light struck into her.

"I…", she managed to gasp. She couldn't finish her sentence.

"Wesley, help her!", Connor desperately turned to the ex-Watcher, his gaze teary-eyed.
Wesley felt a tremendous anger at his helplessness as he willed his mind to work faster, the wheels and gears of his mental powers to grind together. He had to remember that spell. All he knew…all he felt…was that he would not fail Connor again…he wouldn't fail Angel, or his friends…he couldn't fail Darla…

He'd die first.

"Vetsche…Vetsche…invadoria…", he mumbled to himself. "Vetsche invadoria…DAMN IT, what was the rest?"

"Disparu!", Fred yelped. "That was it! Vetsche invadoria disparu!"

Everyone's eyes shot to Fred. "I think."

"That was it!", Wesley exclaimed. "Everyone get down here! Now!"

The remaining three AI teammates kneeled in the center of the room, surrounding Wesley, Connor and Darla.

"Everyone hold hands", Wesley instructed them.

"Wes, I don't think singing 'kum-baya' is what the doctor ordered", Gunn said, wryly.

"JUST DO IT!", Wesley roared.

Everyone linked their hands with each other. Lorne to Gunn, Gunn to Fred, Fred to Connor, Connor to Darla, and Darla to Wesley.

"Darla", he said, gently cradling the blonde. "Listen to me…we're lending you our strength…our essence…you need to say this phrase…"

Darla looked like she was fading and out of consciousness more and more.

"Darla, please", Wesley whispered to her ear. "I know it's hard, and I know you're hurting, but you have to remain focused…repeat after me…Vetsche…"

"…V-v….vetsche…", she gasped.

"…Invadoria…"

"Inva-in…vadoria…", she wheezed.

"Disparu…"

"Dis…pa….mgghn" That was all she could manage as she felt herself black out.

"Darla, come on!", Wesley said, shaking her. "Stay with me…don't you quit on me now!"

"Mom!", Connor yelled.

The voice of Cordelia chuckled in her head. That's right, dear. Just give in…you never were a fighter, Darla. Don't even bother starting now…you can't beat me. And once you're gone, it'll only be a matter of time before my sweet Connor, or should I say…your precious little boy, is back under my control…You can't save him. A pause, followed by an evil chuckle. You can't even save yourself. -
Suddenly, Darla shot up to a sitting position. Her eyes were overtaken with a dark, onyx-like glint, and her face filled with fire, determination…and fury.

A mother’s fury.

And at the top of her lungs she bellowed:

"Vetsche invadoria disparu!"

A white glow emitted from the group as their combined energies traveled into Darla, who suddenly began to glow a bright yellowish hue.

"It's working!", Wesley said in triumph.

Back in the factory, 'Cordelia' felt the sudden shift in power that had occurred. But before she could counter, she felt herself being thrown all the way back into the wall 60 feet behind her. She cried out as the power of the five had flung her all the way back.

She collided with the wall, head-first, and landed on her knees.

"Oh…crap, that hurt like hell", she muttered dizzily. And then she fell to the ground, unconscious.

Buffy let out a roar as she sliced the neck of a Bringer climbing across the side of the Winnebago. By now, the Slayers were up to their necks in Bringers as the minions of the First Evil began to climb swarm the Winnebago.

Faith ducked the swing of an axe-wielding Bringer nimbly as she landed two cross kicks to its stomach and head, following up with a quick inside spin before she jammed her dagger into its stomach. The Bringer fell down quickly over the side.

"Jeez, they're like freakin' flies on sugar", Faith muttered as she went toe-to-toe with another Bringer.

Buffy landed a well-executed roundhouse-left cross-side kick combo on one of the Bringers while keeping the other at bay with her sword. In one sweeping motion, she grabbed the one in front of her and threw it into the Bringer behind her, giving her the time she needed to decapitate both Bringers with a quick, but strong swipe of her blade.

"There's too many of them", she told Faith, giving her a hand and gutting one of the Bringers coming up from behind her while Faith threw her foe over the side.

"We can't outrun them in this hunk of junk, B", Faith panted as she resumed her attack side-by-side with Buffy. "We need to get these creeps off our backs."

"Easier said than done", the elder Slayer commented dryly. "Or have you not looked behind us?"

Faith turned back to the thundering legion coming up behind the convoy, stretching as far as her eye could see.

"Isn't it about time for Willow to pull a rabbit out of her hat and get us the hell outta here?", Faith looked at Buffy briefly before she turned her attention to slicing and dicing a Bringer coming up to her left.

Willow, can you hear me? Buffy thought aloud, trying to establish a telepathic link with her best friend. How soon can you get us out of here?
Willow responded from inside the car. *Buffy…I don't know if I can do this…*

You can, Buffy thought, resolved as she did battle with a Bringer. *I know you can. Because you're Willow. And you can do this.*

**But Buffy- -**

*You can do this, Buffy insisted. Don't make me a liar, Will.*

Willow smiled. *I wouldn't dream of it.*

Giles glanced back at Willow, concern filling his eyes. He knew that what they were asking her to do was to stretch the borders of her powers, to possibly go back to that dark place, where she had nearly lost herself completely…and dragged the entire world with her.

"Willow…are you positive that you're up to this?", he asked, his voice heavy with worry.

"Honestly…no", she confessed. "But we're running out of time, and there aren't any options left. I have to do this."

"I'll guide you through as best I can", Giles said, taking one hand off the wheel briefly, squeezing the hand of the witch tightly. "Focus yourself. Ground all your energies to the earth…", the Watcher gently instructed. "Let it flow…deep breaths…"

Willow closed her eyes for a moment, breathing in slowly as Giles had instructed…

And when she opened them again, they were a dark steely black.

Darla collapsed in a heap into Wesley's arms. The ex-Watcher could feel her body quivering with exhaustion. Her eyes were half-closed, a thin film of perspiration lined her forehead, and she looked like she would faint at any moment.

"Darla?…Darla, can you hear me?", Wesley asked, not-too-calmly as he gently shook her.

"Mom? Mom, wake up!" Connor implored as he reached down and touched his mother's face.

"Lorne, is she alright?", Fred asked the clairvoyant demon.

Lorne gave a sweeping glance at Darla, his eyes scrunched in analysis. After a beat, he smiled. "She'll be fine, candy-cane. It looks like 'Cordy' exited stage-left outta there."

"Will she come back?", Gunn asked.

Lorne shrugged. "Anything's possible, Charles. Especially with Mommy Meanest pulling the strings."

"We'll have to find a way to cast a protection spell", Wesley said, looking up at Lorne. "I have a feeling that 'Cordelia' won't be stopping her attempts to kill Darla anytime soon."

"Why is she doing this?" Connor asked Wesley, confused. "This isn't like Cordelia."

"Because it's not Cordelia, Connor. You have to remember that", Wesley said, his voice perfectly even. "Whatever's inside her now, it may look like her, sound like her…but this is a being of malevolent power and unsurpassed evil. It's not our Cordelia."
Connor’s eyes cast down to his mother's tired features, and then nodded sadly.

Just then, Angel came in through the door, fully showered and changed into his black pants, purple silk shirt, and black duster. And a lopsided grin on his face.

"Hey guys", he announced, cheerily. "Anything I missed?"

At that, all of them turned to the vampire, and incredulous expression written on their faces.

"What?", Angel asked, confused. He missed something….He figured as much.

Amidst the crashes of arrows through shattering glass, the gentle 'thwipp!' of plucked bowstrings, the clashing of swords and stomping above her and the distant screaming of girls, Willow chanted.

"Goddess Hecate hear my plea,

Fill me with your energy,

Grant us passage from harm's way,

Neither human nor demon let go astray,

From this roadway give us depart,

And deliver us to our end's heart,

Deliver us now from the problem arisen,

Unto the Champion, Deliver THE CHOSEN!"

A bright flash of purple light exploded from her, her hair briefly flashing dark for a moment, the slightest hint of veins showing themselves, before the light consumed everything around her…

Up on the roof, Buffy felt her senses warning her. She could feel something happening. And her instincts screamed at her to take cover.

"FAITH! GET DOWN! NOW!", she screamed at her fellow Slayer as she ran at her.

"What the - -", was all a confused Faith could muster out before she felt herself being tackled to the floor of the Winnebago by Buffy.

Just before a blinding flash of purple light engulfed them both….

"So you're saying that 'Cordelia' was here?", Angel scrunched his head.

"Not here, physically", Wesley said as he lifted Darla gently into a chair. "She contacted Darla the same way she contacted you when you were Angelus."

"Humph. Talk about playin' mind games", Gunn chuckled.

Hearing no laughter, and receiving a blank look from Lorne and Fred, he grumbled. "Sure, a brother can't get no props for adding a little humor to the situation? Fine, that's cool."

"What if she comes back?", Connor asked Angel, fear in his eyes apparent. "We don't have any way of protecting Mom."
"I'll manage, baby", the ex-vampire rasped out. "She couldn't get me this time, she won't get me the next."

"We don't know that!", Connor angrily insisted. "You saw her, Mom. She's crazy! She won't stop coming back until she kills you!"

"Then we'll stop her, just like we did this time", Angel assured his son.

"We?", the boy turned an angry look to his father. "Where the hell were you when she was being attacked? Huh? You didn't have any role in helping her!"

Angel visibly flinched at Connor's angry comment.

"Baby, that's not the point", Darla said, reaching out to him, gently squeezing his hand.

"Yes it is!" he insisted. "If he had been here, maybe we would've stopped her sooner! You're never here when you're needed, are you?" He paused for a beat. "You're never here for me when I need you."

"Connor!", Fred scolded, shocked and angry that Connor would still treat his own father like some...animal.

Angel's eyes shone with heavy hurt at that comment. He flashed back to when Holtz leapt through that portal to Quor-toth with his infant son in hand.

"I'm sorry", he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Connor - -", Wesley tried to interject.

"Don't defend him!" the boy spat. Turning back to Angel, he said, "And you're supposed to be a champion? What kind of a champion lets down the people he claims to love?"

"Conner, that's enough!", Darla suddenly sat up, her face set in anger.

All took a step back in surprise, as Darla seemed to have found new strength so quickly.

Connor's eyes went wide with astonishment as his mother glared at him.

"Don't ever talk to your father like that! He's a wonderful man, and he's risked more to help you, me and everyone he loves than you could ever know", she said, her voice shaking with emotion. "He's a champion by the truest definition of the word. And you will show him the respect that he deserves, young man. Because he deserves it."

She glanced up at Angel, a faint smile on her lips. "Every last bit."

Connor frowned, and then lowered his eyes. "Yes, mom", he sighed, defeated.

"Now, don't you have something to say?", Darla arched an eyebrow at him.

Connor scowled. "I am not apologizing."

"YES YOU ARE!", everyone except Angel shouted at him.

Connor sulked as he stood up to face his father. "Fine…Dad…I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Angel smirked. "No, you're not. But at least you said I'm sorry." He patted his son on the back.
"That's good manners."

Despite himself, Connor felt a hint of a smile coming on at his Dad's easy going behavior.

"Wow, Connor apologizing", Gunn whistled. "This day just keeps getting' weirder and weirder."

"Yeah", Fred said. "Well, let's hope that it doesn't get any more weird. I don't know about y'all, but I could do without any more out-of-the-blue-surprises."

No sooner had she said that, than when a loud screech of heavy tires echoed outside the Hyperion, followed by the shattering of glass, twisting of metal and the crashing sound of metal-meets-wall echoing throughout the hotel.

Everyone jumped.

Angel's eyes morphed from concern to alert. "Wes, grab Darla. Take her down with us. If there's any trouble, I want you to take her out the emergency exit near the side of the staircase. The rest of you, follow me."

In a rush, the Fang Gang marched through the hallway, and came barreling down the stairs.

They stopped momentarily at the foot of the stairs at what they saw.

Lorne gasped. "What in the name of NASCAR--?"

A massive wreckage of overly large vehicles…well, at least they were at one time vehicles…had plowed through the entrance of the hotel, taking most of the front lobby out of commission. The Front door was completely obliterated, as was most of the wall surrounding the entrance. A large white mass of twisted metal lay at the head of the mess, steam and exhaust pouring out of it. Behind it were what appeared to be school buses, tipped over and crushed.

A small coughing sound came from the wreckage and suddenly, the metal was heaved away by a pair of small hands.

Angel was stunned. He didn't think it was possible to survive a crash like that. He was pretty sure nothing could. Well, nothing human, anyway.

Off of the twisted metal, the large sheets peeled back to reveal a dusty, coughing, Faith, who, oblivious for the moment to her new surrounding, lifted another heavy piece of metal back off the wreckage. "B!", she called, worried as she scanned the wreckage for any signs of life. "Buffy! Where are you?"

"Down here", a female groan came from one side of the rubble, before a hand shot up and threw back the wreckage on top of it with ease.

Angel felt his world halt as the rubble gave way to the next sight….a sight that a small part of him began to doubt he'd ever see again.

There, standing in the rubble, was his beloved.

Buffy Summers. The Vampire Slayer.

"You okay?" Faith asked her fellow slayer.

Buffy smiled wryly. "Five by five."

"Hey, don't go stealing my lines, now, B" Faith chuckled.
Buffy's eyes went wide. "Omigod...the others! Dawn! Willow! Xander! Giles!" she began to frantically call out as she tripped through the rubble in search of them.

All eyes suddenly turned to the rubble, where a large churning and lurching of metal began to stir.

"What the hell's goin' on?" Gunn wondered.

"They're here", Darla answered quietly.

Suddenly, the rubble began to slowly and surely levitate itself off of the ground. They all stood in awe as the heavy, seemingly endless rubble floated up gently into the air as if weighing nothing at all. The rubble gave way to reveal a focused Willow, her face extenuating effort, as she held the rubble up over her head.

"Everybody out! MOVE IT!" she barked back to the rest of the people behind her, a purple glow surrounding them.

No sooner had she said that than had the gaggle of teenage girls, smattered with a few males leading their frightened charges, quickly darted out from under the rubble.

Willow's hands trembled as she thundered her next command:

"Recursum Gaie!"

In a flash, the rubble above had vanished into nowhere.

"Magick is soo cool" Amanda gasped in awe. Dawn could only chuckle at that. She had seen Willow do much more than that. She knew that for the redhead witch, that was barely a warm-up. Or, at least, it wasn't before she had to go cold-turkey on the magick.

Willow wobbled or a brief instant, before Xander and Buffy rushed forth to catch her.

"Woah...what a rush", Willow shook her head.

"Willow, you okay?" Xander asked, fanning his best friend's face, propping her up against him.

"Yeah...I've gotta start practicing again...I'm getting a little too winded or this", Willow panted back as she pushed herself to her own two feet.

"Will she be okay?", a concerned Molly asked.

"I think she'll be fine", Buffy assured the Slayer-in-Training.

"Uh, guys...where the bananas are we?" a confused Andrew pointed out.

At that, the Sunnydale crew took in their surroundings. They saw in wonder that they were now in a rather large hotel, a beautiful one at that...notwithstanding the giant hole let by the wreckage at the entrance of the hotel.

"Um, excuse me?", Fred's voice called to them. "But I think y'all might've taken a wrong turn or some- oh, HEY, Willow!" she finished giddily.

The group turned to the seven strangers standing at the base of the stairs.

Both groups stared at each other with some suspicion.
Angel's voice broke the silence. "Buffy."

At that soft, familiar voice, Buffy turned and locked eyes with the one man on Earth that she loved more than herself.

Her eyes went wide, throat dry. She could barely believe it was him. Standing up there, looking as handsome as ever.

It was him.

Her voice was but a breath. "Angel."

Neither of them said anything else. Simply holding the moment.

Seeing everyone else was either too timid, scared or glaring at one another to make a comment, Willow cleared her throat, waving warmly at Fred, before grinning sheepishly and addressing the Fang Gang with the only thing that could come to mind.

"Oh…hey guys! Ummm…did we come at a bad time?"

_T B C_
From the vineyard, viewing all of these events unfolding before its omniscient eyes, the First Evil, in the form of Buffy Summers, was very displeased.

"This is...most disturbing", the First/Buffy scowled. "The Slayer and her pals were never meant to find their way to that meddlesome vampire's city. That could out a serious dent in my plans."

Now, rare was the day that the First Evil was ever angry or nervous. After all, it never had any reason to be. Being incorporeal, it could neither be fought nor killed. But with the same token, it could never act on its own. And while it might have been diabolically clever, a gift that came with being around since before the dawn of time, that meant it had to take up a lot of faith in its followers and those it manipulated. Something that hadn't always panned out.

Especially against this Slayer and her friends.

And now, they were reunited with the Champion, Angel, and his gang. This had the makings of a nightmare scenario for the First. And that made it nervous. And when it became nervous, it became angry.

Very angry.

It took a look behind to the awaiting Harbingers, standing ready in wait for command.

"The time for waiting is over", the First/Buffy growled. "Send a group to L.A...but wait until I give the word for attack. And you..."

The First/Buffy walked over to one of the Bringers. "Head down South. Bring...him...up to Sunnydale. It's time I summoned forth a champion of my own."

The First/Buffy walked over to a slab of rocks, heaped away by a bunch of laboring Bringers with power tools.

"Well, they might not have finished the job yet", the First thought aloud. "But let's see what I can whip up with a little...imagination."

At that, the malevolent being let loose a fiery bolt of red and black mystical energies from its "hands", which encircled the pile of rubbed stone and rocks. The swirl began its encirclement, swallowing the rocks whole and sending them spinning in a black cyclone of energy.

The First smiled evilly as the swirl reached its chaotic crescendo of blinding speed, until, at last, a pair of feet began to materialize from the bottom of the cyclone. Then large, strong legs. Then a torso, a strong imposing chest, broad shoulders, and at last a head.

A hideous, horned head.
The figure dropped to its hands and knees, its new life breathed into its raw form, a natural exhaustion from the birth process set in.

The First/Buffy sauntered up to its new creation, smiling flirtatiously as it bent down to eye the creature face to face.

"You will do my bidding", the First/Buffy wickedly smiled. "And you, my sweet, will be my left arm of destruction...and the last sight that the Slayer and her beloved Champion will ever see."

The creature said nothing, keeping its face to the ground. And then, gradually, it let out a small, low chuckle. It was neither jolly nor pleasant, but disturbing and bone-chilling.

And the chuckle built itself up to a deep, evil laughter.

A laughter which echoed throughout the vineyard, piercing the night, frightening away the birds in the trees, the squirrels on the ground, and the ducks floating peacefully on the water.

All of them heading for safety. For higher ground. For anyplace to get away from the origin of that chilling laugh.

...the origin of which would come the darkest, most destructive force seen by man or beast, dead or living...

...a force that would now set its sights on the world's last hope for survival...

Its champions.


The Hyperion stood silent for a few moments, the dozens of people on the inside now standing around, looking suspiciously at each other.

Buffy stood at the front of the group, taking a few tentative steps forward. She could still not see anyone, hear anyone else.

Except the tall, dark and very handsome vampire standing not but a few steps up from her.

"Angel?"

She said that name with a quiet hope. Almost a childish awe. Like a little girl staring up at Santa Claus for the very first time. She said that name so softly, as if in fear of scaring him away if she spoke too loudly.

She couldn't believe that it was him.

Angel.

Her Angel...even if he wasn't really hers to have.

Her voice jolted the Champion out of his stunned reverie. "Buffy...what...? You're...here."

At long last.

She was here.

The thought alone was enough to make his soul sing, but to have her here, now, alive and beautiful, even more so than ever, if such a thing were possible, sent waves of shock and joy throughout his body.
Buffy...

His sweet, beautiful, brave Buffy... was here at last. She had come back to him.

"Angel...wh-what are you doing here?", she continued, blinking back her surprise.

Angel looked at her incredulously. "Um... I live here"

Buffy blushed, embarrassed. "Oh. Right. Of course."

"Always knew how to make an entrance, didn't you?", Angel chuckled, staring poignantly at the gaping whole in the center of the Hyperion.

"Well, you know me", Buffy shrugged with a smile. "Never much for the knocking."

Angel stared at her for a beat. "I've...you know..."

Buffy nodded. "I know." Then she smiled. "I have, too."

The half-smile that now adorned his face was still enough to make her sway. But she gathered up whatever resolve she had in her system to maintain her composure...however difficult it might be around him.

The tingling sensation, their sacred bond between their souls was now humming, vibrating in both of them. Every drop of love, of hope, of passion etched into that pure link that bound them for all eternity.

Connor said nothing, only took in the interaction between this girl that had arrived and his father. It was apparent to him that there was more between those two than meets the common eye. And judging by the scent those two were giving off now, perhaps they were even romantically involved.

That alone was enough to raise his interest in these new people that crashed through the hotel walls unceremoniously.

Wesley took a moment before coming down the stairs. "Buffy?"

At the sound of his voice, the moment broke around the two star-crossed warriors. Buffy turned to gaze in surprise yet again at the man who she recognized only by face to be her former Watcher.

"Wesley?" She could barely register that this rugged, weary-looking yet handsome man was the snooty, pretentious Watcher she knew years ago.

"You look...well", he stated simply, but managing a faint smile at his former charge.

"You look...hot", she cocked an eyebrow at him, obviously approving.

A dry, somewhat exhausted smirk grew on Wesley's face. "Not something I planned on, but...thank you."

"'Sup, Angel?" Faith smiled warmly as she greeted the vampire.

"Hey", Angel nodded in response. "How're your ribs holding up?" He was referring to the injuries to her ribcage she sustained when attacked by both Angelus and the Beast during the rampage in L.A.
"Healing nicely", the dark-haired Slayer shrugged. "Slayer powers definitely have advantages."

"Hey, Angel", Willow greeted, edging to the front alongside Buffy. "Looking good, as always."

"Hey, Willow. A pleasure, as always", Angel nodded, smiling.

"Aww, you're just saying that cuz I helped put back your so-" At Buffy's look of confusion, Willow blurted out, "-veriegnty! Your so-vereignty over Los Angeles!"

Angel scrunched his eyebrows. "Sovereignty?"

I didn't tell Buffy about your little lack-of-soul problem a while back yet, Willow telepathically explained to the Champion. So play along, GOT IT?

"Oh...OH! My SO-vereignty! Right", Angel chuckled nervously. "Yeah, can't be losing that now...that could only lead to...badness."

Buffy cast a suspicious look at him. "Uh-huh", she said.

"Um...SO! Wesley! Great to see you again!", Willow changed the topic rather quickly, opting to talk to the handsome ex-Watcher instead. "And still with the extra-stubbly machismo."

"Hello, Willow", Wesley greeted with added warmth and another faint Faith just behind Willow, he managed a polite nod. "Faith."

"Wes", she returned in kind, with a small smirk on her face. She hated to admit it, but she was actually starting to like this side of Wesley. He seemed more real now, less of the prim and proper, more of the down and dirty. And besides, he was much hotter like this.

"Hi, Wesley", Dawn chirped up from behind.

Wesley turned to Dawn, blinking in surprise. "Dawn. You've grown up...I've missed a lot, it would seem."

Dawn shrugged. "Not so much...well, okay, a ton, but that's later stuff, okay?" She gave a wave towards Angel's direction. "Hi, Angel! It's been a while."

After staring at the Slayer's sister for a moment, he spoke. "It's amazing", Angel said.

"What's amazing?", Dawn asked, puzzled.

"Every time I see you, I see more and more of your mother", Angel smiled. Although he knew that technically, this was only the second time he had actually met Dawn, the memories he had of Buffy's little sister were kind, warm ones.

Dawn was taken aback by the unexpected compliment. She had to fight the tears that stung at her eyes for a moment at the mention of her late mother. "Thank you", she smiled. "It means a lot to me."

"So...This is Wesley? He looks all dark and...sexually desirable", Anya noted.

Xander coughed in some surprise.

Darla crinkled her nose at that. The remark made her more than a little bit jealous.

"You must be Anya", Wesley chuckled, amused by the girl's blunt honesty. "Willow's told me about you."
"None of that's true!", Anya said defensively.

Wesley looked at her in surprise. "She told me you come in handy against fighting the forces of evil."

Anya blinked, stunned. Even after some of Willow's attempts to mend the bridges between them after the Magick Shop met its fiery demise, she had come to expect the witch to paint a very black-and-white portrait of her to others, with heavy emphasis on the black. To hear that Willow actually talked her up to someone was surprising... and welcome. "Except for the stuff that's SO true!", she backpedaled, beaming a pleased smile.

Giles silently moved to the forefront. "Angel", he nodded politely, managing a faint, courteous smile.

"Giles", Angel nodded in kind, with a mirrored smile. "How've you been?"

The exchange between her ex-lover and her surrogate father figure did not go unnoticed by Buffy. It saddened her to think back at how their once-promising friendship had collapsed almost entirely after the four-month rampage Angelus had unleashed on Sunnydale years ago. Angelus had committed many unspeakable horrors during that short-lived, but violent reign of terror, among them the brutal murder of Jenny Calendar and the sadistic torturing Giles endured at the vampire's hands. And although Giles had eventually learned to forgive a very contrite Angel, Buffy knew that their relationship would never be quite the same as it once was.

"Um... apocalypse", Giles smirked, almost embarrassed. "And you?"

"Apocalypse", Angel sheepishly rubbed the back of his head.

Giles' keen eyes soon turned to his former replacement. "Pryce?", Giles said in astonishment as he eyed the younger man. "My God... you look... tested."

"In more ways than one I'm afraid, Rupert", he said, as he walked over to his former co-Watcher. "Good to see you again... though I wish it were under different circumstances."

"You've heard... about the Council?", Giles asked, hesitating briefly before finishing the question.

Wesley nodded grimly, his eyes reflecting his darkened emotions.

"Then you know about... your father?", Giles asked quietly, the elder Watcher's eyes sadly gazing at his quasi-protégée.

Wesley said nothing, only cast his eyes down like heavy stones.

Giles sighed, sympathetically. True, he and Wesley had a terrible start when they first met, a large sense of enmity developing between them over Buffy's guidance. But over the years, as they had conversed via telephone, Giles had noticed the changes slowly start to develop within Wesley, and had come to slowly respect, even like, the man whom the Watchers Council designated as his replacement.

There was much empathy as Giles placed his hand on the young ex-Watcher's shoulder. "Then you know what we have to do... what... he... would have wanted you to do."

Wesley's eyes met Giles for a moment, a silent understanding passing between the two men.

The electricity of the moment was broken when Andrew said, "Wow. The last two Watchers
convening together as one to salvage the last of their kind and the fate of the world hangs in the balance...it's just like that part in Star Trek: Generations, where Captain Picard and Captain Kirk meet in the time continuum and agree to go on the dangerous mission to stop the evil - -"

"Andrew!", Kennedy snapped. "Nobody cares, okay, Spock-boy?"

Andrew flailed his arms in a huff before pouting and folding them across his chest. "Fine. Nobody gets me."

"That's because the Star Trek convention is a couple states away, Chewbacca", Rona wryly grinned.

"Actually, ST Con 2003 is in San Diego this year. I have all-access passes to this year's convention, 'cause last year, I had to miss it on the count of a bad case of mono, but - -"

"Andrew", Molly sighed. "How many times are we supposed to gag you before you realize that there are more important issues at hand than your silly convention?"

Andrew sulked as he walked over to the back of the group.

"Wes?...Wow! You're looking all...manly", Xander said, impressed at the former Watcher's appearance.

Wesley rolled his eyes at that comment. He always found that Harris boy to be a bit of a nitwit. "Hello to you too, Xander", he sighed.

"Yeah, well...so, Angel!", Xander turned his attention to the vampire. "Long time, no see, Deadboy. Nice place you got here."

"Xander", Angel greeted with an exasperated sigh. Even after all this time, Xander still had a way of bugging him. "For the umpteenth time, stop calling me that."

"Angel, what's going on? Who the hell are these people?", Gunn asked, still suspicious.

"Relax, Charles", Fred rolled her eyes with a smile. "Willow and Faith are here, so they must be that famous 'Scooby Gang' we've heard so much about."

"Um, actually, due to contract infringements, we go by 'that crazy group of teenagers with that dog solving mysteries in a van'", Xander quipped. After a beat, he added, "Or at least we would if we had a dog. And a van. And if we were all...you know, teenagers."

"You must be Xander", Fred deduced.

"Ah, so you've heard of me", Xander beamed with pride. "No doubt Cordy and Angel have mentioned my usefulness in the face of danger, my quick thinking...my razor sharp wit?"

Fred paused a beat, considering her words. "Actually, they...mentioned you talked a lot...like, ramble-talked a lot."

Xander's face deflated. "Oh." Had Cordelia seen that face first-hand, she would have had to chuckle. It was a classic 'Harris Moment', as she had teased him when they were dating years ago.

"So", Buffy said to Angel, taking in the people before her. "This is Angel Investigations, huh? Nice group of people you've got- -" She stopped when she saw Lorne. "Demon. There's a demon! Why is there a green, horned demon here and no one seems interested in the least?"
"Whoa, easy, Buttercup", Lorne held up his hands. "I'm one of the good guys here."

"Oh, well, in that case- - wait a minute. Did you just call me Buttercup?" Buffy scrunched her eyebrows in confusion.

"Would you prefer Sweet Doodle?" Lorne grinned.

Willow sighed, thanking Hecate that at least one amongst them was in the loop on things...and even more thankful that it wasn't Xander. "It's okay, Buffy. That's Lorne. He's a friend. Uses his powers for good."

"Oh...you mean like Clem", Buffy said.

"Sort of, but...he's a bit braver. Lorne, that is", Willow shrugged, a smile suddenly brightening her face as she remembered one of Lorne's many talents. "Plus, he does a mean version of 'Heard It Through the Grapevine.'"

"He sings?" Buffy asked, turning to Lorne. "You sing?"

"Well, not to toot my own horns, but...", Lorne chuckled. "I've been told I've got quite a set of pipes. You should hear my Motown. I do a version of Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' that'll knock your socks off!"

"I think it's about time for introductions", Angel sighed, knowing that a meet-and-greet was probably the only way he could avoid bloodshed between the two tightly-knit groups. "Buffy, everyone, I'd like you to meet my crew. Most of you already know myself and Wesley."

"Nice to meet you", Buffy smiled as she extended her hand.

"Likewise", Gunn replied, eying the small blonde from head-to-toe. He had heard Angel and Wesley, and occasionally Cordelia (although not so much from her), mention the famed fighting prowess of the Sunnydale Slayer, but the ever-skeptical Gunn was still surprised to see that this cute, tiny, cheerleader-type blonde could be the unstoppable demon-killing machine he had heard so much about. "So, you're Buffy, huh? The Buffy? Wow, I've gotta say, never come face-to-face with a chick I've been intimidated by, but I guess there's a first for everything."

"Don't worry", Buffy winked mischievously at the taller man. "I'll go easy on you."

Seeing the interaction between the two, Fred nudged Angel with her elbow, poignantly making motions with her eyes to introduce her next.

"Oh...Oh! Right. This is Fred. Fred Burkle. She's our resident physicist and inventor. She joined our crew after we rescued her from Pylea."

"Py-What-A?", both Buffy and Xander wondered aloud.

"Pylea, Sweet Doodle", Lorne told Buffy. "My home dimension. And believe me, once you check in, everyone's just waiting to check the hell outta THAT dump."

"HI!", Fred enthusiastically approached Buffy. "So...you're Buffy? Gosh, I-I mean, WOW! Angel and Cordy talk about you a lot, well, not so much Cordy, 'cause when she mentions you, Angel has something called 'Buffy-face'. Is it really true that you came back from Heaven? What's heaven like? I've read some really interesting theories on paranormal phenomena that hypothesize that Heaven is actually a small time anomaly intersected right at the center of the entire time..."
"Whoa, Fred!", Buffy held up her hand to stop the sudden verbal bombardment that came from the girl. "Slow down. My brain can't process language that fast." After a small beat, she continued, smiling. She had no idea why, but she liked the girl already. There was something about her that gave off a powerful Willow-like vibe. "So, this is the famous Fred that Willow's mentioned to me before. It's nice to finally meet you in person."

"And they say I talk a lot", Xander pfft quietly. Not quietly enough to avoid Angel's and Buffy's super-sensitive hearing, though. As he found when both turned to him and shot him disapproving glares.

"What?", he shrugged, oblivious, as usual.

Willow looked over her shoulder at Kennedy, who stood back none-too-patiently, arms folded across her chest. "Ken, this is Fred. Fred, Kennedy."

"Pleased to meet you", Fred greeted with equal enthusiasm.

Kennedy stared at the attractive, slender brunette, a thin, facetious smile on her face that did little to mask the jealous glimmer in her dark eyes. "Likewise I'm sure", she replied, her tone saturated with forced courtesy.

"Fred's one of the only people I know of besides me that can count Phi tables in reverse", Willow trumpeted proudly. "It's really quite amazing."

Buffy did not miss the feigned look of fascination on Kennedy's face. Despite the fact that she personally did not like this girl in the least, Buffy knew that her duty as a best friend morally obliged her to be happy for Willow regardless of her own feelings. And if there was one thing Buffy Summers had intimate knowledge with, it was the pain-staked notion of duty. So Buffy had to grin and bear it; if she could accept her role as a Slayer since her calling at 15, then she could bear to stomach the willful, often-rude girl her best friend had chosen for herself. Or was chosen for her, anyway, Buffy dryly thought.

"Remember, last time you were here how we ran into that naughty equation?", Fred chuckled.

"Yeah…2.4169!", both girls exclaimed aloud, before breaking off into hysterical peels of laughter.

Everyone else was standing at a loss as to what was so hilarious about a decimal number.

"We have just entered the Nerd Zone", Faith smirked.

Both Fred and Willow ceased their laughter when they realized they were the only ones laughing.

"Um…I guess you had to be there", Willow shrugged.

"Oh, yeah, I'm just dying…of embarrassment for that dribble", Skip snorted.

Buffy's eyes ticked to the entrapped demon. "Who's that?"

"That", Lorne pointed to Skip, "is one of the bad guys, MoonPie."

"Is he a hostage?", Andrew piqued up.

"Basically", Angel said, returning his gaze to Buffy. "His name is Skip."
"Skip?" Buffy raised an eyebrow. "Out of all the cool evil villain names out there, one of them drew the short straw and got Skip?"

"Yeah, right?", Andrew snorted. "Nothing like Dr. Doom, or the Violator, or Darkseid, or even Bulls-Eye. You know, I'm really digging the new Bulls-Eye in the DareDevil movie, 'cause the original comic version of Bulls-Eye looked like a giant blueberry in a -"

"Andrew", Xander snapped. "See this?" He made a trickling-down gesture from his head with his hands. "That's all the caring, flying right out of our ears."

Off the Fang Gang's confused look, she shrugged. "That's Andrew. He's new-ish here. Don't bother listening to him. We don't."

"Anyway", Angel continued, taking her advice and ignoring Andrew's outburst, "Skip's in cahoots with whatever's taken over Cordy. So far, we've gotten a few bits and pieces out of him as to what's the deal with the Master Plan."

"So, what's the sitch?", Willow asked. "And what does any of this have to do with the First Evil?"

"We're hoping our…friend…can impart us with that information", Wesley replied, his eyes sweeping derisively over Skip.

"Keep dreaming", Skip arrogantly sneered. "Whatever's coming next, it's something beyond any of your puny comprehensions. We're talking Evil Incarnate, here. Power beyond power. And whatever you chump-sickles think you can whip up and throw at me, it's nothing compared to what I'll be facing if I spill the beans."

Buffy walked over to face Skip, a menacing gleam in her green eyes. "I wouldn't be too sure of that…Skippy."

Skip knew full well who it was that was standing before him, so that knowledge, coupled with that murderous look in the tiny blonde's eyes made him more than a bit nervous, but the demon swallowed hard and attempted to cover up with false bravado. "Buffy Summers. So, you're that famous Slayer the underworld's been quaking in fear over, huh?" He snorted. "I've seen better."

"Have you really?", Buffy said in a mock-fear voice. "Well, gosh, what'll I do? Hey, look, guys, the big, ugly metal demon said he's seen better. I can feel my self-esteem splintering away as we speak." Her eyes regarded him, unimpressed. "And just what are you supposed to be? Some demon spirit trapped in the body of a washing machine? Maybe an off-Broadway Wizard of Oz reject? Ooh, I know! Maybe…some blind kid in Metal Shop 101 made a project out of you from recycled buckets and wished really hard for you to become a real boy!"

Angel chuckled softly. God how he'd missed that sense of humor of hers. The way she could get under any bad guy's skin. It was one of the things that made her so special, so…so Buffy.

"Make jokes all you want, Slayer", Skip snarled, obviously annoyed. "But the fact is, you're in way over your head on this one. When it arrives, it'll make damn sure that the third death's a charm for you. And this time, you won't come back from Paradise. Or, wherever it decides to send you."

"Haven't you told your buddies back at Evil, incorporated yet?", Buffy smiled, but with a hint of danger lurking under her expression. "The more times you send someone to blow up the world, the more times I send them back on their asses. Stick around and you'll see." She paused a beat. "Or then again, I guess you'll have to, you know, 'cause you're a prisoner and all?"

Skip growled in irritancy.
Suddenly, Spike came to the front, dusting himself off. "Well, dunno 'bout the rest of you, but I'm certainly workin' up a pretty penny on me dry cleaning bill. Any of you how hard it is to get a leather coat clean of all this - -"

He stopped when he looked up. Straight into the eyes of his GrandSire.

"Oh. It's you." Spike rolled his eyes.

Angel's gaze broke from Buffy to Spike when he noticed him coming to the forefront of the group. Upon his eyes landing on the face of his platinum-blonde CrandChilde, the warm look on his face flashed in surprise, then grew frigid with a stone-cold scowl.

"Spike", he all but growled as he gritted his teeth at the very unwelcome appearance of the irritating vampire.

Darla's eyes widened in recognition as she saw her Great Grandchilde. "Spike?...William?", she gasped.

Hearing his real name, the blonde vampire directed his gaze towards the woman. Upon thus, his jaw dropped in shock.

"Wait a minute...D-Darla?"

"Darla?", Willow's head darted around, until she met on with Darla's face. Willow was the only core member of the Scoobies to have actually seen Darla's human and vampire faces. "Omigod! Buffy, it's Darla!"

"Darla?", Xander and Dawn exclaimed in alarm.

"Darla? The vampire?", Anya looked around.

_Uh-oh, Darla thought, concerned at the alarm over her presence. This can't go well...

Buffy 's eyes locked onto Darla's form. "What..?" The slayer's mind made the connection. Mentally adding some wrinkles to her brow and other demonic features, and she was a perfect match for the vampiress who was her first opponent in Sunnydale. Her mind flashed back to that fateful night at the bronze, when the vampiress came at her, her twin Colt .45's blazing bullets as everything around that darkness flashed with the deadly gunfire.

The same one who tried to kill her…and Angel...

And her mother.

Darla drew in a shaky breath before softly addressing the Slayer. "Hello, Buffy."

"Darla", Buffy whispered, before her eyes narrowed. "Xander…stake me!"

"What?", Connor asked, puzzled as to what was going on. He turned to his mother, who was frozen in place, an uncertain expression on her features.

Automatically, Xander tossed her a stake.

Angel held up his hands. "Buffy, wait, don't - -"

But before he could say another word, the stake came whizzing through the air, with deadly precision…right at Darla's heart.
"NO!", Wesley leapt towards Darla, intending to shield the smaller woman, who was frozen with a 'deer-in-the-headlights' expression on her face. But he was moving a half-second too slow, a half-step too late as the stake neared its target…

Just then, a hand shot out and snatched the stake in mid-air. Mere inches from Darla's heart.

Connor held the stake so tight that it was starting to splinter.

Buffy was stunned. She didn't think that anyone could have moved that fast. Well, no one human, anyway.

Connor's icy gaze pierced the Slayer's eyes. There was something familiar about those eyes. Something she couldn't put her finger on…but it was very familiar…

Before she could form another thought, however, Connor drew out his knife from his belt and launched himself in an unbelievable vertical leap right at Buffy.

"Connor, don't!", Darla called to him.

But as he landed he lashed out at the Slayer, knife slicing through the air. Buffy's instincts kicked in as she ducked nimbly under the knife, blocking Connor's next blow with her forearm while she landed a roundhouse kick to his stomach. She tried for a second, which Connor grabbed. With one good twist, Buffy spun helplessly through the air until she landed hard on her back.

He moved to advance when a young girl about his age stepped in his path.

"Don't!", Dawn simply said, her tone pleading.

Their eyes met almost instantly. And the one known as the Destroyer felt his entire world stop around him.

He'd been around in the world long enough to have seen pretty girls, even beautiful ones. Cordelia, of course, being the most beautiful he'd ever seen. Until now.

Her huge blue eyes stared back into his. They were so deep Connor felt himself drowning in them. Her hair, a golden brown color, was in fair contrast to her milky white skin. Beautiful wasn't the word to describe what he was seeing right now. There wasn't a word invented yet that could do this girl justice. He felt a slight churning in his stomach, a nervous reaction, and he felt sick, but in a good…no, a wonderful way.

All this and only a handful of seconds had just passed. Only to Connor, it felt like forever…

Dawn stood there, the shield between her sister and this strange new boy. Boy? No boy she knew could ever leap like that. Well, not anyone normal. But she felt a strange spark when she caught his dark brown eyes. It was something unlike she ever felt before…

"Dawn, look out!", Buffy's voice broke their moment when she landed a hard side-kick out of nowhere into the boy, knocking him down. Buffy seized the moment as she pounced right onto him.

"Buffy, no!", Dawn tried to call, but it was futile. When Buffy wanted to fight, there was just no stopping her.

"Buffy! No! Connor! Stop it, damn it!", Angel frantically shouted. The vampire jumped into the fray, attempting to pull Buffy off of his son, but was met with a crushing blow from Connor,
intended for Buffy. It was enough to send Angel flying back on his head.

Spike tried his hand as he tried to grab the boy. "Alright, ya little ponce, off you g- -"

He got a mouthful of Buffy's elbow, missing Connor by inches, for his efforts, knocking Spike right on his ass. "Ow, Bloody hell, why does everyone keep hitting me!", he muttered as he tried to stand.

"Stop it! Stop it!", Willow shouted.

"They'll kill each other!", Fred squealed.

Connor leapt onto Buffy's prone form but Buffy was ready for him. A quick forearm to the face and she turned on top of him. But Connor wasn't ready to give up yet. A quick roll-over counter and he pinned her beneath him. The two warriors rolled about furiously, each gaining a brief advantage before being forced under again.

"Shouldn't we do something?", Molly insisted. "This is getting rather out of control!"

"Are you trippin'? I ain't gettin' near no guy with a knife!", Rona said, taking a cautious step backwards. "Do I wear a sign that says 'Organs-for-free'?"

"But Buffy's our leader!", Amanda protested.

"No, Rona's right", Giles said, brushing the girls behind him with a protective sweep of his arm. "It's much too dangerous for you girls to get involved. Buffy is more than capable of handling this situation herself."

"Yeah, but the hotel probably isn't that capable of sustaining a fight between two super-beings", Gunn said as he tried to find a spot to pick and intervene.

Buffy and Connor traded vicious blows to each other as they continued their ground struggle.

"Somebody, stop him!", Xander yelled.

"Why don't you do something then?", Anya snapped, as she watched the combat transfixed, until the knife embedded itself a few inches from her feet. She let out a frightened 'EEP!' before hopping behind Xander in fright.

"Oh, for the love of Vince McMahon!..", Lorne sighed as he tried to separate the two, rather unsuccessfully.

Suddenly, three pairs of strong hands pried the two combatants apart. Buffy felt herself wrenched away, looking up at Angel and Spike.

"Easy, now, luv", Spike gritted out as Buffy wildly thrashed in his grip. "Take a breather."

"Get…off…me!", she squirmed in their iron grasps.

"Buffy, please, you have to calm down- -", Angel tried.

"Calm down! That little …he tried to - -"

"I'll explain everything", Angel said, calm but his voice hard. "But you have to stop fighting."

After a beat, Buffy relaxed her muscles. "You'd better."
Faith, however, wasn't having that easy a time trying to hold down Connor.

"Okay, Junior, cut it out!", she said as she tried to hold him back.

"Did you see what she almost did to her?", he hissed, his eyes wide with anger.

"I know. But you didn't make things easier, either. Now stop!", Faith insisted.

"NO!", Connor boomed as he brushed past her when he was met by Spike dead center en route to Buffy.

"Don't even think about it, Spunky", he said, his eyes dark, fists balled into punching formation.

"Get out of my way", Connor said quietly in a deadly manner.

"I'm in your way. Deal with it", Spike replied coolly. He had no intention of moving. And he was more than ready for a fight.

"Connor", Angel called, just as Connor looked ready to spring into action again. "Just calm down."

"No", he said, his eyes still fixated on Spike, who returned the glare.

"Connor", Darla's voice rang out over them. At that, Conner turned to find his mother approaching him. She stopped just in front of him. "Baby, relax. There's no need for this."

"She tried to kill you", Connor defensively pointed out, his eyes softening as they met his mother's eyes.

"I know", she nodded. "But it was a mistake. And so's what you did. Violence only begets violence, son." She paused a beat. "Besides, that's no way to treat a lady."

"But- -"

"No, Connor", Darla shook her head, her voice calm but leaving no room for argument. "I know your heart was in the right place. But what you did was wrong. We don't fight humans. Not good ones, anyway. Or haven't you learned from what happened in the factory with 'Cordelia'?"

Connor wanted to argue more, but seeing the look in his mother's eyes and all the anger dissipated out of him. Reluctantly nodding, he gave in. Darla smiled as she reached up and gently stroked his cheek. Despite his anger, Connor felt himself smile at his mother's touch. She was the only one who could calm him, ease him with a mere gesture.

"Can somebody please explain to me what the hell is going on here?", a frustrated Buffy demanded.

"Um, actually, that's what I'd like to know", Xander said. "For example, why is Angel protecting, correct me if I'm wrong, but the evil blood-sucking fiend who tried to kill each of us, including Joyce?"

Angel grimaced. He should have anticipated that Buffy wouldn't react well to Darla's presence. After their short, but violent history, how could he expect Buffy to react in any other way? He tried to sum up the overly complicated explanation of Darla's arrival in just a few words. "Things are...different now."

While this was all being said, Wesley took a few steps inching towards Darla, putting himself in
front of her as far as he could, as if to shield her. Whether or not that was a conscious or unconscious move was uncertain.

Buffy scowled, not taking her eyes off of Darla. "Unless she's got herself a bullet-proof heart, there isn't going to be a lick of difference when I take a stake and ram it right through her -"

"Darla is human", Wesley said, his tone clipped, his eyes hard as he stared back at Buffy.

Buffy's jaw dropped, her eyes wide in disbelief.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Right before the bombardment of questions.

"Wait...what?", Willow blinked, stunned. "Darla? Darla's human? HUMAN?"

"That's impossible", Giles said, inhaling a deep breath.

"You can't be serious!", Xander exclaimed.

"No way!", Dawn shook her head in disbelief. "She can't be human. She's a vampire!"

"Who's a vampire?", Vi, one of the Potentials, looked around in fear.

"I think...she is", Molly pointed over to Darla. "Or...was?"

"Spike?", Willow turned to the blonde-dyed vampire. "Is it true?"

Spike took a few steps towards Darla, locking eyes with his Great Grandsire. Angel and Wesley, however, quickly moved protectively in front of her.

"If you so much as touch her-", Angel warned, his fists balled tightly.

"Oh, knock it off, ya soddin' wanker!", Spike spat. "I'm not going to hurt the chit."

"You'll be dead before it crosses your mind", Connor warned as he came in from the side, the coldness in his voice surpassed only by his frosty eyes.

"And quite painfully, might I add", Wesley added, his voice taught with warning.

"Oh, swell", Spike rolled his eyes, already irritated. "Now all of 'Team Pouf' is gangin' up on me?"

"Stand aside", Darla softly requested. All eyes turned to her in surprise.

"Darla-", Angel began to object.

"Trust me", Darla simply said.

"I do trust you", Angel said, before turning his dark gaze back to his GrandChilde. "It's him I don't trust."

"Oh, for heaven's sake", Spike growled, brushing past Angel and Wesley. He stood face-to-face with the smaller woman, locking eyes once more.

He regarded her appearance. Stared at her up-and-down. His nostrils flared with scent, analyzing her from every angle.
"Are you done now?", Wesley said, a hint of annoyance betraying his otherwise cool voice.

Spike looked at Darla again and smirked. "Human, huh? Always with the one-upmanship, now, weren't you, luv?"

"This from the guy who went halfway around the world to get a soul?", Darla smirked back. "Someone's got daddy issues."

At the mention of the word 'soul', Angel's eyebrows raised a tad. He thought he was mishearing their quiet conversation. But, given his supernatural hearing abilities, that was probably not accurate.

"I don't have-", Spike started, flustered. "You...bugger this, that wanker isn't my father! Damn that sharp tongue of yours." He really hated that she could get under his skin like that. Then, something dawned on him. "Wait a tick! How'd you know I've got a -"

"Calm down, Spike", Darla chuckled. "You always get so grumpy when someone else ribs you even a little."

If Spike had any doubts about whether or not this was really Darla, all of that dissipated. Only the real Darla would be able to irk him like this.

"Thanks for the analysis, Dr. Freakin' Freud", Spike muttered, scowling.

"Anytime", Darla smiled back, almost annoyingly.

Spike forced down a smile that threatened to pull at his lips. He always enjoyed sparring with her verbally. Of course, rued was the day that William the Bloody would ever admit to anything. Led alone to one of his 're-birth' family.

He turned before turning back to Buffy. "It's true, Ducks. She's human. I can hear that heartbeat singin' in my ears."

"Wait a second-we're talking about Darla, right?", Xander said, skeptically. "THE Darla? Legendary vampire, murdered and tortured people longer than the good ol- U-S-of-A was even around?"

Darla felt a stab of pain and guilt at those words. She hated to be reminded of all the horrible crimes she committed during her vampire days...so much pain, destruction and death that she wrought. So much blood on her hands...

"Darla was brought back during an...encounter with 'Cordelia'", Wesley cautiously explained.

"Wait a second...Cordy's behind this whole human-Darla thing?", Xander blurted, stunned. "How? When? Why?"

"Not Cordy...whatever's taken control of her", Angel clarified. "We think whatever's controlling her was responsible for all of this."

"And what makes you think that this isn't part of that thing's plan?", Buffy snapped, still very skeptical. "Hasn't it occurred to you that this could be a trick to get you to lower your guard so she can-"

"It's no trick", Darla's voice rang out. All eyes turned to the blond-haired ex-vampire, who started to take a few steps towards Buffy.
Connor moved with her, but she turned to her son and shook her head. She did not want him protecting her this time.

"I've been sent back to prevent something terrible from happening", Darla said as she came face-to-face with her former nemesis.

"And why should I believe that? How do I know you're not helping this thing?" Buffy said, her eyes narrowed. She'd read up on Darla's exploits after Angel staked her to dust. And if there was one thing she learned from the books and her own experiences, it was that Darla was not a creature to be trusted. "The Darla I knew would have thrown a picnic at the prospect of a good apocalypse."

"The Darla you knew is gone, Buffy", Darla said in her feathery-light, yet raspy voice. Her eyes reflected a sort of sad honesty. "I know that I have no right to ask you to trust me, especially after what I...what she did." The 'she' Darla was referring to was her vicious demon.

"You fed off my mother", Buffy practically snarled, pronouncing every word slowly and forcefully, her anger rising to the surface. "My mother!"

"And I can't take that back", Darla shook her head, gazing back at the Slayer with remoroseful eyes. "I wish I could, but I can't. You have every reason to hate me, every right not to trust me...but all I know, is that if we're going to beat this thing, if we're going to save all those lives hanging in the balance now, then we're going to have to put aside our differences."

Buffy opened her mouth to object, when Darla's next words stopped her: "And if nothing else...do it for Cordelia. She's counting on us."

Buffy closed her eyes tight. Cordy's face ran through her mind, screaming for help many times, replays from the seemingly endless times the girl had gotten herself into peril. Her friend was counting on her. And while Cordy and she were never exactly the best of friends, she had always come through when it counted. And if aligning herself with one of her oldest enemies meant Cordelia's freedom, then Buffy had only one choice to make.

"For Cordy", Buffy sighed, defeated. "Fine...But if you I trust you for a second, you're wrong. I'll be watching you. Every minute. Every second. Try anything funny, and we'll see just how many times you can stake a 'human' before they die."

Darla nodded in agreement, a tense silence passing between the women.

"And on that fun note, let's talk sleeping arrangements, rates, pillows, anyone?", Xander quipped, but forced down his smile as he saw the tense faces rapidly filling the room.

Spike's eyes narrowed as he observed Connor. Something about this kid was bugging him, but he couldn't place his finger on turned his suddenly observant eyes back at Angel, still beside Buffy before turning back to Connor, still facing Darla. Suddenly, the connections started to form quickly in the vampire's mind. He studied all the boy's features. The eyes. The hair. The cheekbones. Skin texture. Height...

And the scent the boy was giving off had a stunning familiarity to it…

And that's when it dawned on him.

"Oh, my God!", he exclaimed. This drew everyone's attention towards him.

"What now?", Angel groaned, still put off by Spike's presence.
Spike let out a small chuckle. "Well, knock me over with a Wiccan broomstick! Always did have a knack for the impossible, Peaches, but this…well, you pretty much topped yourself."

Darla's eyes widened in concern as she realized that Spike was about to let the proverbial cat out of the bag. "Spike…", she warned, a slightly pleading note in her voice.

"What are you talking about?", Buffy asked, confused about what Spike was going on about.

"Oh, come on, luv, take a look at the little whelp", Spike motioned to Connor. "Look hard at him. Angel's eyes. Darla's cheekbones. A sneer very reminiscent of a certain vampire with a certain aero-dynamic hairstyle…"

Angel held his breath...well, figuratively speaking. He had a sinking feeling that was about to happen wasn't going to be pleasant at all.

Buffy's confusion was plain on her face…and then it dawned on her.

"Oh, my God", she whispered. She took a step closer to the boy, who immediately got into defense stance. Almost identical to Angel's own posture.

"You're Angel's son." She paused, swallowing before she spoke again. "You're Connor."

Meanwhile...

Sunset - Clarity, Iowa

"Well, I've been afraid of changing coz I built my life around you,
But time makes you bolder, children get older,
I'm getting older too, Well I'm getting older too.
So, take this love and take it down,
Year and if you climb a mountain and you turn around.
And if you see my reflection in the snow-covered hills,
Well the landslide brought me down.
And if you see my reflection in the snow-covered hills,
Well maybe, well maybe, well maybe the landslide will bring you down."

Lindsay McDonald gave a faint grin as the applause came following his song. He never was much for showboating. He never even gave a 'thank you' to the crowd after receiving such adulated applause. He simply nodded and grinned his acknowledgement. Something engrained in him from his parents. They might have been piss-poor and struggling, but at least they were honest.

With a heavy sigh, the handsome ex-lawyer plopped down into a barstool, unloading his guitar from his shoulders. A few folks passed by, slapping him on the back, a few 'You go gettem, boy's and 'Them some pipes ya got, kid's mixed up in the hail of compliments that bombarded him.

The young red-headed bartender smiled flirtatiously at him. "What'll it be, Mr. Undiscovered
Lindsey returned it with an equally flirty gaze. "Come on, Claire. You know what I like, baby", he drawled, his eyes playfully suggestive.

The young woman giggled. "Well, I'll see what I can do 'bout that after I getcha a cold one."

Lindsey loved to tease the girl. He knew that ever since arriving back in Clarity, the place of his dirt-poor roots, that the girl had a crush on him from almost the first time he entered the bar. 'Irving's Bar', the name above the establishment. A place he found himself frequenting after his daily 9-to-5 down at the local candy store his brother owned. One of three siblings he had left.

It was hard at first, readjusting to the drain, muck and downright dissatisfaction with Midwest life after coming from the wealth, power, caviar-munching and champagne-sipping lifestyle of L.A. that his former employers, Wolfram and Hart, had provided for him. At first, Lindsey had serious second thoughts about the trade-off. He had even considered going back to Wolfram and Hart, asking them to take him back into their fold. However, he knew, in the end, that it simply would not happen.

First, after the way he left the firm, he knew that if he ever set foot again inside that tower of glass and steel, he would probably have never been heard from again. He had seen first-hand how Wolfram and Hart deals with unsatisfactory employees. He could practically feel Lee's blood on the side of his face, freshly splattered from a gunshot wound to the head, courtesy of Wolfram and Hart's 'termination' of his contract.

Second, he knew, perhaps always knew, that even if Wolfram and Hart accepted him back, even if they did give him back the fancy office, the extravagant benefits, the mountainous raise, and the silk-and-roses lifestyle back to him, it could only end badly. How far could he really trust a firm who implanted him with a possessed, murdering hand? Without his permission? If Wolfram & Hart could do that, well, nothing was short of their reach, now was it?

And third, there was something nagging him at the pit of his stomach, something that he couldn't quite put his finger on, but was there nonetheless. Like there was a certain need to do this. Almost a pre-requisite for his conscience, his soul to be at peace. He was tempted to think 'atonement', but he refused to. He'd be sounding too much like Angel. At that thought, he laughed. Whoever thought that Lindsey McDonald, cunning, intelligent, and handsome heir-apparent from Wolfram and Hart would have been likened to Angel? Certainly not Lindsey.

But still, there was the need for him to put to rest his own sins of the past. With the stroke of a pen, with the argument of a legal charge, with a simple word through a telephone, he sentenced innocent people to die. He let murderers walk free into the night, ready to kill again. Men, women, even children had befallen a cruel fate, because of his actions.

He had to go through with this. He owed too much to those victims, to the memory of his father, to let his own crimes go unpunished. Well, maybe atonement was more or less in the right ballpark.

Huh, what a picture, he thought, Now I'm just a few steps away from wearing all black and ridiculous tabs on strong-holding hair gel.

Aside, from it, he was getting used to life back in Clarity by now. Sure, the pay at his job wasn't much, and the hours were hell, but the people...he'd be damned if he ever had anything bad to say about the people here. Some of the most honest, well-meaning, friendly, and just more fun-loving than most other folk. Just better people. They reminded him what it meant to be human again. Really human. It wasn't just a pulse and a brain-wave. It was about feelings. People were about
feelings. Wolfram & Hart almost drained him of that. But not enough to totally strip away what was purest in his heart.

What made him human.

"Here ya go, sugar", the girl smiled at him. "Just how ya like it."

"You are a heavensend, Claire", Lindsey sighed. He grasped the bottle with one hand and toasted her. "To your health."

"So", she leaned in close, the scent of her sweet perfume faintly wafting in his nostrils. "You never did tell me exactly what a big city guy like you's doing back in a town like this, now did ya?"

"Just living, sweetheart", he shrugged. "That's something we all take for granted. Living. Choices. Just doing what we do. Took me a while to realize that. And I almost lost myself before I could find myself again."

"Sounds like you just went through hell and back over in L.A.", Claire noted.

Lindsey snorted. "Trust me, Claire, you don't know the half of it."

He reached into his pocket of his long-sleeve jacket, and placed a few dollar bills on the counter. "Always know how to bring a guy up, sweetie. The rest of the money's yours."

Claire's eyes lit up as she saw that the rest of the leftover change was in about 40 dollars worth of tip. "Ooh, Lindsey!", she squealed. "Thank you!"

"Think nothin' of it, sugar", Lindsey smiled as he got up from his barstool.

"You know", she drawled in a seductive voice. "One of these nights, you'll just have to stick around after you sing…maybe we can do a duet."

"You sing?", Lindsey's eyebrows raised.

"Not quite", she smirked. "But I bet you could help me hit those…high notes."

Lindsay smiled back, chuckling. "I'll keep that in mind…g'night, Claire."

He strode out of the bar, his guitar in hand. He sighed, knowing of the prospect of work still awaiting him in the morning. *Maybe a late-night session wasn't such a good idea after all,* he thought. *Ah, well…*

He had just placed the keys to his pick-up truck in door, when a voice stopped him cold.

"Lindsey McDonald, right?"

His hand froze on the keys. Instantly, he stiffened. His instincts told him to be on guard.

"Depends." He said that with a smooth, calm voice, masking his alertness well.

"On what?"

In an instant, Lindsey's left hand shot out. An audible click was followed by the sudden appearance of a sawed-off, well-concealed spring-propelled shotgun…which he had pointed right at his would-be attacker in the second he whirled around.
His eyes flashed warning. "On who wants to know."

His eyes rested on a smaller man, wearing a Porkpie hat and a slightly scuffed leather jacket. The yellow Hawaiian shirt, plastered with light blue palm trees in the design, was tucked sloppily into the man's khaki pants. In Lindsey's eyes, this guy was the poster boy for what a man should not dress like.

"Whoa, tough guy!", he raised his hands. "Watch where you point that thing, you could put an eye out."

"You don't tell me who you are and what you want in exactly 3 seconds, I'm going to put out a lot more than just your eye", Lindsey said, his voice still smooth, but his glare smoldering. "You from Wolfram & Hart?"

The man, balding, from what Lindsey could tell, spread a huge smirk across his face. "Nope. Wolfram & Hart isn't looking to hiring anybody nowadays. You know, on the count of most of them being dead and all."

Lindsey's eyebrows raised. "Say that again?" Surely he wasn't hearing what he thought he was hearing...right?


"Yeah, I heard you the first time", Lindsey snapped, his shotgun still pointed straight at the man. "I just don't believe that's possible. This is Wolfram & Hart we're talking about, not K-mart. They don't go out of business that easily."

"Boy, the news really does trickle down slow in these parts, don't it?", the man shook his head. From what Lindsey could tell, there was a strong Northeastern accent laced in his voice. Like he should be driving a cab down 7th Avenue in downtown Manhattan. "Haven't you heard the news, Lawyer Boy? L.A? Rain of Fire? Sun blocking out? Major apocalyptic broo-haha? This has been going on for the last few weeks!"

"Yeah, I've heard about all that", Lindsey said, his face reflecting his surprise. "I just figured..."

"That it was business as usual at the Tower of Power? Hardly, Blue Eyes", the man said. "In fact, the big W & H was caught with their pants down, just like everyone else. In some cases, literally, when the big, ugly Beastie stormed the building and turned it into the aftermath of a Neeman Marcus discount sale day."

Lindsey blinked, stunned almost to the point of loss of words. "Are you telling me that everyone at Wolfram & Hart is dead?"

"Ding-ding-ding! Tell 'im what he's won, Johnny!", the man sarcastically said. "Yep. All gone. Well, at least at the L.A. office. Though I don't think it'll be too long till the ones in Cairo, London, New York and Paris go down too. It's the end, kiddo. The Final Showdown at the O.K. Corral."

"Who are you?", Lindsey said, his voice rising slightly. No doubt that this mysterious stranger's words had rattled him a little.

"Well, cowboy, how 'bout you put away that peashooter and you find out?", the man said, his eyes fixed on the gun in the ex-lawyer's hands.

"Everything all right, Lindsey?", a gruff voice asked from the side.
Lindsey's eyes darted to the dimly lit entrance of the bar. There stood two men in the doorway, each dressed in rugged, country style clothing. The one who spoke had long brown hair, a white cowboy hat covering the top of his head and just a hint of his eyes, narrowed in suspicion at the stranger opposite Lindsey McDonald. The other one had short blonde hair, his baseball cap rimmed down in front. His hands were rested tightly around the barrel of a 12-gauge shotgun.

Lindsey regarded the stranger for a moment, and then turned back to the two men. "Don't worry, Sam. It's nothin'. You can tell Leo to put away the gun."

The man in the cowboy hat nodded. "You need anything, you just give us a holler, ya hear?"

Lindsey nodded. "Thanks, Sam." The two men slowly withdrew back into the bar.

After a minute, the stranger smirked. "Nice folks. Protective types, aren't they?"

"Just around people who don't belong here...like you", Lindsey said, lowering his own gun. "Now I'm asking you one more time before I shout that holler-who are you?"

"Geez enough with the threats already! Haven't had so many guns pointed at me since the time I walked in downtown Boston wearing a Yankees jersey", the man smirked. "Name's Whistler."

"Whistler, huh?", Lindsey scoffed, unimpressed. "What'd you do to your parents that made them call you that?"

"Hey, hey, hey! Let's not get touchy, here", Whistler said, defensively. "A little more respect for a messenger from the Powers that Be, please."

"You're a messenger from the Powers?", Lindsey asked, disbelievingly. "Nice try, buddy, but I think that Porkpie hat's on just a little too tight."

"Think back to your W & H days, Slick", Whistler said. "Think back to everything you've read in the file on Angel."

"How do you know Angel?", Lindsey's eyebrows narrowed in intrigue and suspicion.

"Who do you think trained the great Champion how to act all 'champion-like'? Here's a hint: it wasn't Mick from the 'Rocky' movies", Whistler bragged.

Lindsey's eyes widened as he suddenly realized who it was standing in front of him. "Whistler...half-demon messenger from the Powers That Be...you found Angel in the alleyway in Manhattan, 1996...showed him the way to fighting for the forces of good." He paused. "Well, the files did mention you were a tacky dresser."

"You know", Whistler tersely said. "In New York, a lot of guys would've been shot for all those pot shots you've been taking."

"Yeah", Lindsey shrugged, nonchalantly. "But we're not in New York, and you're not the one with the gun, are you?"

"Touché", the half-demon smirked. He had to admit, the kid had spunk. And fire. Those were qualities that would serve him well, if he was up to the challenge he was about to lay at his feet.

"Now", Lindsey continued. "You've already answered one part of my question, now all that's left is the second: What do you want?"

"Simple things, really", Whistler quipped. "Ice cold beer, steaming hot dog with mustard, more
sleep...the Knicks to actually be watchable again...ever since they lost Ewing, man, the whole team chemistry's just been shot down the-

"I meant with me", Lindsey snapped, nearing the end of his patience. It'd been a long day, and he really wanted to get some shut-eye before his morning shift, not trade quips with some vagabond who looked like he'd been vomited on by the World's Tackiest Closet.

"Oh...right", Whistler shook his head again. "Well, that all depends on what you want, doesn't it, Lindsey?"

The young man's patience was dangerously wearing thin. "I'm not in the mood for any mind games, pal. So just spit it out."

Whistler grinned, amused. "Think about it. Here you are, Lindsey Mc-freakin-Donald, shot up like a rocket through law school, handpicked by Wolfram & Hart into their special little world, going all the way to Junior Partner, and eventually, being selected President of Special Projects Division...one disgruntled workday later, you're slumming it back in your hometown, pushing candy for a nine-to-five at your brother Earl's store, hitting on the local bar maid while doing your best Billy Ray Cyrus impersonation. And you've somehow managed to fool yourself into thinking that this is what you have to offer the world for the rest of your life? That you're happy doing this?"

"I am happy", Lindsey said, his voice low and dangerous.

"You're as miserable in this town for the last two years as I've been for the last 5 minutes", Whistler snorted. "Do you honestly think that by hiding away in the Dust Bowl that you'll be able to atone for what you did during your time as Mr. Hot-Shot-Evil-Lawyer? That a couple of hits from the Billboard charts and a few friendly smiles would undo the deaths your hands were tainted with?"

"I never killed-"

"No, but you might as well have", Whistler countered. "That's what your conscience keeps whispering to you on all those late nights you try to rest your head to bed, isn't it? That you could've done something else? Maybe you could have stopped a few more innocent deaths other than those psychic kids in the orphanage?"

Lindsey didn't respond. But his eyes spoke the truth. Whistler was right on target. What could he really say? His conscience did eat away at him nightly. He was frustrated. And, despite everything he'd done, he felt like there was something he didn't finish that night he sped away from L.A. in his pickup truck for the last time.

"Life doesn't stop going just 'cause you got yourself a new hand, boy-o", Whistler continued. "It keeps going. Never stopping, never ceasing, until that one big spin where everything's a blur and then-poof! Off the axis. And newsflash, Cochran, Jr., that big push-it's about to happen soon."

It dawned on Lindsey. "So you're telling me-an apocalypse is coming...?"

"Not just a apocalypse, kiddo-THE apocalypse", Whistler said, his face serious now. "This is the granddaddy of them all. The Big One. The Mother Load. The Crap Shoot for All the Marbles."

He paused ominously. "The Final Battle is going down. Soon."

"So, basically", Lindsey said, "I'm going to die."

"Well, you are human", Whistler shrugged. "It's bound to happen sooner or later."
Lindsey took this all in, nodding before he took a deep breath. "Well, nice of you to drop by and tell me that...I'm going home now." He turned back to his car.

"Wait a second! Slow down!", Whistler exclaimed. "That's it? I tell you the world's about to go down the tubes and you're just heading back to your tiny little apartment to wait for judgment day?"

"No", Lindsey shook his head. "I'm going back to my tiny little apartment to wait for eight o'clock in the morning, when I can get up, shower and somehow make it to work on time. There's a difference."

"You can be a difference, McDonald", Whistler said. "You don't realize it yet, but you still have something left in the tank. You can still be someone who counts."

"Is that right?", Lindsey sneered. "How? I'm barely making a living for myself, I don't have the connections or the power I used to have a Wolfram & Hart, and I'm just a mortal. I'm not a champion like Angel, and I never will be. I'm just me. Lindsey McDonald. And I'm fine with that."

"I don't believe that", Whistler said, his eyes reflecting an earnest honesty.

"Believe what you want-I don't give a damn", Lindsey said as he opened the door to his pickup. He had one foot in the car when Whistler's next words froze him in place.

"Then what do you give a damn about-Darla?"

At her name, Lindsey's head jerked around. His gaze went from semi-calm to furious within an instant. A dull pain surged through his heart before rage overtook him. He stalked over to Whistler, grabbing the smaller man's coat roughly and shaking him hard.

"Don't ever talk about her in front of me again! Understand?", his eyes burned with anger, his voice practically a growl.

"Never let go of her, could you? Understandable...I mean, she is the woman you love", Whistler shrugged calmly, in spite of his precarious situation.

"You don't know anything!", Lindsey spat as he threw Whistler roughly away from him.

"I know that you still keep a picture of her you snapped yourself in a frame under your guitar case", Whistler said, adjusting his jacket. "For good luck before you play...I know you spent part of your time on the internet, surfing everywhere for rumors on her whereabouts during your first few months back in this dumpy town...I know you had to cry yourself to sleep when you found out that she staked herself in an alleyway last year...to give birth to a kid. A kid you wish were yours and hers...and how you nearly drank yourself to death in the weeks that followed, mourning for her."

Lindsey felt the sting of tears start up in the back of his eyes, blinking them back hard. Those were very personal memories dredged up to the surface. Times he wanted to let go of. Times he didn't want to remember ever again. He knew that Darla never returned his love for her, but that couldn't stop him from loving her. He knew not of any man that could do that. And now, just as he'd finally come to terms with the death of the woman he loved, this man had now resurrected those memories in one cruel joke...

"And I know that she's alive. Again."
Lindsey's eyes widened. He didn't know whether or not to laugh or cry or be angry...the words sent a jolt running though his heart, a shiver up his spine. Darla...alive? It was impossible...wasn't it?

"You're lying", he said in a fierce, yet quiet tone.

"After all I've told you, knowing who I am, you still don't believe me?", Whistler asked.

Lindsey didn't know...and he didn't care.

"Where is she?", Lindsey asked, quietly, but with a soft trace of hope in his voice. His emotions were running so fast that he was starting to tremble.

The half demon shrugged. "In distress. As most beautiful damsels find themselves in the stories."

"WHERE IS SHE, DAMN IT?", the young man's voice roared, filled with a desperation and longing so powerful it nearly made him hoarse.

"Alright, alright, geez", Whistler sighed. "L.A. Dealing with the apocalypse that you so eagerly seem to be running away from."

Lindsey's eyes fixed back to his car. "I'm going to find her", he started to walk back to his car.

"And then what?", Whistler scoffed. "Drag her away from the evil? Spirit her away into the sunset? Live happily ever after? It doesn't work like that, McDonald."

"I don't really give a damn about how it works!", he snapped angrily. "If Darla's alive, and she's in trouble down there-"

"Then she'll tear you apart sooner than let you take her away from a fight she wants to win", Whistler said. "Look, Slick, a lot's gone down in the last year or so you've been in this little exile. It's not just Darla's life that's at stake here-it's the lives of every living thing in existence. And, let's face it, you've been out of the loop for a while. This is the real deal happening here."

"Then help me", Lindsey gritted his teeth, his anxiousness at its limit. "You're supposed to be one of the white hats, right? Tell me what I need to do. I want to..."

He stopped himself, taking a deep breath. "I need to help her...I want to help everyone...but especially her."

Whistler chuckled, shaking his head. "Look at you...love-struck and all...well, love's as noble an intention as any...I can help you, Lindsey. Under three conditions: you do what I tell you, when I tell you and you don't ask questions. Got it?"

Lindsey hastily nodded. "Fine. Anything, now come on!"

"Geez, Mr. Huffy! Cool your pits, huh?", Whistler said. "Alright, we need to get by your place. Get a few 'special' things you've tucked away."

"Why?" Lindsey asked, confused.

The half-demon glared at him, annoyed. "What did we just agree on?"

"Whatever", muttered Lindsey under his breath. "Then what?"

"Then", Whistler said as he hopped into the car. "We find the interstate highway and make a bee-line towards the Coast. After we pick up an extra passenger on the way."
"Wait a minute—what extra passenger?", the young ex-lawyer exclaimed.

"Another player in the game", Whistler said simply. "Hope this guy won't be asking as many questions as you, though. Otherwise, it's gonna be a looong ride."

Lindsey sighed as he hit the ignition. He knew this was crazy, stupid and completely irrational on his part. He was about to return to a place he swore never to return to, on the advice of a guy who looked like he just stepped off the unemployment line, on a mission to save the world that would likely kill him. All to chase the vision of a woman whom he never thought he could have, anyway.

But it was Darla...and any way he could finally win her heart, he would take...

...no matter how insane...

"Oh, man", Lindsey shook his head, tiredly, as the truck started to roll down the dirt path road. "Earl's gonna kill me when I get back."

Lindsey had a feeling this was going to be a long ride...

"Hey, no worries, McDonald", Whistler drawled. "You're doing a great service to humankind...Besides, I have connections: I'll have the Powers write you a sick note or something while you're gone."

Lindsey sighed. A veery, loong ride...

TBC
'Cordelia' slowly began to stir and after a few tense moments, she arose from the floor.

She grabbed at her pounding forehead. Vaguely, she reconstructed the bits and pieces of what she remembered to transpire. Darla. The spell. The foiled attempt to kill the newly resurrected woman...and ending up spatula-ed against the wall, courtesy of a powerful counterspell.

"Ugh...man, I really hate those guys", she muttered angrily.

'Trouble?', a voice casually asked, before the swooshing of air sounded behind her. 'Cordelia' whirled around, drawing her meat-cleaver in a heartbeat. However, upon seeing who it was, she dropped it.

Standing there, arms folded, smiling sweetly, was what appeared in form to be Harmony Kendall. Cordelia Chase's old high school friend...and a vampire. But vampires were dead. And Harmony couldn't possibly have known about any of this. So that meant...

"M-Master?", 'Cordelia' uttered softly, her voice trembling.

"In the flesh", 'Harmony' replied. "Well, so to speak."

"Um...heh, what an honor that you come!", 'Cordelia' shamelessly began to lavish praise on her. "I-I wasn't expecting you so soon, uh...how are the Bringers? Still mute?"

"You seem a little jumpier than usual...is something wrong?", the figure appearing as Harmony asked, her question poignant.

"No! Nothing's wrong! Never better!", 'Cordelia' backpedalled. "I-i-in fact, the vessel is developing at a faster rate than we expected-"

"And yet, MY vessel still hasn't arrived...when it should have arrived some time ago", 'Harmony' said, still calm. "And I understand that you've lost the sacrifice AND the Destroyer, whom I had great plans for."

Her astonishment left 'Cordelia' nearly speechless. "How did you-"

"All-seeing and all-knowing, remember? Did you think me blind to what was happening with my most important weapon ever? I AM the First Evil, you know."

"And what a GREAT First Evil you are, might I add", 'Cordelia' laughed nervously. "By the way, have you lost weight? You look so good-"
"Enough boot-licking, please!", the First/Harmony said. "You have a very simple assignment. Find a virgin sacrifice, deliver my vessel, wham-bam-thank-you-m'aam, you're done. Simple. Now, because of your incompetence, not only is Angel, the Powers' Champion, and his gang up to snuff on your actions, but even worse, now they've alerted, and reunited with my worst enemy, Buffy Summers, the Slayer, and her accursed friends to derail MY plans!"

"The Slayer?", 'Cordelia' gasped. "She's here? In L.A?"

"As we speak", the First/Harmony snapped. "This is EXACTLY what I feared would happen most...that the two greatest warriors of good would convene here, NOW, to prevent me from gaining the ultimate weapon, which would enable me to bring the Powers That Be AND the entire universe to its knees, giving me dominion over ALL life...and now they're BOTH here, because YOU saw fit to make flesh a ghost image of the boy's mother!"

"I-it seemed like a good idea at the time", 'Cordelia' stammered. "He showed enough emotion for Darla that I thought that it'd be easier to control him...and well, the boy's so irrational-"

"And did I give you permission for an act like that?" the First glowered at her. "I don't think so...You've been more trouble than you've been worth lately. And yet, I must count on you because inside of you is a power unlike any other" At that, it bent down to take a closer look at 'Cordelia's' pregnant belly.

"...a power that would grant me my fondest wish, and the universe's greatest nightmare." After a beaming, yet chilling smile, the First faced 'Cordelia' at eye level. "You are not to use your powers for anything other than self-defense or for the sacrificial ritual until the vessel is delivered. ANY more foolishness like that Darla stunt, and I will be greatly...greatly...displeased."

'Cordelia' swallowed hard, fear dancing in her eyes. An angry First Evil was definitely not something she wanted to be placed in the crosshairs of. "Yes...of course, master...anything you ask. I won't fail you again."

The First/Harmony smiled sweetly. "Oh, my dear." Then her eyes flashed bright red.

'Cordelia' gasped as a tingling, burning sensation passed through her body, making her gasp and cough, shaking uncontrollably. With every precious breath becoming more and more impossible, she looked up at the First/Harmony, desperation and fear written all over her face.

"See that you don't", the First/Harmony smiled evilly. "Or the pain you feel right now won't even be an inkling...of what I have planned for you if you fail me again...I've waited thousands upon thousands of years for this very moment, and I will not be defeated now, NOT when the universe is within my reach...find a sacrifice. Quickly. Do what you must, and bring my vessel forth at ALL costs. Fail me...and there will be no way out...for you."

The pain suddenly disappeared and 'Cordelia' fell to her knees, on the floor, panting and wheezing. When she looked up, the First had vanished. As if it was never there, to begin with.

She winced. "I really...hate...that thing", she snarled to herself.

But she was already terrified. The most powerful evil in existence, a force with more power than even she possessed, had just given her her ultimatum: Deliver the baby or forfeit her life. And time was running out. She had to act quickly. She had become very used to walking the mortal realm...so she had to find another virgin.

Her entire well-being was depending on it. And if there was one thing she was good at, it was knowing how to survive. To save her own skin.
To stay alive.

Back at the Hyperion...

After a relatively long silence, Xander blurted out:

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a second-son? What son?"

Fred sighed, knowing this would be a long explanation. "Well, things have been a little wacky here over the last two years and...long story short, Connor is Angel's son."

"You mean he adopted a child?", Anya corrected, snorting at the idea of a vampire fathering a child. That wasn't possible, and she knew that...right?

"Ah...no", Faith corrected. "That's Connor. Angel's son. As in, offspring? Biological child? Fruit of his loins?"

"Angel has a son?", a confused Dawn asked Buffy.

Buffy said nothing, only continued to stare at the tall boy in front of her. She felt her heart constrict painfully as she observed him. He was exactly what she pictured Angel's son to be like. More or less, anyway. His eyes, although a clear, piercing blue, much like Darla's, had a stare about them that was so characteristic of Angel. He was tall, like his father. And judging from the way that he fought, he was strong, just like his father.

"Wait...I-I-I don't seem to be following, are you telling me that...this...boy, is Angel's biological child?", Giles stammered, stunned.

"Yup", Willow said. "A perfect genetic match. Right down to the sneer."

"That's not possible", Giles said, clearly flustered. "Vampires can't have children. It's-it's-it's a biological impossibility!"

"Tell me about it", Fred rolled her eyes. "I mean, I was stumped, too, trying to figure it out...I guess it's one of those theories we'll never really know about, like the Big Bang, or Einstein's relativity...or how many licks it takes to get to the Tootsie Roll center of a Tootsie Pop."

"The world may never know", Andrew sighed, wistfully.

"Yeah, but I think we all know that in this line of work, the impossible has a tendency to become very possible", Gunn shrugged.

A faint coughing could be heard from behind the wreckage, as Principal Wood threw back a sheet of metal over his head, wincing with the effort.

"Omigosh, Principal Wood!", Amanda exclaimed as she ran to the faintly staggering principal, sliding an arm under him for support. "Are you okay?"

"Um...yeah", he coughed. "As okay as one can be after surviving a four-car-pile-up."
Buffy snapped out of her haze for a moment to attend to her ally. "Robin, are you hurt?", she asked, her voice a bit distant.

"Oh, no, no", Robin smirked. "I'm good to go...as long as you point me in the right direction to go, that is."

"Who's that guy?, Connor asked, suspiciously.

"A friend", Willow answered as she went in to check on the condition of the principal.

Wesley took a moment in the distraction of Wood's emergence from the rubble to turn his attention to Darla. He walked over to where she was standing, many thoughts clouded in her beautiful blue eyes.

"Are you alright?, he asked, his tone soothing, as he placed a hand on her shoulder, as gentle as he could be.

Darla's eyes met his, a sort of relief in them as she beheld his gaze. "Yes, I'm fine...or as fine as one can be after having a stake thrown at them at about 80 miles an hour."

"You're not hurt, are you?, he asked, his eyes darkening with worry.

She smiled gently at him. "No, Wesley, I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

"How could I not?, he smirked back, but lightheartedly. "Can't have you off and dying again so soon."

She had to chuckle at that comment. Though she couldn't explain it, Darla was feeling somewhat more at ease, now that Wesley was at her side.

"Gosh", Skip chuckled sarcastically as he surveyed the scene in front of him. "Look at all this. A lover's triangle, old enemies forced on the same side, allegiances drawn in the sand...it's like a spooky episode of 'Survivor', only without the chicks who strip down to their undies for peanut butter."

"Need I remind you, Metal Face, that we can still open up a can of Infinite Agony whoop-ass on you if you keep talking out of turn?, Lorne testily retorted.

"Hey, just stating the obvious, Green Jeans", Skip shrugged. "I mean, c'mon! Do you actually expect all of these people to work together? They've got more baggage on them than American Airlines."

"You're awfully talkative for someone who can be subjected to horrible, blinding torment within a few minutes", Fred noted, suspiciously.

"Probably 'cause I just realized something", Skip smirked, a knowing gleam in his eye. "One, no matter what I could tell you, it'd be like holding the ocean back with a broom. No way it's going to make a difference, kiddies. The Big Bad you're so mad on to put a stop to...can't be stopped. It's too powerful, too all-knowing."

"Well, if it won't make a difference, how come you're not spilling?, Willow asked. "If it won't make a difference, then there's no harm in letting us in on the big surprise."

"And yet, I derive an odd sense of satisfaction from making all of you so frustrated", the metallic demon snorted. "You know, it's the simple things in life."
"I could beat the information out of you", Angel warned, eyes darkened.

"Suppose you could, but then, you'd have to consider, it took a while last time for our rumble to die down", Skip smirked arrogantly. "Sure, champ, you might get lucky twice. But, then again, people can get hurt in the crossfire. People can die. You willing to risk one of the lives of your crew? Or those little girls? Or your old friends?" He paused for dramatic effect. "If you let me out...are you willing to risk the third death of the woman who was once your whole world?"

Angel's jaw clenched, considering his options. He hated to admit it, but Skip was right. He couldn't risk a battle in the hotel. There were too many people to consider. Buffy, Darla, Connor, the AI team, the Scoobies, the gaggle of new girls, most of them barely looking 16...

"Ha...shoulda known you'd chicken out", Skip snorted. "Besides, as good as Miss. Science-Whiz over there is", he motioned to Fred. "...there's no way she'd get the spell done right, or in time. I mean, the 'Sphere of the Infinite Agonies'?...That's a whole lot of dark mojo. Can't be done by any boob with a book. Only a truly powerful master of the dark arts could wield the power and skill sufficient enough to-"

"'Sphere of the Infinite Agonies'?", Willow perked up. "What, you mean one of these?"

She raised her right hand and pointed right at Skip, her green eyes suddenly morphing to steely black orbs, her face a mask of focus.

"Sphere of the Infinite Agonies, I summon thee!", she called.

Skip gulped. "Uh...hey, hold on, wait a minute, now-"

A swirling of cold wind instantly followed, accompanied by tiny streaks of red lightning around the forcefield holding Skip. Just then, a bubble-like sphere appeared around the demon, encircling him. The startled demon's eyes widened, and his mouth opened as if to scream, but his cries were muted to all.

"What the-", a startled Xander managed as he stared at the scene in awe.

"Is that...?", Fred began to ask, as she stared wide-eyed at a screaming Skip.

"One Sphere of Infinite Agony, in 3 seconds or less or your money back", Willow smiled knowingly. However, the stares of awe, and some of fright, that she was receiving from both groups caused the little redhead to recede her otherwise winning smile (which would have been more winning if her eyes weren't as black as death itself). "Guess it's not quite as funny when you're bringing down unbearable torment on someone, huh?"

"Actually, it can be quite hysterical", Spike chimed in. "Specially in Metal Boy's case...I mean, look at the way his eyes are starting to show those funny little red veiny thingies-"

An elbow nudge from Anya cut him off. "Oww! What was that for?"

"Don't you think it'd be a little bit stupid to start acting like your vampire self in front of strange new people who hunt and kill demons on a daily basis?", Anya motioned to the Fang Gang with her head, her stare poignant.

"What, them? Please, it's just the Pouf and his band of merry men...and that little cutie over there", he said as he took a look at Fred.

Fred bashfully lowered her head, attempting to hide her blush. Gunn, however, took exception to that comment. "Who you callin' cute, Billy Idol?", he gruffly demanded.
"Take a breather, Big Guy", Spike waved him off. "I'm just sayin', is all."

Gunn scowled, squaring his shoulders. "Well, maybe you shouldn't 'just say'. Especially when her boyfriend is."

At that slip, Fred looked up at Gunn, questioningly, with a dash of hope in her eyes.

Gunn gulped. "Uhhh...ex. Boyfriend. Yeah, ex-boyfriend, that is."

Fred's eyes lowered, disappointed. Gunn kicked himself mentally for chickening out, but the look in Fred's eyes made him doubt himself at the last second. There was still much between the once-loving couple that needed to be resolved before they could figure out where they stood.

The swirling died down as Willow lowered her hand, the sphere suddenly dissipating back into the thin air from where it came. Skip fell to his knees within the prism holding him, audibly gasping, muttering curses at Willow, wincing in pain.

Darla looked at her curiously. "How did you do that?"

Willow shrugged. "Well, I happen to be one of the most powerful witches in existence right now...I kinda absorbed a lot of dark mojo one time, totally wigged out. I guess the Sphere of Infinite Agonies was in there somewhere."

"From when you nearly destroyed the world", Darla nodded, in understanding.

Willow's greenish eyes widened. "How did you-

"She just does", Angel answered her while striding over to Skip. "Now, you willing to play nice, or am I going to have to make Willow go all Infinite Agony on your metal ass one more time...Skippy?"

"Okay!...okay...you got me", Skip wheezed, clutching himself. "I'll talk, I'll tell you anything...just keep that red-headed nut the hell away from me, please."

Angel turned to Willow and smiled. "Sometimes I love you, you know that?"

Willow smiled triumphantly, proud of her skill.

"Nice job, Red", whistled Faith, approving.

"Did you see that?", Kennedy nudged Molly with her elbow. "That's MY girlfriend."

Buffy took a couple of steps towards the scene, patting her best friend on the back. "Good work, Will. We're going to need that information if we want to figure out what's going on with Cordy, not to mention the First's role in this whole thing."

"Or what it's connection is with whatever's growing inside Cordy", Angel mused. He suddenly took notice at the rather large group of teenage girls behind Buffy, turning his gaze back to the Slayer. As odd as it was, in all the commotion, he had barely noticed the swarm of girls that had accompanied the Scoobies to the Hyperion. Then he recalled something Darla said about the First going after other Slayers, or something to that effect. Could these girls be a part of that?

"What's with all the girls?", he asked.

"Them?", Buffy turned back to the Potentials, standing shyly behind them. "Well, these are all...potential vampire slayers."
"They're all Slayers?", Angel asked, surprised.

"Potential", she repeated. "Each one of them may eventually be called as the new Slayer one day, but for now, they're all girls with some heightened Slayer-like abilities and on a pretty big waiting list." She broke off, sadly. "Or, at least they were until a few months ago."

"So, what are they all doing here?", Fred asked, puzzled.

"The First", Wesley interjected. "Its forces have been eradicating the Slayer line little-by-little over the last several months."

Buffy looked at Wesley in surprise. "You knew?"

"We found out", Wesley said simply. "Just before your..." he trailed off as he stared at the gaping hole in what was once the Hyperion entrance. "...Arrival."

"Well, yeah", Buffy shrugged. "Anyway, I couldn't leave them behind, otherwise the Bringers would've made chop suey out of their inner organs. Hope it's not a problem." At that, she looked at Angel.

"No, of course not...I just...didn't expect you to bring so many people along", Angel said.

"That's okay", Buffy said, her eyebrow raised poignantly. "Didn't expect you to bear a son, either."

Angel looked down at the floor and sighed, running a hand through his hair, clearly flustered. He knew that not telling Buffy about Connor would eventually come back to bite him. And he was hard-pressed to think of any other conversation he had ever looked more forward to avoiding as that looming blow-up.

Spike laughed out loud. "Oh, I knew I must've done something right in my day...seeing that look on your face right now..."

His annoying Grandchildre's voice painfully reminded Angel of Spike's very unwanted presence."Is someone going to explain to me why I'm not throwing his irritating ass out into the sunlight right about now?", Angel tersely asked the room.

"Aww, what's a matter, Peaches?", Spike tauntingly asked, his smirk growing into a smug smile. "Got your panties all up in a bunch now, do we? Well, I can see why, seeing as how your ex-tumble just found out you got all up-and-springy and squirted out another Mini-Pouf into the world."

"Grow up, Spike", Darla chastised him as she shook her head.

"Why the bloody hell should I?", he chuckled. "You can't tell me what to do, Mummy Dearest. Besides...besides, this is downright amusing."

"Actually, Angel does pose an interesting point", Wesley said, casting a suspicious eye on Spike. "Would anyone care to explain why William the Bloody, one of the deadliest vampires to have been recorded by man, is standing in our midsts and no one seems interested in the least?"

Willow looked at Spike for a moment before turning back to the LA crew. "Like Angel said...things are different now."

"Some things never change", Angel said as he cast a disdainful look towards his Grandchildre. "Like the fact that the vampire you brought into MY home is a murdering, vicious scumbag."
"Or the fact that your forehead could still show an amphitheatre on it, ya ponce", Spike snorted.

"Do NOT test my patience, Peroxide Boy", Angel practically growled.

"Ooh, Peroxide Boy", Spike mocked. "Yeah, I'm real hurt now, Pouf-y. That was a low blow."

"Well, in your case, Spike, that wouldn't hurt very much, now, would it?", Angel smirked.

Spike took a step up to Angel, scowling. "You trying to imply something, Peaches?"

Darla tried her hand at peacemaker. "Look, you two, this isn't the time for-"

"What, too many big words...William?", Angel smiled, a smile that made Spike grit his teeth and sent a powerful urge to knock Angel's head right off his shoulders.

"No, but I got a couple of small words for you, ya poncy, holier-than-thou, piss-brained-"

"STOP IT!", Buffy's sharp voice cut off their heated mini-argument. Both men turned to see Buffy ascending the stairs, her eyes hard and her face set in serious mode.

"Stop it, both of you!", she said, her voice assertive and demanding. "We've got more than enough to deal with without you two clubbing each other over the heads like the 'Flintstones'...or one of those stupid 'Beavis and Butt-head' cartoons."

Angel, ever so pop-culture savvy, scrunched his eyes at the analogy.

Buffy, aware of his expression, rolled her eyes. "MTV, famous cartoons, horrible animation...I'll explain later."

"Yeah, good luck wi' at", Spike snorted. "Angel's about as pop-culture savvy as...well, Giles, really."

Giles reddened. "Now you wait just a minute-"

"Spike!", Buffy snapped. "If you insist on making things difficult-"

"Alright, alright", Spike sighed. "I'll bloody well play nice."

Angel's chuckle, Buffy turned to him, arms folded across her chest. "Same goes for you, Angel."

"What? But he started it!", Angel complained. When Buffy's glare refused to wither, the Champion sighed. "Okay, I'll behave, too."

Fred walked over to Wesley, her eyes trained on both Spike and Angel. "What's with those two?"

"Ehm...Spike and Angel have a very...colorful history between them, so to speak", the ex-Watcher explained.

"By colorful, you mean a 'Ren & Stimpy-violent, hate-each-other's-guts' history or...?", Fred asked as she examined the two vampires, Angel glaring at Spike with his arms folded across his chest, and Spike burning a hole in the elder vampire with a look of pure contempt.

"They've tried to kill each other numerous times in the past, both with and without alliances to each other", Wesley elaborated. "At least, that's all I've gathered from Angel and some of my books."
Darla let out a sigh. "You two were always so damn childish when it came to each other."

Buffy took a glance at Darla. "You mean they've ALWAYS been like this?"

"Please", Darla chuckled. "They haven't even warmed up yet. You should hear them go on about the Ireland-England debate. I had to break up three fist-fights between them to avoid being staked by suspicious neighbors back in the old days."

A smile played on Spike's lips. "Ah, yeah. Manchester, 1893. The old barn behind Croxley and Caine Street...I had you beat, you know", he smirked as he glanced at Angel.

"YOU? Had ME beat?", Angel snorted. "Please. You're lucky Darla intervened when she did, or there'd still be pieces of you blowing around that barn right now.

"Oh, that is so typical of you-"

"You always twist the facts of what happ-"

"ENOUGH!", Buffy snapped, effectively ending the escalating argument between the two vampires. "The next one to start another argument, and both of you are going to need a doctor...badly."

Angel started to say something, but Buffy shot him a warning look and a dagger-like finger, causing him to immediately recede any comment he was about to make.

"Huh, how about that?", Xander mused. "Gee, you'd figure they'd get along easier now, what, with Spike having a soul now and then Angel-"

Instantly, the heads of every Fang Gang member shot around to look at Xander.

"Excuse me?", a stunned Fred gasped.

"Did you just say...Spike has a soul?", Wesley asked, eyes wide in surprise.

Xander nodded. "Uhhh...guess it's news to you guys, huh?"

Angel stared at Spike in absolute disbelief. His jaw dropped and his eyes had practically popped out of his head. Spike, delighted at Angel's expression, shook his head and smiled smugly.

"What's a matter, Captain Forehead? Cat got your tongue?...No, no need...that look on your face says it all."

Angel turned to Buffy, a thousand questions in his eyes. "Buffy...?"

Buffy sighed and nodded. "Uh...yeah. I...was going to tell you, but..."

"What? Slipped your mind?", Angel said, his voice clearly sarcastic.

Buffy started to say something, but then, opted to sigh again. "Things came up...they usually do whenever we're involved."

"Another one?", Connor exclaimed in disbelief.

"Geez, how many of you are out there?", Gunn said incredulously.

"Just two", Angel replied, before realizing what he was saying. "One! Uh, I mean..." He sighed wearily as he realized he had no explanation to offer. "I don't know."
After a brief, uneasy silence, Angel finally asked the question on everyone's mind. "How? Gypsy curse?"

Buffy shook her head. "No...no curse. Spike...he...went off and...asked to get his soul back."

Now Angel was thrown. Surely he couldn't have heard that right. Spike, his arrogant, pompous GrandChilde, William the Bloody, the legendary saint of destruction himself...had asked for his soul back?

"Asked?" he gave voice to his confusion. "He...asked? And it was just...given to him?"

"That's right, Peaches", Spike chimed in. "I have a few connections myself. Endured a few bone-wrenching trials, and it took weeks to get the taste of scarabs outta my mouth, but one shiny new soul later, I guess it was all worth it to see your eyes pop outta your block like 'at."

"You sure don't act like someone who has a soul", Angel growled his reply.

"Why? Because I don't walk around in pouf-y clothes with Nancy-boy hair gel drippin' outta my scalp and skulk in a corner going 'Boo-hoo! Whoa-is-Me! I did so many horrible things so I'll just sit in a corner trying to recede my already all-encompassing forehead by running my hands through it!'...?", the blonde vampire scoffed. "Please. That's your bag, Broody. There's no happiness clause in my soul...I can do whatever I want...get OFF whenever I want...on whomever..." His eyes bore into Angel's, almost poignantly.

Angel's eyes darkened with anger, his jaw clenched. He had no idea what Spike was trying to say, but he knew his smart-ass GrandChilde could only mean something to piss him off.

Buffy shot Spike a look mixed with warning and pleading, a hard, yet soft look which begged him not to elaborate any further. Spike caught her look, and his eyes softened briefly, before closing them and nodding subtly, concurring with Buffy's unspoken request.

"So, he's like a good-guy vampire...like Angel?", Gunn asked.

"NO!", both vampires shouted at once, each one with an appalled look on their faces.

"Uh...sort of", Willow shrugged.

"He's...NOTHING...like...me!", Angel slowly answered, his voice hard.

"Got that right!", Spike retorted. "I'd sooner bury a stake in my own chest than piss in the same toilet as you."

"Believe me, there's nothing I'd like to see more", Angel shot back. "In fact, I have a stake right here-"

"ANGEL!", Buffy snapped. "The only one who's going to be doing any staking around here is me! And the both of you are starting to make me VERY dust-happy! Look, bottom line, Spike has a soul, he's on my side, which means he's on OUR side. Spike stays, and if ANYONE tries to hurt him, they'll have to answer to me! Understood?"

Hurt and shock flickered through Angel's eyes, before he shut them and nodded. Buffy saw the look in his eyes and regretted her choice of words. She wanted to apologize, but then she remembered...Angel never told her about Connor. She found that out on her own. And, boy, was she ever mad about that.

Spike nodded to himself with some...okay, a LOT of satisfaction. To see Buffy tell off Angel like
that, and the look on his GrandSire's face as the cherry on top, made him want to dance a little happy jig. He would have, too, if he wasn't around so many people. And if he didn't think that jigs were for ponces.

"Um, excuse me?", Molly raised her hand tentatively. "I hate to intrude...but what are we going to do about the giant gaping hole in the center of the hotel?"

"Yeah, and besides", Kennedy said. "I'm getting stiff over here. Where are our rooms? Where are we going to sleep?"

"Oh, I can take care of the hole", Willow perked up. "I got a spell that can seal that up just like new."

Giles looked at her curiously. "It looks like you're starting to get some of your confidence back as far as casting spells go."

Willow shyly shifted her feet. "W-well, it's nothing major. Just a little construction spell. Shouldn't even feel it. It's nothing big like...shifting about 100 people and four cars from one place to another."

"Well, that's a relief", Lorne sighed. "I was about to get a nightmare from imagining the costs of renovation."

"Judging by the mess we left?", Xander mused as he surveyed the wreckage. "We're talking at least 50 G's, for starters. I should know, I'm in the construction business."

"Fifty thousand dollars!", Lorne yelped. "That's outrageous!"

"So's that outfit", Xander smirked. Anya chuckled at his comment.

Lorne looked down at his bright baby-blue suit and yellow shirt with the red silk-tie. "Gee, ya think?", he said, looking himself over. "I was going for like a modern Rat-Pack type look, something a little less Frank Sinatra, a little more Sammy Davis, Jr. Now THAT was a guy with style!"

"Really?", Xander added. "I was more of a Dean Martin guy, myself. Girls would just hang off of him."

"You're both wrong", Andrew chimed in. "Nobody had anything on the Chairman of the Board. Frank Sinatra's an American classic!"

Both Lorne and Xander shot the boy a questioning look. "What? Comic books and sci-fi series aren't my ONLY interests, you know", Andrew said defensively. "I have SOME depth."

"Excuse me? Moe? Larry? Curly? We have pressing issues to attend to, world to save and all that", Kennedy snapped.

All three of them shook their heads and sighed. "Women."

"I can have the rest of the girls set up in rooms", Angel said. "Any order or format you were thinking about setting them up?"

"Four in each room would do, I guess", Buffy shrugged. "How many rooms does this place have?"

"Only about 150", Angel smirked. "More than enough to hold all of them...Lorne, Fred, why
Buffy turned to her group. "Okay, the rest of you, pair off. You'll be divided into groups of four. Pick your roommates wisely, as you'll be bunking with them until further notice. Everyone except Dawn, Spike, Willow, Faith, Giles, Anya, Xander, and Principal Wood that is. You guys can choose your own accommodations."

"Hey, cool!", Robin smiled. "I call the President Suite."

"Actually, that's my room", Angel said.

"Oh...bummer", the Principal sighed. "I was hoping I could finally stay in one where I could afford it."

"But you're staying for free", Buffy frowned.

"Exactly. I can afford that", Robin smiled. Buffy chuckled. It was good to see that the Principal had maintained his composure after the crash. If he could keep up that cool in the upcoming fight, she liked his chances of survival.

"Hey, how come I don't get to choose my own room?", Andrew whined.

"You keep with the flapping of the gums and I'll have Angel choose out the nearest holding cell for you", Buffy said with a sweet smile.

Andrew shrunk. "Uh...n-no, that-that-that's...fine, really. I can go bunk, really."

"Good. You're staying with Spike."

Spike freaked out. "WHAT! How come I have to baby-sit the little-"

Buffy gave him a look with little room for argument. Spike grimaced. "Oh, bugger, the things I do for love", he muttered. "Come on, Spanky, it's off to change your nappies, now." He grabbed Andrew roughly by the arm and began to drag the whimpering boy up the stairs.

"Hey, hold up", Faith called. Spike stopped in his tracks and turned to look at Faith.

"I don't suppose it'd be fair to just leave the babysitting of Dorkus Maximus over there to you", she shrugged. "Besides, I need a place to get a good drag in. Mind if I come with?"

Spike's eyes lit up with interest at the proposition. He eyed Faith's curvaceous body from head-to-toe. Well, if SHE was going to bunk with him, it'd certainly take his mind off of inevitably strangling Andrew. Besides, she was a hell of a lot easier on the eyes.

Buffy eyed Faith warily. "Uh...I don't think that's such a good-"

"No, it's alright, Pet", Spike casually said, his eyes still on Faith. "Could use another smoker in 'ere, anyways. Besides, she might be the only one able to hold me back from smothering the little twerp in his sleep."

Angel looked at Faith with a concerned gaze. "Just be careful around him. He's dangerous."

"Hey, no worries", Faith drawled lazily. "Besides", she looked back at Spike and smiled, almost seductively. "It's not like I don't know how to handle bad boys."

Spike smiled amusedly, Angel scowled and Buffy had a look in her eyes that could have killed
three times over.

"We'll show ourselves up", Faith said as she walked up the stairs past Spike, looking at him over her shoulder. "You coming?"

"I don't know whether or not to make a sexy little innuendo or just say yes", Spike said, smirking at her.

"Flattery...will get you everywhere", Faith grinned back as she walked up the stairs, her hips provocatively wiggling. *Oh, this should be...interesting*, Spike smiled to himself as he dragged Andrew up with him.

"Well, I guess Dawn can be where I'm staying", Buffy sighed.

"Actually...I'd rather bunk with some of the girls, if that's okay", Dawn said, almost hesitantly.

"Uh...oh. Okay", Buffy replied, a bit surprised. "Sure, if that's what you want."

"Great! You can stay with us", Amanda offered as she, Molly and Vi walked over to her.

"Yeah...It'd be like a big slumber party or something", Vi smiled brightly.

"We were going to offer Chao-Ahn your slot, but...I don't think the poor thing would've understood us anyway", Molly shrugged as she looked at Chao-Ahn, who said in Cantonese, "There is a strange green demon in a multi-colored suit across from me." (She was referring to Lorne).

"Okay...Connor, could you show Dawn and her friends to one of the rooms?", Angel asked.

Connor looked hesitant, and turned to Darla for some sort of approval. Darla smiled and nodded.

"Uh...sure. Okay", he said at last as he walked over to the group. His eyes caught Dawn's again and he found himself staring at her, amazed by how beautiful she was. He felt his breath catch in his throat. How did you talk to someone like this? How did you talk to an angel?

"Um...I could...show you upstairs", Connor offered softly, almost hesitantly.

"Sure...uh...yeah, that'd be...great", Dawn nodded. After a beat, she offered her hand. "I'm Dawn."

Connor took her soft hand into his and gently squeezed. "Connor."

Dawn felt her breath hitch slightly. God, but he was cute. Like those guys on the covers of YM, or People for Teens. She'd seen and kissed some cute guys in her day, but nobody even came close to this boy, this tall, handsome, mysterious...oh, boy, was she ever in for it.

After being nudged towards him, by the others, Molly hesitantly offered her own greeting. "Um...hello! I-I'm Molly. And these my friends Amanda and Vi."

"Hi", Amanda waved bashfully.

"Hey!", Vi smiled amicably at him.

Connor nodded. "Hi", he smiled hesitantly. "Follow me." He led them up the stairs.

"He's gorgeous!", Vi whispered to Amanda and Molly, who giggled in response.

"Don't I know it", Dawn smirked to herself. Connor overheard her...and smiled to himself.
Perhaps this wasn't going to be so bad, after all...

"Well...I guess I'll just find a place to get cozy in", Xander said.

"Me, too", Anya said. "Though not with Xander. Because we're no longer together, and I still have a grudge against him for leaving me at the altar."

"You...you two were engaged?", Fred asked, surprised.

"Emphasis on 'were'", Xander said.

"Right", Anya said, peeved. "Which is why I'm staying as far away from you as possible."

"Hey, newsflash, Little Miss ex-Vengeance Demon", Xander snapped. "Dead Boy said there are 150 rooms here. More than enough space to keep you and me WELL-distanced!"

"There isn't a DIMENSION with enough space to keep you away from me!", Anya countered, her eyes narrowed in anger.

"Well, you're going to have to try, otherwise, it's going to be a LONG...however long it takes for this whole apocalypse-thing to blow over", Xander lamely finished.

"Well, FINE!", Anya snapped.

"Fine!", Xander snapped back.

"GOOD!"

"GOOD!"

After a couple of intense seconds, Anya brushed past him and stormed up the stairs, muttering something about the consequences of sleeping with mortal men.

"Huh...ex-es", Xander chuckled. "Can't live with 'em..."

"Can't tell a good story without 'em", Gunn finished.

Xander and Gunn shared a hearty laugh, before Gunn caught Fred's icy stare directed right at him. "Uh...that's just how the joke...", Gunn tried to explain.

"Whatever", Fred rolled her eyes before grabbing a bunch of girls. "Come on, y'all. I'll show each of you where your rooms are, and y'all can figure out the rest."

The contingent of 20 girls followed her up the stairs. Gunn sighed.

"Hello, Mr Foot, meet Mr. Mouth", Gunn muttered to himself. "C'mon, girls. If you'll follow me, I'll be more than happy to show you where your new diggs will be situated."

As the girls, Xander and Robin Wood followed him up the stairs, Rona whispered to one of the girls, "Hmm, break me off a piece of that!", eyeing the tall, muscular Gunn appreciatively.

"There! All set!", Willow announced cheerfully, after a bright flash of orange light dissipated...along with a hole in the hotel entrance. And the car wreckage. And the debris.

"Way to go, Will!", Buffy beamed at her.

"Good to see some things never change", Angel smiled at her.
"Aww, shucks, guys, it was nothing", Willow waved it off. "I have a harder time doing a precise glamour spell on a zit than I do of fixing a little crater-sized hole in the wall."

"Great", Kennedy said as she walked over to Willow. "Now that the heavy hocus-pocus is done, I guess we could go up to our room...get...comfortable?" Her eyes screamed desire...and sexual hunger.

Willow fidgeted a little. "Um, actually, I was thinking about crashing with Buffy for the night. You know, discuss some strategy-"

"Are you saying you'd rather bunk with her, than be with me?", Kennedy asked, offended. "I'm your girlfriend, for Christ's sake!"

"I know, I know, baby", Willow tried to pacify her. "It's just...well, Buffy and I-"

"Buffy, Buffy, Buffy! That's all I ever get from you!", Kennedy snapped. "Always taking her side, always picking her over me, what is it between you two? Or is there more to it than you're letting me know?"

"Kennedy!", Willow gasped, appalled. "Buffy's my best friend!"

"Yeah, and I'm your girlfriend!", Kennedy shot back. "Now, which is it going to be?"

Willow looked from Buffy to Kennedy, mulling it over for a moment, and sighed. "Alright...okay, Kennedy. Just give me a minute, and we'll go...upstairs."

Kennedy smiled triumphantly. "Great. Let's head up", she said as she grabbed Willow's wrist and dragged her along.

"Willow", Buffy called to the redhead, making both women stop.

"Yeah, Buffy?" Willow asked.

Buffy gave her a gentle smile. "If anything, my room is always open to you. Anytime you want", she said. However, her gaze shifted to Kennedy, and the smile disappeared, her green eyes narrowed.

Kennedy stiffened up. "She won't need it...but thanks for the offer...Buffy."

"It's still standing...Kennedy", Buffy retorted back, a sarcastic smile on her face.

Willow nodded. 'Thanks...I might be needing it', the witch telepathically told her best friend.

'Don't I know it', Buffy smirked back mentally. 'Feel free to come in anytime, Will.'

Willow mouthed "thanks" before Kennedy dragged her back up the stairs to their rooms.

"Fiesty little thing, isn't she?", Lorne noted.

"You should try training her", Buffy sighed, dismissively.

"Pryce", Giles spoke to Wesley. "I was wondering if we could have some words. I'd like to be able to compare notes on our respective plights. Perhaps we could find a connection to all of this...Watcher-to-Watcher, I suppose."

"Good idea", Wesley nodded. "Your supplies?"
"Ehm...right here, yes", Giles said as picked up a large brown leather duffel bag. "That's all I could manage to smuggle from the Council."

"I have some things I...relieved the Council of, myself", Wesley said. "But, you wouldn't mind if you waited for a moment, would you? I...would like to make sure that Darla is alright."

Giles looked curiously at Wesley, then to Darla and then back to Wesley again. "Uhm...yes, of course. I imagine...being resurrected must be a...disorienting process, from what I've heard."

Wesley snorted to himself. Giles had no idea that this had nothing to do with resurrections at all. He simply wanted to see if Darla was alright. The poor thing must've been frightened terribly after Buffy's attack. And the thought of that...bothered him.

"You're welcome to wait in my study, if you wish", Wesley offered. "Make yourself comfortable."

"Y-yes, thank you, that is most gracious of you", Giles faintly smiled.

"Actually...if you don't mind", Darla's voice chimed in from behind them. "I'd actually like to sit in on this researching...who knows? Maybe something I got from the Powers That Be will be jogged if I listen to some of your texts."

Wesley gave her a concerned look. "Are you sure you're not tired, or-"

"Wesley", Darla smiled. "If I wasn't up to it, I wouldn't have asked to be included."

Giles looked at them both, and nodded. "Very well. I suppose three heads may be better than two. Uh, Buffy, Angel, if you need-"

"We'll give you guys a holler", Buffy nodded. "Go. Read. Do your...Watcher-thing."

Wesley turned to Darla and extended his arm. "After you. Ladies first."

Darla chuckled. "How very gentlemanly of you."

Wesley couldn't help but to smile as she curtsied graciously and walked past both Watchers en route to Wesley's study. Was it his imagination, or did she just flirt with him?

Giles shook his head at Wesley and chuckled. "This city really has changed you, hasn't it, Pryce?"

The smile vanished, leaving a sobered and weary expression on the younger man's face. "More than you realize, Rupert", Wesley sighed as he headed for his study, Giles not far behind. "More than you realize."

That left Buffy, Angel and Lorne standing in the center of the lobby.

"Well, now that's all settled in", Lorne chuckled happily. "Man, the tension, the drama, all the blossoming love stories..."

As Lorne spoke, he hadn't noticed that now Buffy's green eyes hesitantly locked with Angel's brown ones, a thousand emotions, a thousand memories flickering within their eyes, within their minds...

"...wow, this place alone makes James Cameron's 'Titanic' look like an underwritten episode of 'Love Boat', let me tell you, with all the..."
As Lorne turned around, he found both Buffy and Angel completely oblivious to what he was saying, staring into each other's eyes as if the rest of the world had faded out, leaving only the two of them.

Lorne instantly picked up on the angsty, romantic Romeo-and-Juliet vibes coming off both warriors in waves. Not to mention a little reading on what was about to happen...

"Oh...OH!", Lorne caught on. "Yeah, well, I can see you guys have a lot of catching up to do, soooo...I'll, uh, just go see what Fred and Gunn are up to, help the girls get all settled...Buh-bye." No sooner had he uttered his farewell than he quickly darted up the stairs as fast as his green legs could carry him.

Buffy shifted from foot-to-foot, taken aback somewhat by the intensity of his gaze, and at the same time, not intimidated at all. After all, he was still the same. Even after all the obvious changes, the hotel, the new friends, even some of his clothes, one look into those deep, sad brown eyes and she could still see him, could still see her Angel. The same man she had given her heart to long before she even knew she gave it away. She could still feel him, her heart, her soul tingling with recognition. And warmth. And love.

Angel felt himself drowning in her sparkling green eyes. Darla was right. No matter how long he had lived, no matter how many women he had known, in every sense, not Darla, not even Cordelia...none of them could hold a candle to Buffy. How could they? For so long, she was his world, his sun, his beacon...his goddess. The years apart from his beloved had been long and hard, and unbearably painful, for both. It reflected in his lover's eyes, all the hardships, the deaths, the suffering endured...a mirror image of his own eyes. His own quest. But she still sparkled. He could still feel her spirit, light and kind and still pure. Still so beautiful...

"So", he finally said, after seemingly an eternity.

"So", she echoed, smiling tentatively.

"Here we are", he chuckled, a bit nervous.

"Right", she nodded. "We are...here. You...and me."

"We."

"Us."

At that, another uneasy silence fell between them. SO much to say, so complex to know where to begin...

'Oh, boy', Buffy thought uneasily.

'Oh, man', Angel winced mentally.

Both ex-lovers came to one conclusion.

This could get ugly.'

To Be Continued…
Next chapter...we'll take a peak at Whistler and Lindsey's road to L.A...and you won't BELIEVE who their mystery pick-up is! Plus, the tension at the hotel between Buffy, Angel and the gang rises up, and evil will turn up the heat on our heroes.

Update expected within 1 week's time...who knows? Maybe sooner:)

See ya! And thanks for reading! (And waiting)

Yours Always, ;)

Jean-theGuardian
"43 bottles of beer on the wall, 43 bottles of beer...", Whistler was 'singing' at the top of his lungs. If one could call his grating, scratchy, eardrum-popping rendition of the open-road classic singing, that is.

It had been almost 15 hours on the road that Lindsey and Whistler had traveled on. Already, thanks to some quick driving, the pair had driven through several state-lines. Lindsey had spent a good deal of money on the re-fills for gas along the way, regretting slightly giving the waitress at the bar so much of his pocket money.

"If one's not there, I don't care, 42 bottles of beer on the wall..."

And regretting even more that he hadn't brought a pair of earplugs or a mouth gag with him…

"Ooooh....41 bottles of beer on the wall, 41 bottles of—"

"Would you SHUT THE HELL UP! That's the SIXTH time you sung that friggin' song since we drove past Montana! Gddamn, it's hard enough keeping awake on only two hours sleep per switch, I can do without the damage to my eardrums!" Lindsey snapped, irritably.

"What else is there to do on road trips?" Whistler shrugged. "Besides, if my singing is as bad as your driving, it'll be enough to keep you awake until we get there."

"Which is where, again, by the way?", Lindsey asked, tersely. "Look, I just took off from my life AND my job to follow you on this little venture of yours, ransacked my own apartment to grab a bag of very dangerous, highly contraband Wolfram & Hart materials even I forgot about, driven halfway across the western United States territories, and I STILL have no idea where the hell it is that we're going, when we should have made a beeline right for L.A!"

"Just trust me, okay, slick?" Whistler simply replied. "Besides, we're almost there...Make a left, right now."

Lindsey looked up at the green interstate road sign just above the car as he turned left:

'Seattle, Washington. Next Left.'

Lindsey looked at Whistler in confusion. "Seattle?"

"Yup. Grunge Music, Space Needle, Starbucks...where else to find a gay ol' time, eh, pal?", Whistler grinned.

"Don't call me 'pal'. I'm not your pal, Whistler", Lindsey ground out.

The half-demon smirked. "Boy, with people skills like that, no wonder the big W & H didn't put you in their P.R. division."
Lindsey said nothing as he continued to look on into the darkness of night, Seattle's skyline dazzling in the nearby distance. Traveling with Whistler had been a...trying experience. Between the half-demon's atrocious singing, his habit of spilling coffee onto the passenger seat of Lindsey's pickup, and the demon's little insights and one-liners, it was a wonder Lindsey hadn't picked up his shotgun and blown him halfway across the interstate. Unfortunately, he knew that without Whistler's help, he had no way of getting to and helping Darla. And for that, he simply gritted his teeth, lowered his head and drove onwards into the city known as the Home of Grunge…and Starbucks.

He sighed as he found himself dwelling on thoughts of Darla. Lindsey had known many girls in his day. It was pretty easy, when one looked like he did. But out of all the girls, all the women he had known, in every sense...none of them were anything like Darla. Which, in a way was good. After all, going around with vampires was only asking to get eaten. But there was something about her that captivated him, from the moment he first laid eyes on her. The night that Wolfram & Hart resurrected her in that wooden crate. He remembered the wildness in her eyes, the look of confusion, of fear, something feral and dangerous, and at the same time, innocent. Terrified. Of course, he later learned that she was much more dangerous than he thought. But he still felt her seductive pull on him, anchoring him like a harbored ship. He remembered the late Holland Manners's words of advise in regards to his fixation with the beautiful vampire: "Remember, Lindsey. Healthy Attachments, hmm?" But then again, if he wanted healthy attachments, he never would've joined Wolfram & Hart in the first place, when he understood what it was they stood for and represented well before he signed his contract in his own blood.

He sighed lightly to himself as his thoughts drifted back to Darla. He remembered their very first kiss. The hesitance at first, then a slow, tender buildup, the softness of velvety lips, the subtle fragrance of jasmine, Darla's fragrance of choice. When he closed his eyes, if he waited long enough, he could still remember her taste, that sweetness, like honey clovered sugar...It was simply and undoubtedly the best kiss he had ever had in his life...

"Thinking about her again, aren't ya?", Whistler smirked knowingly.

"None of your business", Lindsey testily replied.

"I can tell, you know", Whistler continued. "Whenever you start thinkin' 'bout her, you get that distant, 'Days of Our Lives'-ish stare, like when Bo was staring into Hope's eyes after he rescued her from that-

"Are you always this annoying, or did you make a special exception just for me?", Lindsey snapped.

"Little bit of both", Whistler smirked. "Look, I'm just sayin', is all...she's inside you, boy-o. In your head, in your heart...it's not too often a chick's got that kind of love mo-jo on a guy, but then again, Darla did always have a knack for drivin' guys koo-koo for Cocoa Puffs." He let out a wolf-whistle. "Now THAT was one dame built like a brick house-

"I have a shotgun here, you know", Lindsey growled as he shot the half-demon a death glare. "Unless you fancy having whatever qualifies for you as brain matter dribbling out of your ears, you'll stop talking about Darla.

"Ooh, and now he's defensive", Whistler said bemusedly. "But I just got to understand something...you know, the African Killer bee, in mating season, will pursue a mate up to 100 miles from its course. That's a long way from the hive. I know your motivation here. Darla. There's a queen bee if I ever saw one. But what's your drive for the chase? Is it really love? Is it the vision of the brave knight in shiny...pickup truck, that spurs you on to the princess? Is it the thrill of the hunt? Simple lust? A guilty conscience after what you did to her, or-"
"What I DID to her? What the hell are you yammering about," Lindsey said as he turned to him with an angry glare.

"Eyes on the road," Whistler shouted. Lindsey quickly returned his focus to the car, and with a quick, hard steer, he pulled his truck out of the path of an oncoming SUV, thus averting disaster.

"You see what you made me do," Lindsey snapped, pounding angrily on the steering wheel.

"Hey, I'm not the one who can't juggle a conversation and drive a car at the same time, Slick", Whistler retorted.

"Conversation? You've been flappin' your gums 'bout every 3 seconds about my personal life, and you call that conversation," Lindsey scowled. "And what the hell was that about guilt? What the hell do you know 'bout my guilt?"

"He-llo? Work for the Powers that Be, here, remember? Besides, I can sense it coming off you in waves, little demon aspect of myself I sometimes use," Whistler rolled his eyes. "You know what I'm talking about, McDonald, don't play me like you don't."

"Care to elaborate or is this some sort of new torture you've devised to keep me awake behind the wheel?" Lindsey sighed frustrated.

"Oh, 'd be more than happy to, cowboy", Whistler smirked. "You once, still do, probably always will be in love with Darla, correct? Not like I can blame you, I mean, if she was any hotter, they'd have to use a fire extinguisher on every room she steps into...but I digress. But whoa, flash-forward...now, suddenly your esteemed now-ex employers dish you the files on her records... syphilitic heart condition, terminal. She's got, what, a month left, two if she eats right? Poor thing, and she just started on her second chance at life, too. Sad thing, really..."

"Your point?", Lindsey tersely asked.

"Let me finish", Whistler said. "Now, you're in a panic. You use up all the connections the big W & H has, get about a billion opinions on the matter, which all come up the same: no luck, no dice. Nothing in the medical world can help our girl. But we both know there are other ways of getting around the stuff or mere mortals, don't we? Like say, oh...bringing in a psychotic blood member of her vampire family to turn her back into a vampire against her will?"

Lindsey's jaw clenched and his knuckles grew white as he kept his hands on the steering wheel, trying ever-so-hard not to submit to the urge of throttling him with his bare hands. "You don't know anything about that."

"I know you were the one who brought her in with your W & H flunkies, burst into her hotel room, tasered Angel 'till he nearly passed out as your boys held 'im in place until the Sane-less Wonder could do the deed—"

"They told me to do it! You think it was MY idea, that I wanted to do it! I was following orders back then, OK!", Lindsey practically roared.

"Isn't that what Eichmann said during the Nuremberg trials," Whistler shook his head.

"Just shut up, ok," Lindsey gritted out. "If you only knew how much I've thought about that since then, the nights of sleep I lost just thinking about what I—"

"What you did," Whistler finished, looking down casually at his fingernails. "Betrayed her. That's what you did, Lindsey. Handed her over to Drusilla practically on a silver platter. You didn't sell
The bitter memory flashed through his mind as he recalled the night Darla was turned again. He regretted that every day of his life, for having set Darla up and held in place as Drusilla sauntered in with her empty, crazed gaze as she drained Darla of her blood, and her human soul. He wanted so badly for her NOT to die, to be taken away from him, that he resorted to a last, desperate and evil resort. But he still remembered the look in Darla's eyes, the fear, the sheer horror, and, when they met Lindsey's eyes, a look of hurt. Of betrayal. Before the light completely dimmed in her eyes altogether, as death clouded them. Albeit temporarily. But the heartbreaking look on her face would be enough to haunt him the rest of his nights.

Now at last, he had an opportunity to make it up to her, something he once thought impossible. To make amends with her...and maybe, if things could be different this time, if she could see how different HE was this time...maybe he could finally earn that which he had longed for since his eyes met hers...her love...

"Okay, right turn...and we're here!", Whistler's voice snapped Lindsey out of his thoughts.

Lindsey parked the car at a screeching halt. He took a look around the surrounding area. It was a fairly seedy-looking area, few streetlights, few lights at ALL, except for the blue and green neon glow of a large sign in front of a large apartment-like building, one of many in a complex. And the people shuffling in and around the area looked like the types that you would normally cross to the opposite side of the street if they went your way.

"Hmm, startin' to miss home already", Whistler sighed at the sight, with a hint of nostalgia in his voice.

"I'll bet", Lindsey muttered. "So let me get this straight...this new player, someone who's supposed to make a difference in the Ultimate Final Battle between Good and Evil...is going to be found at a club called 'Sky's The Limit'?

"What, you were expecting shiny pearly white gates, Cochran, Jr? Please, this isn't some cheesy B-movie", Whistler replied as the pair started to walk towards the entrance of the club. "It might not look like much from the outside, but the club's got a killer rep...relax, I'll handle the fees, OK?"

After giving the bouncer a $20, the two men walked down a flight of stairs into the bottom of the building...where a large bar/club full of partying 18 to 20-somethings were, either rocking out to the tunes of the band playing, hanging by the bar, or standing about making idle, but loud chitchat.

Lindsey took a glance around the smoke-filled room, shrugging. "I don't get it", he shouted over the noise to Whistler.

"WHAT?", Whistler shouted back.

"I said I DON'T GET IT! SO WHERE'S THIS MYSTERY GUY OF YOURS?", Lindsey shouted, cupping his hands over his mouth to project his voice. "OR DID YOU JUST DRAG ME ACROSS THE INTERSTATES TO GET A GOOD PARTY ON?"

"HARDLY THE CASE, McDONALD, BELIEVE ME, YOU'RE NOT EXACTLY MY KIND OF PEOPLE", Whistler replied as his eyes traveled onto the stage, smiling. "BESIDES...WE ALREADY FOUND HIM.'

Lindsey scowled in confusion, following Whistler's eyes towards the stage. His gaze rested on the band playing onstage. He saw the name of the band emblazoned on the drum set. 'Dingoes Ate
My Baby'. He was drawn at sight to the dark-haired lad singing loudly his lyrics mixed with teen angst and rebellion, with a style so uniquely his own. The crowd responded loudly, several lighters flying upwards, heads bobbing wildly up and down and girls screaming, calling his name: 'DEVON! DEVON!'

"That's him, isn't it?", Lindsey shouted to Whistler.

"WHAT?"

"I SAID 'THAT'S HIM ISN'T IT?'", Lindsey shouted louder. "THAT'S YOUR NEW PLAYER?"

"WHO, HIM?", Whistler scoffed. "PLEASE. THAT KID WOULDN'T KNOW APOCALYPSE FROM A-MINOR...BUT THAT GUY", Whistler pointed to the one next to Devon. "THAT'S our PLAYER."

Lindsey took a glance at the young man playing lead guitar. He was incredibly focused on his playing, so focused that he barely looked up to register the crowd. But when he did, he would smile coolly, in a way that made the girls near him swoon and faint. He was small-ish, perhaps no more than 5'6", and he had blonde, spiky hair, fairly good looking. And he had a look in his brownish-hazel eyes that hinted of something more within him, something deeper than the skin-scratched surface.

Lindsey looked at Whistler, incredulously. "THAT'S YOUR PLAYER? HE SEEMS A LITTLE...SMALL, DOESN'T HE?"

"HEY, IT'S NOT ABOUT THE SIZE, IT'S HOW YOU USE IT, McDONALD", Whistler replied.

"THAT WHAT YOU TOLD YOUR LAST DATE?", Lindsey smirked.

Whistler scowled at him. "SO, I SEE THEY ACTUALLY TAUGHT YOU GUYS HUMOR AT EVIL, INC., HUH?"

"HOW DO YOU THINK WE GOT THROUGH ACCOUNTING BLUNDERS DURING CHRISTMAS EVE?", Lindsey shot back.

"WHATEVER", Whistler shrugged it off. "NOW,LET'S SEE WHAT WE CAN DO TO GAIN A LITTLE ACCESS."

The final chords of the song died down, with lead singer Devon MacLeish crowing "THANK YOU, SEATTLE! WE LOVE YA'S!" to the roar of the crowd. Devon and the band took off down the stairs, some of their fans flocking over to them, but held back by hefty security personnel. Devon, of course, in rock star fashion, motioned for a few select young ladies to join he and the band.

"Man, how great is this life?", he crowed to the lead guitar player. "Come on, Oz, TELL me you didn't miss this."

Oz shrugged non-chalantly, as was his fashion. "Here and there. Sort of."

Ever so epigrammatic, also as was his fashion.

"Sort of!", Devon blurted as one of his scantily-clad groupies hung off of him adoringly. "Come ON, man! Things have been great! We have that meeting with that guy from Columbia Records
next week, Oz, next WEEK! This could be the big break we've been waiting for in, like, years!"

"We'll do well", Oz nodded, while re-tuning his beloved guitar. "We just have to keep our Dingoes sound and there we'll have it."

"Man", Devon sighed as he autographed the top breast of one lovely groupie. "Imagine what'll happen if we get this deal? Man, the tours, the fame, the spotlight, the money...we'll be up to our EARS in chicks, dude."

"I heard that can be hazardous", Oz quipped, keeping his cool straight face as he said so.

A pretty blonde with heavy make-up, a tight black top and even tighter black mini-skirt with matching boots sauntered up to Oz as he was packing away.

"Hey", she smiled, her voice dripping with adulation.

"Hey", Oz smiled back, his voice as laid-back as he was.

"You know, I think guitar players are sooo...sexy...", she drawled as she trailed a well-manicured hand up his arm, smiling seductively.

"Well, we are pretty cool", Oz chuckled.

"Totally", she smiled. She plucked a piece of paper with her number on it from her side-pocket, drawing it out slowly and placing it in his hands. "Call me?", she smiled as she walked away, her hips swinging ever-so-scandalously.

Oz said nothing, only gave a half-smile and nodded. Ever the calm one. It was as if he was made of ice or steel, his composure was so unflappable. He showed little emotion and spoke even fewer words at times. But there was no denying the goodness in his heart. Or his courage when the time called for it. His days as a Scooby member battling vampires, demons and dark fiends on the Hellmouth of Sunnydale had brought that out in him.

Devon shook his head. "Man, you never change, do you, Oz? Lead guitar, you could have any chick you want in this building, and you're still the same lizzy-faire guy you were back in Sunny D."

"LAISSEZ-faire, Devon", Oz corrected. "Staying in high-school long enough to finish taught me that one."

"Man, it's a wonder you never married that cute little red-head you used to run with...Willow, was it?"

At the mention of her name, Oz's eyes flashed with both love and pain passing through them, a thousand memories, most good, some bad, all memorable passing through his mind and his heart with the mention of that one name. The name of the woman who was, still was, perhaps always would be, the queen and owner of his werewolf heart. Willow Rosenberg.

"Devon, you're my boy, and all", Oz said, as he turned to the lead singer, his face more serious than usual. "But we don't talk about Willow. Ever. Understand?"

Devon was slightly taken aback by his friend's demeanor. "Okay, okay! Geez, man, don't have a cow! I didn't know it was like that between you and your high school ex, alright?"

"Whatever", Oz said as he grabbed his guitar. "Look, I'll meet up with you guys later, okay? I'm taking a little walk."
"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Oz, wait, man!", Devon hastily said as he stood up as Oz did. "Dude, was it something I said, because I didn't-

"No, it's cool, man", Oz smiled, shrugging it off. He knew Devon was a little dense, but his heart was always in the right place. "I just...wanna take a look around, you know. Seattle, and everything?"

"Well, how about me and the guys come with you?", Devon suggested, smiling. "We'll live it up, man, paint this town red-

"Nah, it's cool, Dev", Oz shook his head. "I just...got to do some thinking, is all. Get some Oz time."

Devon nodded. "Cool...we'll meet you back at the hotel, yeah?"

Oz nodded as he exchanged his handshake/high-five with his childhood friend. "Cool. Later." They went their separate ways.

Truth be told, Devon's words did have a meaning to Oz. Especially since they involved Willow. He sighed as he remembered his beautiful, sea green-eyed goddess with the strawberry-kissed hair. He hadn't heard from her in almost two years. He thought about calling up Sunnydale, asking about her. But in the back of his mind, he held himself back. Oz knew full well she had a new life there, with a new...girlfriend. That Tara person he met when he returned there years ago. He knew she was happy, which is what she deserved. And truth, be told, he really didn't feel like Willow telling him over the phone how wonderful Tara was. It was weird enough hearing that from your ex, but it was nothing short of torture when one still was madly in love with said ex.

And yet, he held no grudge. Not against Willow. How could he? He left her, he reminded himself, time and again. The Veruca incident wasn't just a passing thing, an adventure to be looked at with boastful pride. It was a sign. A warning sign. Written with screaming blood-red letters. Leave now. Leave before it's too late. For you. For your friends. For her. Veruca may have been a cold-blooded killer, but her words hit a deep truth within Oz, a truth that made him realize the danger that lie in wait within.

You're a wolf all the time and this human face is just your disguise. You ever think about that, Oz?

For the longest time, hell, every couple of precious moments alone, that was all he thought about. There were lines once, faint and unstable, but existent nonetheless. He knew who he was, and he knew what he was. What he became every three nights of the month, a tragic side-effect of the bite his young cousin Jordy passed on to him in a moment of innocent childhood play, and who he was since the moment his eyes first met the light of this world. But the more frequent the transformations got, the more the hunger, the craving, the raw, primal instinct took him over, the less certain he became of the lines that held the boundaries within him. The less certain he became of where the line between man and beast was anymore, no black and white, only a growing shade of gray.

Who was he, really? Was he Daniel Osbourne, 'Oz' for short, son of Timothy and Rita, lead guitarist for the Dingoes, Scooby gang member, silent genius, stoic poet, and first true love of the beautiful Willow Rosenberg?

Or was he the wolf, the insatiable, blood-thirsting, restless beast, predator of the night, tooth, claw, and roaring howl? Was he man? Was he beast? Human or animal? Hero or monster?

He needed to know. If he ever wanted to find true peace of self, and perhaps, one day, find love's
way again, he had to know.

He still wasn't even sure of what prompted him to return to the states, after spending an extended period of time in Tibet under the tutelage of a wise sensei named Master Shan'tou, who taught him how to control the wild beast, the werewolf that clawed away within his body, his mind, his heart, howling, screaming for release. After he learned how to reign in the primal power within, he simply returned, hooked back up with Devon and the Dingoes, and inspired by the trials he endured over the last few years, wrote and performed music that had landed the Dingoes some widespread success in the underground circuit, enough to draw the attention of Columbia Records, who scheduled a meeting with them in the very next week. It was nice to be enjoying some success after a while for Oz. But still, he would have traded it all away in a heartbeat if he could just see Willow one more time...

*Life's a winding road,* Oz thought as he walked out the side exit of the club, hands in his pockets. *And the paths we take are numerous, split like the branches of the redwood trees...and if the stars above were the Gods, and the Gods were truly benign, then surely one path, one branch may one day lead my travels back into your arms, my love. My heart. My Willow.*

"Daniel Osbourne?", a voice called behind him.

Alert, Oz spun around in a heartbeat to find two gentlemen, one dressed in the most ridiculous attire he'd seen in some time, just a few feet from him.

"That's the name on my driver's license", he replied coolly.

Lindsey looked at Whistler and rolled his eyes. "You know, somebody ever tell you that calling out people's full names when behind them is really creepy?"

"Creepy, but it grabs your attention, don't it, Slick?", Whistler shrugged, turning back to Oz. "Hey, no worries, pal, we're not here for trouble."

"Dark alley, by myself, two strange guys know my name when I've never seen either of them before...no, no cause for alarm", Oz said simply.

"Sorry, he does that a lot", Lindsey shrugged. "I'm Lindsey, Lindsey McDonald. And the creepy little guy with the porkpie hat here is Whistler."

"Hey, watch it!", Whistler said.

"Nice to meet you", Oz said stoically. "You're not gonna, like, try to kill me, are you?"

"Don't worry, we're white hats...well, sort of", Whistler said as he looked at Lindsey for a brief moment before turning back to Oz. "Actually, we kinda need your help."

"Do tell", Oz half-smiled.

"Believe me, there's plenty to-"

"Wait", Oz silenced them with a hand gesture, before sniffing the air around him. He could pick up their scents, all right, but he smelled something else in the air...and that something...no, some-things...didn't smell human...

Whistler tensed up, evidently sensing it, too. "Uh, McDonald? You wouldn't happen to have that shotgun in hand right now, would you?"

Lindsey looked at him, suspicious. "Two of them, actually. Why?"
"We're not alone", Oz said. Just as five dark-robed figures dropped from above onto the streets...surrounding all three men.

And wielding sharp, curved blades.

Lindsey shot out both hands, drawing forth two spring-propelled sawed-off shotguns, tossing one to Whistler, while reaching into his pocket and pulling out a switchblade, tossing it to Oz, who handled it readily.

"I shoulda known you were going to get me into trouble", Lindsey said to Whistler as he set his stance in defensive position, pumping his shotgun.

"Well, don't say I never brought a little spice into your life, Lawyer Boy", Whistler said, praying silently to the Powers that they would live long enough to get to L.A...

Meanwhile, back at the Hyperion...

Buffy stood opposite Angel, somehow managing to pry her eyes away from the burning intensity of his gaze, which, at the same time was soft as well.

"Um, hate to break this fun little moment of awkward silence here, but...one of us has gotta say something soon", Buffy smiled almost shyly.

"I guess so", Angel sighed. "And the smart money's not on me."

An involuntary smile crept onto her face from his unwitting joke.

"So, uh...apocalypse stuff non-withstanding, how are you?", Buffy asked, grimacing inwardly from the lameness of her question. How ARE you? Yeah, that's a GREAT ice-breaker, Summers.

"Ok, I guess", Angel replied semi-cheerily. "You?" O-kay, I GUESS? What the hell was that?, he chastised himself mentally.

"Swell", Buffy mirrored back his smile. "Um...so...I, uh...umm...like your hotel. It's very...hotel-y."

Hotel-y? Is that even a word, Buffy thought.

Hotel-y? Now that's a weird one, Angel wondered.

"Thanks", Angel nodded. "I, uh, just put some new carpeting around."

"Oh, that's...good", Buffy nodded back.

They were stalling. And both of them knew it. Dancing around the plethora of life-altering issues that lay before them, past, present and the oh-so-important future. Both of them knew the roads that they had to take to deal with those issues. It was a road too familiar for the both of them, for it was a road they had traveled together and apart. The way of pain. Of anger. Of rage. Heartbreak. Sorrow.

Loneliness.

Apparently, they weren't the only ones who noticed.

Skip rolled his eyes. "Oh, for the love of Pete! Can we just fast-forward to the angsty, teary, heart-
wrenching part of this whole deal? At least that's more amusing than watching you two tip-toe
around the issue like a bunch of 12 year-olds."

Buffy and Angel both whirled on him, their eyes narrowed.

"You know what I find amusing?", Buffy asked in a falsely sweet voice. "How's about I find
Willow and her finger and get her to put a little Infinite Agony hurtin' on you? What do you think,
Angel?"

"Sounds hysterical to me", Angel replied in his low, icy voice.

Buffy could have sworn that the metallic demon had gone a few shades paler. "NO! No, no, no,
that-that-that's okay, really!"

"Are you sure? I mean, she's just a few doors up", Buffy asked, feigning concern.

"I'm sure she'd love to stop by, Skippy", Angel smirked, almost dangerously.

The mercenary demon chuckled nervously. "No, I, heh-heh, don't think that's really necessary, I
__" "Oh, Wi-llow!", Buffy shouted up the stairs in a sing-song voice.

"OH, GOD, no!", Skip shouted back. "Okay, I'll be quiet, I won't say another word, I swear! Just,
please…keep her as far away from me as possible!"

Buffy shook her head. Underneath all of the arrogance, the snappy comments and the foreboding
sense of doom the demon tried to convey, Skip was just a big, scared weasel. Out for anything
that involved saving his own metallic skin. Then again, most demons she'd known turned out to
be such.

Sighing, the little blonde slayer turned back to Angel. "Maybe we should…discuss…somewhere
in a more quiet setting…? Y'know, without any creepy baddies listening in."

Angel smirked a little. "Liking that suggestion."

"What can I say? Born to problem-solve", Buffy smiled, making a grand gesture to herself with
her arms in mock cockiness.

"And she remains ever so humble", Angel said in mock sarcasm, though smiling through the
comment, as much as Angel could smile, anyway.

"Hey, you save the world a couple of times over and you'd be gloating, too", Buffy shrugged.

Angel whirled and took two large, menacing steps towards the entrapped demon. "Here's the deal.
We're going to leave now. Take this conversation to a more private place. In the mean time, you
are not to make any noises, you are not to speak to anyone within the confines of this building.
You so much as sneeze, Willow can be down here in the blink of an eye…and she won't be happy
with you at all."

He turned around taking a few steps back towards Buffy, when he paused and
turned back to Skip. "Oh, and by the way, do you breathe?"

Skip shrugged. "Well- -"

"Don't." Angel said, that one word filled with as much stark warning and foreboding as possible.
Skip swallowed hard, suddenly quite nervous.
"We'll be back," Buffy added, with a smirk on her face. "Not like you could but...Don't go anywhere."

The two warriors turned their backs to the mercenary demon and began their ascent up the stairs to a more private setting for their conversation.

Skip scowled after them. "That chick's really startin' to bug me."

There was silence, mostly. Not a word was spoken as Dawn walked side-by-side with Connor, the other girls a step behind them as Connor led the way across the long halls of the first floor of the Hyperion.

Dawn was expecting him to start with the asking of the questions, or anything, to start a conversation going. But he mostly kept on walking, leading them further up the stairs, through the corridors. She was getting fairly anxious. There was a lot she wanted to know about this handsome new boy, who just happened to be the son of two vampires. Little did she know that Connor felt the same, anxious, even nervous about approaching her.

"So", Dawn said, looking up at Connor. "You're Angel's son, huh?"

The boy visibly stiffened, the topic of his parentage not a happy one for him. "So I'm told", Connor replied stoically.

Dawn was slightly taken aback by the non-chalant attitude of the boy, but shook it off. "Well, you sure can fight like him...it's not too many people that can give my sister a run for her money."

"Buffy...the Slayer...that's your sister?", Connor asked, his eyes turned to Dawn in interest.

"Technically, yes and technically...not exactly", Dawn sighed. "It's complicated."

"There's a lot about this world that is", Connor sighed back.

"You're telling me", Dawn rolled her eyes. At that, Connor looked at her and gave a hint of a smile.

"So, uh, Connor", Amanda spoke up. "Have you lived in L.A. your whole life?"

"No", he replied. "I'm...pretty new here."

"Truth be told, a lot of us are", Molly shrugged. "I've never even seen America until my Watcher sent me here with Mr. Giles a few months back to find safe haven with Buffy and her friends..." She paused before regretfully adding, "before he was killed, I mean."

Connor turned to Molly, a spark of interest in his eyes. "Your voice...you're from London, England, aren't you?"

Molly's eyes lit up with pride. "London-born, yes...just a stone's throw away from Piccadilly Square! How did you know?"

"My fa...", Connor paused, correcting himself. "Someone I used to know...talked to me about it a lot once. He taught me how to recognize different English accents." He broke off, staring back ahead. "Always wondered what his homeland would look like with my own eyes."

Molly sighed, nostalgia laced in her voice. "It's a beautiful country...by now they should be entering Spring-time, the blossoms starting to bloom on the trees in the city parks, just a few
shades warmer, not too stuffy, but just enough to..." She broke off, wistful. "Oh, how I do miss home."

"Cheer up, Molly", Amanda patted her on the back. "I'm sure you'll get back there soon enough...besides, springtime's starting in California already. And-and we have a lot of blooms around here and stuff!"

"Assuming we all live long enough to see them bloom", Vi muttered.

"Don't say that, Vi", Amanda chastised.

"Why not? In case you haven't noticed, we're not exactly making leaps and bounds in our training", Vi pointed out. "And after Annabelle, and Chloe...I don't know if even Buffy or this Angel guy can protect all of us from the First...or this new big bad, whatever it is-

"Hey", Dawn said, as she turned around, facing the three of them. "That's where we stop. Look, you guys don't know Buffy, and you haven't seen what she can do, or what Angel can do, for that matter. But I have. When they're together, they've stopped, like, a BILLION apocalypses...apocalii, whatever...they suffer, and they hurt, but they always come through, because that's what they do. We're going to get through this. ALL of us. Because neither of them will have it any other way.

"And I don't know about you guys, but I, for one, am a little sick and tired of having to be worried about. I want to make a difference, I want to help. And you guys should, too. I mean, you're all Potential Slayers, with powers that are, like...way bigger than anything I've got. So, instead of worrying whether or not Buffy and Angel can save our asses, we should start thinking about what we can do to help cover theirs. Because that's the only way we're going to count for anything around here other than helpless victim or potential worm food. Okay?"

The others looked at Dawn in awe, seeing as how this girl, who had nothing particularly special about her in appearance or fighting power, was suddenly taking a commanding role. Inspiring them. Connor's eyes lit up at her words. So, she was apparently as brave as she was beautiful. This only increased Connor's attraction to the smaller brunette, furthered his desire to get to know her better.

She turned to Connor. "So, our room?"

Connor shook his head, snapping out of his thoughts. "Oh, yeah, uh...this way."

After taking a few more steps, Connor stopped the group at one of the many white doors. He opened the door wide, letting the girls take a full-on view of the beautifully refurbished room. Red silk curtains lined the spacious windows and a breathtaking balcony view of the sun-lit city. The room was lined in emerald-green wallpaper, two enormous king-sized beds to the right of the room. There was a mid-sized refrigerator built into the wall, a small kitchen within it, its new utilities shining in all their factory-fresh glory.

"Oh, my God", Vi breathed.

"It's beautiful", Molly smiled excitedly.

"Can I live here?", Amanda wondered aloud. "I mean, it's not like I have...school, or anything..."

Connor looked at Dawn, who was as wide-eyed as the rest of the girls. "Like it?", he smiled, anxious.

"Like it? Well, DUH!", Dawn chuckled gleefully at Connor. "God, I had no idea that Angel's
hotel was so beautiful. I've got to come here more often."

"Not the worst of things that could happen", Connor smirked. Dawn responded with a shy smile. Was it her or was Connor just hitting on her? Not like that would be a BAD thing or anything!

"Yeah, it's got pretty much everything here", Connor said as he took a few steps into the room, the girls a pace or two behind. "Nice view, big screen TV, plenty of room-"

His sentence was cut off as he felt the sharp impact of something breaking over his head, shattering everywhere. Connor, stunned, stumbled to the floor, slightly dazed.

The girls let out a startled cry as they all took a step backwards.

"Connor!", Dawn shouted as she came to his side, concerned. She looked up at his attacker.

"G-g-get AWAY FROM ME!" A frightened looking, pretty young girl with an unbecoming bruise on her chin was standing just a few paces away, wielding a very sharp, jagged edge of the shattered vase she used to hit Connor over the head with.

Everyone stared at this girl in shock. "Ooh, I didn't know the room came with a free homicidal maniac", Vi quipped, but with worry in her eyes.

"Vi, please", Molly chastised her quietly.

"Wh-what's going on? Who's that girl?", Amanda asked, confused.

Connor gazed up at her, shock and regret in his eyes. The girl from the factory. The one he almost got killed...he had forgotten about her.

"Oh, God...", he trailed off, stunned.

The girl's eyes ticked to Connor and her eyes went wide.

"YOU!", she hissed. She pointed the sharp piece of pottery towards him, but still kept her distance, like a frightened animal trapped in a corner. "Get away from me, you-you-you freak! You did this to me, YOU did!"

Dawn stood up slowly. "Uh, look, um...you...I-I don't know what's going on here but-

"Oh, God! Did he kidnap you, too?", the girl asked, fright in her eyes.

Dawn's eyes scrunched in confusion. "Kidnap? Connor? What's she talking about?"

Connor slowly stood, his eyes remorseful and sad. "Um, yeah, I...kinda forgot to tell you guys this, but-"

"He KIDNAPPED me!", the girl shrieked. "Took me to some weird, smelly dark place, tied me up...you were trying to kill me!"

"I'm sorry", Connor said quietly.

Dawn stared at him in disbelief. "Connor...You...you...kiddnaped her? But...why?"

"Long story", was his short response.

"You mean...she was taken here...against her will?", Molly asked, her eyes scrunching in confusion.
Vi's startled glance shot back to Connor. "But, I thought you were...like, one of the good guys", the redhead said, taking a hesitant step back.

"He IS one of the good guys!", Dawn said defensively, before turning back to Connor, with an uncertain gaze. "Right?"

"I'm on your side, I swear", Connor said, clutching his head.

Dawn took a step towards the girl, but froze when she saw that the girl held up that sharp slice of pottery up higher, letting out a slight whimper, fear in her eyes.

"Look, I'm not going to hurt you, okay?", Dawn talked slowly, her hand up in a pacifying gesture. "No one here is gonna hurt you, not even him."

"Yeah, right!", the girl sarcastically said, her eyes flickering with fear, the pottery slice trembling in her hands.

"You don't believe me, huh?", Dawn nodded. With that, she extended her hands away from herself, and dropped slowly down to her knees. Her big blue eyes met the girl's frightened blue-eyed gaze, a sense of calmness taking over Dawn.

Molly stared at her in disbelief, baffled as to what she was up to. "Dawn, what are you-

"Guys, get down like I'm doing", she told the group, without taking her eyes off the girl.

"Did you go postal and forget to give us the memo, Dawn!", Vi exclaimed, exasperated. "Look at her, she's got a...sharp thing!"

"And, helloo? No weapons?", Amanda chimed in, apprehensive. "How are we going to protect ourselves from-

"That's the idea", Dawn said calmly. "No weapons, no stance, no chance of us being able to hurt her...we want to show her we're serious about the whole 'We're-not-going-to-hurt-you' thing, right?"

Sighing, Molly was the first to drop to her knees, mimicking Dawn's position, arms extended away from her body. Amanda then came next, followed by an ever-hesitant, very wary Vi.

"If I get killed, Dawn, I'm SO telling Buffy on you", Vi sighed.

Dawn took a sideways glance at Connor, who watched this whole event transpire with wide eyes. "That goes for you, too, Superboy."

Connor, although miffed by Dawn's little nickname for him, dropped to his knees with the same position.

The girl was watching all this, confused and scared as to what was going on. Dawn gave a tentative smile towards her. "See?...Can't exactly come charging down the gates of Helm's Deep, now, can we? We're just like you...sort of...kind of...in a way...we're not here to hurt you, honest...just put the pottery down, take a seat and give us a chance."

The girl was very apprehensive, at first, but somehow, she sensed there was truth behind Dawn's words. There was just something about this girl she'd never seen before that lulled her into trusting her. Besides, from a kneeling position, they couldn't really do much to her.

"W-will...will he...will he keep away from me?", she asked, pointing to Connor.
"If you want...I promise", Dawn said. "Come on, take a seat. You're among fr...well, good acquaintances."

After a few tense moments, the girl nodded, slowly seating herself down on the wooden cedar floor, Indian-style, settling the shard just alongside her, in case.

Connor was amazed. She didn't look it, but Dawn was quite a leader. With nothing but words and a risky idea, she had managed to disarm the girl and, at least for now, earn her trust. Connor, knowing himself, probably would've tried a more...hands-on approach. But Dawn didn't need it. She was truly remarkable, he could tell, and he'd only met her for a few minutes.

Dawn exhaled in relief, before smiling again, lowering her hands back into her lap, the others following her lead. "Guess here comes the name game...I'm Dawn. Dawn Summers. And these here are my friends, Amanda, Molly, and Vi...and he's Connor, but I guess you've...already met, huh?"

"Hi", came the hesitant greeting from the crowd.

"What's your name?", Dawn asked, smiling slightly.

The girl swallowed before softly, and nervously uttering her name. "A-Anna...?"

"Anna", Dawn nodded, smiling. "That's a pretty name."

"Um...thanks", Anna said hesitantly.

"How long have you been up here?", Amanda asked.

"I don't know", Anna shook her head, confused. "One minute I was getting home, trying to finish off a history paper due this week...then there was this guy with his...face all messed up in an alley, tried to...and then he came", she motioned at Connor. "He...saved me...and then everything went black, I woke up in some dark, scary place...he kept talking to himself the whole time, and I was just trying to convince him to let me go home and....there was the crazy lady with the knife, and another one, dressed in white and...last thing I remember was this flash of white light, and then I woke up here."

Dawn gave her a soft understanding look. "It must've been scary for you...I know, I was...kidnapped myself once, or...a couple of times, actually. It's scary, I remember...though I try hard to forget about it sometimes."

Dawn's thoughts flashed back to the most terrifying moment of her young life, being held captive by the hell goddess Glory, to be sacrificed in an unholy ritual that would've destroyed the entire universe. She remembered well the fear, the terror, the dull aches and pains in her body...the terror when Doc, a man-reptile worshipper of Glory took it upon himself to bleed Dawn dry to open the portal. In her darkest nightmares, sometimes, she could still feel Doc's blade slice across her stomach, could smell her own blood seeping out of her, could feel the flashes of pain as her skin was pierced methodically, precisely, by the icy blade...before she could wake up either screaming, or covered in sweat.

"My mom's gonna kill me", Anna said, almost in tears. "God, she's probably worried sick about me right now."

"Well, here, use this", Dawn said, plucking out her cell phone from her side pocket, handing it over to the new girl. "Call your house up, talk to your mom. Talk as long as you like. Hey, you don't even have to give it back, I hate that thing anyways. Been trying for weeks to get my sister
to get me one of the new Motorola's."

"Thanks", Anna sniffled.

"We had a friend once named Anna", Molly piqued up. "Well, actually, it was Anna-BELLE. She...was killed a while back, though. 'ts a terrible thing that happened to her. Poor Annie." Molly trailed off sadly, brief flashes of her friend Annabelle running through her mind, of that fateful night that the first Turok-han unleashed upon the Slayer and the Potentials claimed Annabelle's life as its morbid prize.

Anna took this in. "I'm sorry", she said, in a sympathetic voice. "She must've been close to you guys."

"Well, not entirely", Vi said. "I mean, I didn't even meet her, neither did Amanda, but...she was about our age. It was pretty scary to deal with, you know, when somebody as old as you, like you, just...dies?...It's weird to think about."

"I know the feeling", Dawn sighed. "God knows how many friends, kids I went to school with, I grew up with...they dropped like flies back in Sunnydale, and that was even BEFORE all this started happening."

Anna's eyes widened. "Sunnydale? You mean that freaky town upstate? With the giant snake thing and everything? THAT'S where you guys are from?"

"Actually, it was less a giant snake, more like a humongous DEMON...snake", Dawn clarified as best she could. "Well, see the thing is...Anna, there's a lot of...there's things that you don't...I mean, what I'm trying to say is--"

"Vampires are real. So are demons", Connor cut in. "They've roamed the Earth and much of the universe for thousands of years now. We fight them on a daily basis."

Dawn shot him a glare. "Way to be soothing, Tact Boy. Why not just go up and lunge at her so you can send her screaming out of here to the police even FASTER?"

"What? It's not like I'm lying", Connor shrugged. "Besides, how else could she understand why I almost did to her what I...almost did?"

"What, you mean when you kidnapped her at knifepoint, bruised up her face and apparently nearly had her killed?", Dawn said, her voice harsher than she intended to be.

"I didn't use a knife, I...", Connor broke off, flustered. "You wouldn't understand."

"Sure, I wouldn't!", Dawn said sarcastically. "What, being kidnapped myself a few dozen times, what COULD I understand about fear, terror and the uncertainty of walking out alive! Or about the fact that you LIED to me, to US, about Anna?"

"I didn't LIE!", Connor snapped. "I said I was sorry, okay! I just...forgot."

"With all due respect, Connor, it's pretty implausible to forget about a girl whom you abducted and hid up in this hotel", Molly noted.

Amanda agreed. "You can forget homework, you can forget to rewind videos..."

"But forgetting a crime you committed? Not very likely", Vi finished.

Connor inwardly flinched at the word 'crime'. He had felt guilty enough already about it, but Vi's
label on his actions put a different perspective on the situation. A crime. He committed a crime. An act of evil. An act against another innocent being. Acted the way not a man, not a normal person...but the way a demon would act. That which he most feared was inside him, in his blood, brewing beneath the surface...an evil thing...no, he wasn't...he wouldn't allow himself to be that...

"I know", Anna said.

"See? She agrees", Vi pointed out.

"No, not that" Anna said. "About that stuff about vampires and demons?...I know. I know they're real."

At that, the group's heads collectively whipped around at her, and they all exclaimed one single, unanimous thought aloud:

"WHAT?"

"I said 'You're sleepin' on the floor', got it, Frodo?", Spike snapped irritably.

"But there's two beds here!" whined Andrew huffily.

Faith smirked. "One of which I called, might I add. And since being a slayer in addition to a girl works in my favor, I say, either way, I'm restin' comfy tonight." She patted the bed she had thrown her stuff onto with affection.

"You know, th-this isn't exactly team-friendly behavior", Andrew said. "Imagine how the Fellowship of the Ring would've ended up if they hadn't learned the values of friendship, comradely and sharing. They never would've lasted long enough to make a final stand against the evil Sauron and his mass of murdering hordes to save Middle Earth and make their bonds of friendship last a lifetime."

After briefly trailing off to bask in the afterglow of his brief surmise of the Tolkien classic, the skinny teenage kid looked expectantly at the two warriors, hoping that his short-lived tale would've inspired them to have shared at least one bed.

When both sets of eyes returned simultaneous blank stares at him, effectively dashing his hopes, he threw up his hands in an exasperated, almost feminine manner, defeated. "And besides, the floor carpeting makes me chafe!"

"Too much information", Faith snorted.

"And not our problem", Spike shrugged. "Unless, of course, you fancy tryin' to take the bed for yourself, mate."

"I say you guys fight for it," Faith grinned wickedly.

Andrew visibly blanched an even paler-than-his-normal color as his eyes shot from Faith to Spike, who himself seemed to be pondering the idea.

"You know, luv? That don't sound like too bad of an idea", Spike smiled, flashing a rather sinister looking grin. "What say you, little fella? Wanna give it a go wit' ol' Spike?"

"Uh, that's okay! Heh, no problem, really", Andrew quickly replied.

"You sure?" Spike asked, his smile growing even wider as he motioned to get up off the bed.
"Oh, come on, it'd give your fellow joystick buddies a real tingler when you tell 'em you went toe-to-toe with a real live demon…hell, maybe I'll even let you keep some of your fingers."

"NO!", Andrew exclaimed, his voice going a few octaves higher than normal…boys. "I can do the floor. Floor guy, they call me! I am so…", he paused as he pointed down twice, gesturing to the carpeting "}…the floor." He sat down Indian-style on the carpet, hands folded neatly in his lap, staring intently at both his roommates.

Sighing, Faith said, "Okay, I know I'm going to be sorry I asked, but is there a reason why you're looking at us like we've got Ewok masks and making the Klingon sign?"

"Uh, actually- -"

"Got your genres mixed up, pet", Spike corrected for Andrew. "Ewoks are the little furry blokes from that Star Wars set and the Klingons are the tall guys with the wrinkly foreheads from Mr. Roddenberry's Star Trek saga."

Faith raised an eyebrow at the blonde vampire, who shrugged. "I've had some time to sit down in front of the telly, mind you. I'm not hard on for it like Spanky over there."

Andrew breathed a sigh of relief. "Kudos, Spike, for your well-versed…ness, of sci-fi Dom…I was just basking…this is a pretty cool little moment, huh? Us three, sharing this room…the three murderers of the Scooby Gang…we've walked on the dark side, we have" he continued, his eyes narrowed in a comical impersonation of an ominous glance. "}…Tasted the forbidden fruit, danced with the devil in the pale moonlight…death row, is what they call- -"

"Bloody Hell!", Spike said, his patience with the boy on end. "Either lay your nappy little head to rest or I'll put you to bloody rest."

"Sorry", Andrew said, as he stood. "I guess I'll use the bathroom now. I haven't urinated in about 5 and a half hours and I've really had to go bad."

"Again with the overabundance of information", Faith rolled her eyes.

"You need a lifesaver in case you fall in, Spanky?", Spike snickered. "Can't have you floatin' round in LA's sewer system. God knows what sort of unmentionable things live there…you might scare 'em back up here."

Completely oblivious to the snarky remark, Andrew shook his head. "No thanks, I'm cool", before he closed the bathroom door.

"In 'is dreams", Spike snorted.

Faith let out a small laugh and shook her head. "He's a hoot, isn't he?"

"Yeah, a regular breath of fresh bloody air, 'e is", Spike muttered, as he pulled out his carton of cigarettes. "Thank God I don't breathe."

"He's a good kid", Faith shrugged. "Wish he came with a mute button or an 'off switch' sometimes, but…"

"Well, guess I'll have to get used to the little nancy. 'll be stuck wi't 'im for a bit. Figure if I can go a whole night without rippin' 'is tiny little head of 'is even tinier little shoulders, I'll be good to go." He pulled out a cigarette to Faith. "Wanna bum one?"

Faith smiled. "Ooh, read my mind." She plucked the cigarette from his hands, their fingers slightly
grazing each other as she did. Spike noted the difference, her warm fingers contrasting towards his often cold ones.

"Need a light?", Spike asked, rather lazily, as he lay backfirst against the headboard of the bed.

Faith shook her head. "Got it covered, man", she smiled as she pulled out a shiny black metal Zippo lighter, a rather impressively decaled metallic skull and crossbones emblazoned on the front of the black metal of the lighter.

Spike whistled, impressed. "Nice lookin' piece ya go there."

Grinning, she replied. "Got it from an old boyfriend."

"Anniversary present or somethin'?"

"More like a 'Thanks-for-cheating-on-me-so-I-can-steal-and-pawn-all-your-stuff' present", the dark-haired Slayer replied.

"Hmm…remember who he did the deed with?", Spike asked, intrigued.

Faith let out a distasteful 'pfft' before answering, "Some red-headed bitch from a local Wal-Mart store he worked with…Imagine this, I'm 16 years old, comin' home to his place, even wanted to surprise him with a 'Metallica' T-shirt I caught him eyeballing in a mall a couple weeks earlier? I'm all giddy like a school girl, thinkin' he'll get a real kick out of it…I walk in, stupid shirt still in hand, walk right into the living room, and much to my naive little heart's surprise I find my boyfriend…with a pair of long legs wrapped around him, with Miss Wal-Mart sprawled under him like a rug, lookin' like a scene from some cheesy porn-flick."

"Ooh", Spike winced. "Had to hurt."

"It did", Faith shrugged, before smiling wickedly. "Of course, not as much as it did him after we…discussed my feelings."

"I'm guessin' there was less talkin', more fist-meets-face action", Spike grinned as he raised his eyebrows at her.

The raven-haired beauty smiled coyly. "Now what would make you think somethin' like that?"

"I'm also guessin' that's about the time you recently discovered your fantastic new Slayer powers", Spike took a guess, after puffing his cigarette.

"Pretty much around then", she nodded. "Anyway, after I beat the ever-holy crap out of my jack-off now-ex, I grabbed everything I could into a sack. His favorite clothes, cash, credit cards, jewelry, the works…burned the clothes, spent the cash, hocked the jewelry, even wrecked the car…but I liked the lighter I found in his drawer. Figured it was a keeper."

Her face flickered a brief orange glow with the light of the Zippo glaring off of her. She leaned back and lazily let out a jet stream of smoke, staring straight ahead at the wall.

Spike watched her with interest. Here she was, a slayer, bunking the same room as he was. Spike knew slayers, killed a pair of them back in his wilder days. But it was clear that Faith was an anomaly. She sensed something about her that he'd seen only glimpses of in Buffy. She had a type of joy of living within her, mingled with the experience of the horrors of life. Faith had a certain type of spark, a power. Her very aura screamed danger and warning, but it was still hard to take one's eyes off of her. She was the hot stove that mom and dad scolded their children to stay away from, but one couldn't resist giving it a tap, even if you'd be burned in the end. But then again,
Spike never did care much about doing what was good for him. One didn't earn the reputation of the legendary William the Bloody by playing it safe.

"I heard that Buffy put you in charge of training the potentials," he said. "How's that workin' out?"

"I'll know as soon as I start," Faith said. "Never been much for the leadership ring, and now I'm playing teacher? A little weird."

"Well, you know what they say", Spike shrugged. "Desperate times…"

"Desperate measures," Faith smirked. "Guess B's gotta be feeling the heat to put one of her former arch-enemies in charge of training the wannabe's."

"She did what she thought was necessary," Spike said, looking at Faith intently. "Nothin' more, nothin' less, pet. And she put you in charge of it, then she thought that you were the best one up for it."

"Hey, not like I'm complainin' or anything," Faith said. "It was just…unexpected, is all."

"Well, welcome to life in Sunnyhell," Spike replied.

"Dude…we're in L.A. now", Faith reminded him.

"Don't matter where you go, luv. The Hellmouth's vibe is felt everywhere. Even here in the Land of Fruits and Nuts."

"Yeah, well, guess those nuts fall pretty far…how else would people like us end up back here?"

"I'm not a people", Spike groused.

"Yeah, but you're not exactly a demon, either", Faith ventured. "Not really, anyway. You've got a soul now."

"But not a pulse", Spike retorted, simple, absent of aggression.

But Faith kept at it. "Buffy and Willow filled me in on some parts…told me 'bout how you've been helping out to fight this First guy…out on the front lines, keepin' the peace…some pretty damn heroic stuff. Don't figure the old you would've been up for any of that."

"Hmmmph…if you'd only met the old me", Spike smirked, not bothering to tell her about the first few years he spent in Sunnydale in his less soulful, more chip-having days, when he threw himself into the heart of the battles against the powerful Hellgoddess Glory, among other fiends, all for the love of one little blonde Slayer.

He got so enraptured in his own thought that he almost didn't notice Faith looking at him, a knowing smile and a tiny little glint in her eyes.

"What?", Spike asked, baffled.

"Oh, I know a bit more about you than you think, William the Bloody", Faith said.

Spike snorted. "What, just 'cause you popped open a few textbooks and went research-girl on my life story makes you think you got the inside scoop on my head? Not likely, pet."

"Well, I did do a little reading", Faith said. "But I find the best way to know about someone is from a more…hands-on approach."
Spike raised an eyebrow. "Not that I don't mind the mental visual but...meaning?"
"I mean that I've met you before...you know, pre-soul", Faith smirked.
"Is that right," Spike smirked back. "Doubt it much...'d be hard to forget meeting you for the first time."
"We did, though", Faith said. "I was kinda wearing a different body."
Spike gave her a slow and steady once-over glance, before grinning somewhat lustily. "Pity."
"You seemed okay with it." Her eyes met his, brown orbs dancing with something hidden, a private joke that he was on the cusp on being in on.
Spike's eyes widened as he got it. "A body swap", he smiled. "With Buffy."
Faith laughed softly. "Give the vamp a prize...so she filled you in on that whole deal?"
"Told me it went down", he shrugged with nonchalance. "Failed to mention who was driving 'er skin around."
"Gives a whole new meaning to 'walk-a-mile-in-my-shoes', huh," Faith grinned.
"Should' a known", Spike mused. "I knew somethin' was off 'bout her that night, but..."
"You were too busy trying to keep your load from blowin' to give a crap, huh," Faith teased.
"Huh, you wish," the blonde vampire scoffed, smiling.
"No, actually, I think you were the one wishing that night," Faith slyly grinned at him. "I know that look you were giving me way too well. You were dying for a taste, weren't you?"
"Already dead," Spike retorted smartly.
"You know what I mean, smart-ass," Faith rolled her eyes playfully.
"Oh, so I'm the one who wanted to give you a good shag when now you're talkin' 'bout my ass," Spike wiggled his eyebrows.
"Eat me, Blood Boy" Faith retorted, but with a bemused smile on her lips.
Spike gave her a slow once-over look, his eyes trailing from her black leather clad legs, stretched out before her, slowly up her flat stomach, roaming over her other...features on her tight red cut-off t-shirt, before gliding to her face, blood-red lips, pouty enough to make a man wish many a things, stopping at a twin pair of big, dark chocolate pools of eyes.
He flashed a most seductive smile, almost leery, but enough to be flattering. "Any time, any place, pet."
She raised her eyebrows, smiling like a Cheshire cat. "Sounds like a challenge to me."
A lazy smile spread slowly across his lips. "I'm always...up...for a challenge."
She gave him a slinky smile. "I bet you are."
Oh, yeah, was there ever a connection. They'd barely spoken for about five minutes and already,
they could sense that. They could sense the mood becoming more and more intimate, and even though Spike was a cold corpse, even he could feel the heat starting to rise…

Whoosh!

And then the moment was shattered.

"Hey, guys, check it out," Andrew exclaimed as he walked out of the bathroom, bouncing up and down on his heels in giddiness. "The water in the toilet turns blue when you flush it! It's like, 'I go poo, but my poo go blue!'"

Off of Spike's red-faced, peeved look and Faith's muffled giggle as she shook her head, Andrew brought himself to awkwardly ask, "Um…did I come in the middle of something?"

Faith turned to smirk at Spike, whose knuckles were squeezing even whiter than normal. "Come on…play nice with the geek."

Spike forced a grin that looked like he swallowed a rotted lemon. "In fact, Spanky, I think you did."

One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand thr—oh, bugger it.

He vamped out, growling, effectively brushing aside his chain of thought to attempt to keep a cool head.

"My supper."

Andrew let out a girly scream as he bolted for the door as if the devil himself were behind him. Which, in fact, wasn't that far off, as Spike was hot on his heels. "Come 'ere, ya scraggly little pansy-pickin' git! I'll tear you a new one or three!"

Faith laughed out loud this time, shaking her head. "Boys."

Elsewhere…

Nightfall – Birmingham, Alabama

"Girls….dirty, dirty girls."

The man wiped his blade clean, the black cloth he used now soiled with the moisture of the freshly spilled blood of the knife's ending target.

At his feet, the body of a beautiful, young brunette lay silent.

Motionless.

Eyes wide, forever freeze-framing the horror of her final moments on Earth. Her blood became a steadily increasing pool of vile-smelling crimson, the site of it very much out of place with the otherwise beautiful moonlit courtyard in the center of a small redbrick church. Quiet now, as compared to when the dying scream of a young teenage girl pierced the rural night's gentle lull.

The handsome young man's dark eyes sparkled shockingly with a sense of accomplishment as he studied his latest victim. Perhaps more shocking was his otherwise innocent appearance…black pants, black shirt, and a priest's collar around his neck. To the common eye, he would have
appeared to be a preacher, a local pastor listening to confessions, comforting the lost with soothing words of forgiveness. A Sheppard to line the stray lambs on the path of righteousness.

The sight of a supposed man of God standing over the body of a dead girl, blood-streaked knife in hand, would be quite a graphic distortion of that image.

"And then he answered, 'It is written, Do Not tempt the Lord, thy God'," he said, quoting the sacred Biblical passage as he slowly circled his victim, like a vulture hovering about the carcass of a fallen cub.

"And yet, there you went, dressin' like a filthy whore, your perfume dancin' in the air like some fly trap, followin' me all the way here... didn't think I'd see, now, did ya, li'l miss?"

His voice, laced with a laid-back Southern twang was a gentle, almost a condescending tone, like a father reprimanding a toddler for running with untied shoelaces. "Didn't think I could see behind those pretty little eyes and a blossomin' little body and see that you were tryin' to corrupt me? To test my faith? Reckon I had to teach you this the hard way: A man's true strength... is his conviction." He took a deep cleansing breath. "So let it be written."

"So let it be done."

He didn't even blink at the registering of a new voice. Without turning back, he calmly answered the owner of the voice, "You ain't never gonna stop with the poppin' in, poppin' out hocus-pocus, are ya?"

The First, in the form of the murdered girl, smiled as she, it, entered the courtyard. "Oh, and here I thought you enjoyed me watching you work."

"Almost as much as I know you like watchin' it yourself," the man drawled.

"Cocky, aren't we," the First raised an eyebrow.

"Well, if you'd been on the roll I've been on since we put your plans in motion, hell, you'd be struttin' like a rooster in a hen house", the 'clergyman' shrugged.

"You've done well", the First conceded. "You've exceeded my expectations, Caleb. You're first few rounds in the field went smoothly. Organizing the Harbingers..."

"Quite nicely, might I add," Caleb smirked. "'Em boys can fight some'in fierce, now."

"Executing the murders of the Potential Slayers around the world...", the First continued.

"Without a hitch," the false preacher added.

"And, of course, setting up the bombs that destroyed the Watcher's Council and everyone in it."

"Ain't nothin' like the cleansin' fire to clean that place of sin," he crowed.

"Which is why I need your help a little sooner than... planned", the First sighed, discontent.

"I live to serve", Caleb said. "Tell me what you need, and thy will be done."

The First turned its attention to the cold body of the girl whose skin she was wearing. After staring down at the dead girl, she turned to Caleb. "Who was she?"

"Her?" He shook his head disdainfully at the corpse. "'Nother dirty girl. This one was a might filthier 'n the others. One of 'em potential slayer ilk." He studied the girl's face, for a moment. "At
least she was. 'Till she met me, that is."

"Slayers", the First sighed. "They're like cockroaches. Just when you think you get rid of one, more of them spring up."

"Then I'll squash 'em like ones," he said. "A bug's only as strong as the shoe that crushes the life outta 'em. And there's lots more to be purified."

"We have a little change of plans", the First said to him. "The one encharged with the vessel has compromised our security…"

"Ain't that jus' like a woman", Caleb sneered. "Always mussin' up a good man's work."

"Which is why I need you to rectify the situation", the First finished. "Send a team of your finest to L.A."

"Los Angeles?", Caleb frowned. "Why we gotta send 'em there for? I thought Sunnydale'd be our Jerusalem, and instead you're sendin' the boys to Sodom & Gomorrah?"

"The Slayer is there", the First patiently explained. "As is the Champion."

Caleb's eyebrow raised. "The Slayer? And Angelus, as well?"

"Unfortunately", the First sighed wistfully.

Caleb seemed to be a bit apprehensive now. Clearly, he was looking like he was having second thoughts. "Um, heh, not that I'd question your methods and all, but, takin' 'em both out? Seems like a tall order for the boys to handle. Not that I couldn't do it by m'self, course."

The First chuckled. "Oh, ye of little faith. Trust in my plan, Caleb. I haven't steered you wrong yet, have I? Was it not I who granted you the strength of 20 men in your fist alone?"

"Of course", Caleb bowed his head. "Forgive my doubt."

"Just do as I have told, Caleb. Everything will present itself soon enough", the First said, looking again to the corpse of the girl. "She won't be the last dead little girl."

"Speakin' of which", Caleb said, turning to the First. "The Slayer. When am I- -"

"Soon", the First said. "Patience, sweet Caleb. You'll meet her soon enough. Your time will come."

"Jus' remember. I'm your good right hand", Caleb said with a touch of awe in his voice.

"I know," the First replied. "Stick with me, and you'll be the one to separate the righteous from the wicked. And the righteous shall burn eternally. And the Slayer and Angelus will be the first to burn." The First looked Caleb directly in the eyes, a gaze of pure malice and evil, a look only able to be generated by the most evil, awesome force to have ever been known.

"Burn for me."

Caleb looked at the brink of tears as he smiled gleefully. "Hallelujah."

TBC….

Next chapter…As the Scoobies and the Fang Gang race to find a cure for Cordy, Connor and
Dawn hatch a rather scary plan of their own. Can you spell T-R-O-U-B-L-E?

Buffy and Angel have a talk…’cause we know those are ALWAYS easy, right?

And some startling new revelations come to light!

BTW, I'm going to just stop promising when I update. Truth is, I haven't published this for a while, because I wanted it to be absolutely perfect. I refuse to write crap underneath my name. Only the best for you guys! But I swear, I won't stop until this is finished, and finished it will be, just as soon as school, work, family and other stuff eases up on me.

Read, review, suggest, and let me know what couples you'd like to see. I'll take EVERYTHING into account. Promise!

See ya!

Jean-theGuardian
"I can't believe the nerve of that Buffy," Kennedy fumed as she paced the floor of her room. "I mean, it's bad enough that she took away my job as trainer for the girls, let alone gave it away to that ticking STD-carrying-slut bomb…"

Willow nodded absently as she sat on her bed, tuning in and out of her girlfriend's rantings while sorting out her magick supplies in her bag. In light of the recent developments, Willow thought it'd be best if she focused on her arrangement of supplies to ready a few protection spells if things got nasty. No sense going to war against the most powerful evil alive without being prepared. Besides, in all honesty, Willow found little sense in Kennedy's arguments. It was perfectly clear that Kennedy's logical thinking was still a work in progress.

"…But now she's all 'Hey, Willow, come on up into my room, let's be gal pals, forget about your girlfriend'. I mean, I know she's the Slayer, but seriously, where does she come off acting like such a little bi--"

"Kennedy", Willow said sharply. "I…I think that you're trying to read into Buffy's actions a little too deeply. We're in the middle of a war. An actual, no-holds-barred, anything goes, anyone dies war, here. Buffy's just doing what she thinks we need to survive--"

"Oh, what a surprise!", Kennedy snapped. "The infallible Buffy, never wrong in the eyes of Willow. You just love sticking up for her, don't you?"

"You don't get it", Willow sighed, patiently.

"No, I don't! And I'd like to!", Kennedy said, her arms folded across her chest. "You just let her walk all over you, over me, all of us and you just-just take it! You're the most powerful one out of all the people under this roof! She says that the Slayer is about power, right? Who's more powerful than you? No one! Not Buffy, not Spike, not that Angel guy…no one!"

"It's not all about power", Willow said. "Well, yes, to a degree, it is. But if there's one thing I've learned from my time in Sunnydale, Kennedy…power? Doesn't get you to the finish line by yourself. Power comes in groups. In numbers. You can't lose sight of that, sweetie, or you're dead."

Kennedy sighed, looking ever petulant as she did. Willow knew that the girl had been through a rough deal, her Watcher being killed and being forced to flee from her family, but she could see that Kennedy was trying to take on too much. She was like the little girl trying to wear big sister's
clothes. It was admirable, cute even, but in the end, she just couldn't fit those shoes.

"Whatever", Kennedy shrugged, stopping her pace at a table, picking up her crossbow to inspect it. "So...what's the deal with this Angel guy, anyway? Everyone was making such a big deal getting here in a hurry, and all I heard from you or Buffy or Giles was how important it was to get to Angel and how he'd help us out. What, is he some sort of superhero or something?"

"Close. He's a vampire", Willow said nonchalantly.

Kennedy looked up from her crossbow at Willow, her mouth agape in shock. Then she shook her head and chuckled. "Good one, Red. Almost had me going there for a sec. Vampire, yeah, right!"

But when she saw that Willow's face remained still and quite serious, her laughter stopped. "Omigod...you're not kidding, are you?"

"Nope."

Kennedy took a moment to process this, and then her anger took over. "Buffy...man, I can't believe her! She led the whole lot of us 200 miles from shelter and home base to bunk with a vampire? And she didn't even bother to tell us about this! Who the hell does she think she is?"

"Kennedy, relax", Willow sighed. "Angel's not your average vamp."

"Yeah? Well, next time I see him, let's see if he dusts like your average vamp!", she said, holding up her crossbow menacingly.

"Whoa, down, girl. Angel has a soul, okay? He's a good guy", Willow said.

Kennedy wrinkled her brow in confusion. "A soul, huh? You mean, like Spike?"

"I wouldn't let Angel hear you say that", Willow smirked.

"This is just...it's a lot to take in", Kennedy said. "I mean, Buffy's the Slayer, right? If this Angel guy is a vampire, shouldn't he be, I don't know, dust?"

As Willow unpacked her clothing from her suitcase, she explained. "Well, Buffy and Angel have a bit of...history together. They go way back, like years back."

Kennedy was quickly able to put two and two together. "They used to go out, didn't they? Buffy and Angel?"

"Big yuh-huh", Willow smiled, thinking back to those sweet, innocent early years. "They had, like, this epic romance. Picture Romeo and Juliet, only up the angst wattage to about a bazillion and two."

"And, you know, if Romeo were a blood-thirsty, creature-of-the-night", Kennedy added, almost snidely. "Spike, Angel...huh, that girl's got a real hard-on for monsters."

"Angel's not a monster!", Willow said defensively. "He's a sweetie. He's nice and kind and he saved my life about a billion times. So, he's no monster. Well, assuming that he remains broody guy and never, ever, ever experiences a true moment of perfect happiness."

Kennedy was quite puzzled. "Okay, Red, I'm going to need you to rewind that last bit, okay?"

Willow sighed as she continued. "There's this thing with Angel's soul. It's got some fine print on it, complete with Gypsy size-one font. Angel was cursed with his soul a long time ago. But the
catch was, the soul had to make him suffer. If he ever experienced a moment of pure or perfect happiness, his suffering would end and —"

"I'm guessing the frog doesn't turn into a magical prince and whisk away to the Disney Land Castle, huh?", Kennedy snorted.

"Only if you consider Prince Charming to be a psycho, mass-murdering, fish-killing demon", Willow finished, inwardly flinching at the memory of her finding her fish, stringed together, dead in an envelope, courtesy of said demon. It wasn't so much the fact that Angel killed her fish that creeped her, though she did adore her little clownfish. It was the idea that perhaps the most ruthless and evil vampire that ever lived was actually in her room, close enough to have made her share the same fate of those fish she found.

Kennedy was still in the dark. "Huh? Willow, elaboration needed here?"

"When Angel experiences a moment of perfect happiness, the curse is lifted, which means he loses his soul and he turns back into the sleazy evil vamp he used to be, Angelus", Willow explained.

"Angelus?" Realization slowly set in on the young Potential. "Wait a minute...Angelus? The Angelus?", Kennedy exclaimed, her eyes widening in bewilderment. "'Scourge of Europe' Angelus?"

Willow was stunned. "You mean you've...what have you heard?"

"Lots of stuff! My Watcher made it a point to make me study all the noteworthy vamps, with Angelus being Public Enemy number 1!", she said, her fists balled in anger. "Puppies nailed to walls, marking victims with crosses in their skin, tearing up convents...You mean to tell me that Buffy just put our lives, the lives of the last few potentials around the world, in the hands of the most evil vampire son-of-a-bitch who ever lived?"

"He's not evil, Kennedy, not anymore", Willow tried to calm her. "He's got a soul now, he's-

"A monster!", Kennedy snapped. "Willow, I've read about him, he's dangerous! I can't believe that you allowed Buffy to do this!"

"I trust Buffy", Willow said. "And I trust Angel. Look, Kennedy, if it wasn't for the both of them, I'd have been dead years ago...either that, or the bride of Robo-Demon". She shivered at the distant memory of her encounter with Moloch the Corruptor, who disguised himself as a student..."
on the internet, and lured Willow into a trap that nearly forced her to become his bride. "Look, we can trust them, okay? Besides, like you said, I've got power. If Angelus decides to come out and play...I'll just turn him into a cute, little, furry mousy", she said with a smile.

"I guess that means we should go buy a cat", Kennedy said, a tug of a smile coming across her lips. "A really big one, that likes to play with its meals before it chews them to bits."

Willow let out a small chuckle. Kennedy finally smiled and closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around the slightly smaller Willow's waist. "I like when you do that", she said.

"Do what?", Willow asked.

"Make something fun out of something serious", she smiled as she met her eyes. "It's what makes you Willow."

"Well, it is pretty cool to be one of the most powerful witches in the known world", Willow grinned.

Kennedy's eyes shifted down as she eyed Willow's lips. The stare shifted into something else. A kind of longing. Desire.

For her.

"Come here", Kennedy said in a low, husky tone.

Their mouths crushed together as they felt their mutual heat radiating against each other. Willow's approach was gentle, soft, like a feather floating on air. Neither imposing, nor demanding. But she could rapidly see that Kennedy wasn't up for any beating around the bush. Her tongue practically forked its way into Willow's mouth, rapidly searching through, what started as a sweet, soft kiss starting to become rougher, full of need, demand, want.

"Whoa, hey, slow down, huh?", Willow murmured through the kiss. But Kennedy's lust was starting to get the better of her. Willow felt her girlfriend's hands sliding down her back and down onto her backside, cradling the cheeks. But when she felt her butt being squeezed hard, her eyes widened. It was rather painful, considering Kennedy's added strength as a potential Slayer.

"Okay, then!", Willow said quickly as she jumped back from their embrace, leaving Kennedy in an unsatisfied, confused, and somewhat angry state. "Um, I-I-I think that maybe we should, uh, you know, take a break for a minute, huh?"

"What?", Kennedy asked, irritated.

"Um, I mean, uh...clothes!", Willow quickly covered. "My clothes are still unpacked. We should unpack everything. You know, set up...get the bed all clear for...later?" Willow asked hopefully. In truth, she was just stalling for time. Kennedy's approach had totally wigged her.

Kennedy looked at Willow for a beat, and then smiled. "Oh...I get it."

"You do?", Willow asked, hesitantly.

"Yeah, I do", Kennedy slyly smiled. "Want to break in the bed the old-fashioned way, huh?"

"You mean jumping up and down on it and trying to touch heaven?", Willow laughed nervously. "'Cause me and Xander used to do that all the time when we were kids-"

"You know what I mean, silly", Kennedy said as she leaned in a pecked Willow on the lips.
"Sure, I'll help you set up your stuff…and maybe later, you'll get a chance to see some of my stuff", Kennedy smiled wickedly.

The veiled implication was not lost on Willow. "Okay", she practically squeaked.

The girls went about folding and packing Willow's clothes into the drawers. Kennedy was placing two of Willow's favorite tops, a bright orange tee and a silky black one, into the drawers, when something fell underneath them. Kennedy noticed and picked up the object. The innocence of the object dumbfounded her. A little red-haired Pez witch dispenser, complete with matching black witch's hat.

"Never knew you liked Pez", Kennedy chuckled as she looked over at Willow, who was folding clothes. At Kennedy's comment, she turned and found her Witch Pez in her hands. Willow's eyes widened and she hastily grabbed it from her hands.

"Um, that was a…gift", she said, before placing it on top of her dresser.

"Someone gave you Pez for a gift?", she snorted. "What, the 99 cent store all out of those Dum-dum pops and plastic flowers?"

Willow looked up at Kennedy and frowned. "I thought this was very sweet", she said, defensively. She looked down at the toy candy machine thoughtfully, smiling to herself. "Only Oz would be able to think something up like that."

Now it was Kennedy's turn to frown. "Oz? Your old boyfriend Oz?"

Willow nodded. "Yeah. It was kind of a theme present."

"I don't suppose you gave him a little Pez werewolf to match?", Kennedy said, trying to mask the jealousy in her voice.

"Nah. No such luck, they don't make a Pez werewolf", Willow said absently, her mind wistfully traveling back to her high school days. "Believe me, I know…I looked through the entire Southern California region. I did manage to find him a Pez Scooby-Doo, though. I figured, 'Hey, if you can't find a werewolf, why not go for the wacky cartoon dog?'" She chuckled as she remembered the conversation she and Oz had once at her locker during their senior year, when he first presented her the present.

Kennedy looked down at her shoes, a strange feeling of insecurity creeping up on her. "I see…and what else of Wolf Boy's did you keep around? Some old chocolate wrappers? Love notes? Class ring? Letterman jacket?"

Willow shook her head. "Oz wasn't much into chocolate, I lost the love notes years ago, class rings are expensive, and no, no jacket. Oz was more into music and the Dingoes than into sports. Which was cool, because he was a pretty kick-ass lead guitar."

Kennedy thrust her hands into her pockets, clenching them hard. "Gee…sounds like a real, fun guy", she ground out.

"Yeah, he was", she sighed. "Yeah, he had the whole werewolf thing going on, but…I dunno, it kinda made him all the more sexy, actually."

Kennedy had about all she could take. And she knew just how to alleviate that.

"Or then again, maybe he was just giving off some extra hormones or something," Willow still mused. "Oz always was a-"
"Okay, you know what?", Kennedy said abruptly. She took one large stride towards the bed, where she unceremoniously batted away the remaining folded clothing off the covers, scattering a rainbow of shirts, blouses and pants over the carpeted floor.

"Hey! What are you-"

"I think that's enough time getting our clothes away", Kennedy said as she slid her hands down Willow's sides.

"Now it's time…", she lowered her voice, as she leaned in and gently kissed Willow.

"To get our clothes…" Another kiss.

"A little…" And another.

"Dirty," she practically whispered as she smiled seductively.

Willow gulped. "B-b-but….clothes! A-and blouses, and all those wrinkles-"

"Can wait a little bit" Kennedy smiled mischievously. "Let's see if I can teach you a few tricks Dog Boy couldn't learn…"

Willow was offended by the crass reference to Oz, but before she could protest, Kennedy had dove in and swallowed her tongue whole. Whatever protest she was about to mount were muffled by the pressure of Kennedy's lips, as she was lowered to the bed.

Willow instinctively kissed back, but the words 'Dog Boy' floated in the back of her mind. So much that she could barely enjoy her kiss with her girlfriend. She felt Kennedy move her lips to trail kisses down the side of her neck, settling on her collarbone, and taking residence there, and raising a friggin' family, as well.

Willow peaked open her eyes as Kennedy remained latched onto her neck and absently turned her head to the dresser. Her little Witch Pez dispenser stared back at her with its little dotted black eyes.

She thought back to when Oz first gave her that Pez toy, her senior year…

"What's this?", asked Willow, as Oz handed her a small bundle wrapped somewhat clumsily in old newspaper clippings.

"It's a gift", he smiled.

Willow was surprised to say the least. "What's the occasion?"

Another small smile. "Pretty much you are."

Willow opened the bundle and was blown away at what she found. "It's a little Pez Witch!", she exclaimed, thrilled.

"Kind of a theme present", Oz shrugged. "You like?"

"I like! I more than like!", Willow gushed. "Oz, this is probably the sweetest…Hey, we should find a little Pez werewolf, then little Pez Witch can have a boyfriend!"

Oz smiled at her bouncy enthusiasm. "Don't think they make a werewolf Pez. Might have to settle for a wacky cartoon dog."
Willow felt her emotion beginning to well up inside her chest. "This is just so thoughtful…", she breathed.

"Well….I think about you", Oz said, staring into her eyes. She stared back, and one glance into his soft blue eyes told her all the truth she needed to about his words.

"Oh…but I don't have anything to give you", she pouted.

He smiled as he gently put his hand on her shoulder. "Yeah you do", he said as they leaned in and kissed…

….back when Oz and her were fully dating, and, unfortunately, when Xander and her picked then of all times to start a fling that, in the long run, was fruitless and hurtful. But Oz had forgiven and forgotten. All he wanted was her, and she knew that.

Funny how one little innocent trinket can open up so many memories.

After all those years, she still held onto it. It was a little reminder of him, what they had, what they went through during her groundbreaking high school years, both individually, collectively with the original Scoobies, Buffy, Angel, Willow, Xander, Cordy, Giles and her sweet Oz, as well as what they went through as a couple. Ultimately, it appeared as though it wasn't meant to be. She lost Oz twice, to both the wolf and to Tara, and Willow lost her to a stray bullet from Warren's pistol. And though she was with Kennedy now, she never forgot him. He was the first one to love her completely and unconditionally. He helped to make her stronger and for that, she would always love him.

Oz…oh, Oz, she mused as she lay on the bed, Kennedy still Hoover-ing her neck. It's been so long… I wonder what you're up to now. Whatever it is, I'm sure you're fine, cuz, you know…you're Oz. You always land on your feet.

Seattle, Washington--Sky's The Limit Club, Back Alley

The Same Time

Oz went crashing backwards into a row of trash-cans, taking a Bringer with him to the ground. He managed to kick away the knife from the Bringer's hand, but now the drone was wrestling with him for possession of the switchblade Lindsey had tossed him.

"Uh, guys? Could use a hand right about…well, now," Oz called out to his fellow combatants.

Whistler briefly looked over his shoulder. "Be right with ya, kid. Just after I take care of these-"

He sharply kicked a Bringer in the kneecap, grabbed its arm and sent it spinning out hard against the alley wall. "Crashers."

Lindsey held off two Bringers coming at him, both from each side. The one on the left smiled wickedly as it twirled the knife in its hand, the moonlight bouncing off its silvery sickle form.

Lindsey smiled back, cockily. As was his style. If there was one thing he'd learned from his time at Wolfram & Hart, it was one golden rule of survival: never let 'em see you sweat.

"Here, Slice 'n Dice. Catch!" The ex-lawyer tossed one of his shotguns to the Bringer, who
caught it on reflex. In that instant, it dropped the knife, giving Lindsey the advantage he was looking for. He brought up his other hand, resting both on the other shotgun in his left hand, and brutally smashed the butt of the gun into the Bringer's face, knocking it backwards and to the ground. Just as quickly, he lashed out his left foot and kicked the second one in the gut, giving Lindsey a brief opening of space and much needed time. Without hesitation, he pumped the shotgun once and aimed point blank at the Bringer's horribly scarred face.

"Say cheese", he grinned wickedly.

One instant later, a bright flash exploded out of his gun. As did the head of the Bringer, splattering brain matter and bright red blood all over the ground where he fell.

Lindsey grimly chuckled. "Ooh, that'll leave a mark." But no sooner than he spoke, the Harbinger he knocked down suddenly sprang to life and tackled him to the ground. Lindsey barely had enough time to recover his senses when his arms shot out, desperately clutching at the sharp blade the Bringer was attempting to force down into his chest.

Whistler leveled another Bringer he was fighting with a sharp left hook, picking up its knife before turning to see Lindsey's predicament. "Hey, uh, McDonald, you need any help over there?", he smirked slightly.

"No thanks", Lindsey grunted, as his left hand shifted under him, never taking his eyes off the Bringer. He could have sworn that the Bringer was smiling at its intentions as it continued to push at the knife, now dangerously hovering over Lindsey's heart.

But the merciless minion's smile faded when Lindsey suddenly bore a mile-wide grin. It took a moment to follow down his prey's form, stopping right at his hands…

…where a 9-mm semiautomatic pistol was staring right back into the dumbfounded Bringer's sown-shut eyes.

"I got this", Lindsey grinned.

**Bang!**

Blood splattered across the handsome drifter's face.

Two Bringers down. Three to go.

As he pushed off the Bringer's body from his own, Lindsey got to his feet, smirking cockily. He could feel the blood pumping through his veins, adrenaline surging through his system. God, but he missed this. It was too long since he last had a real good fight. It made him burn with a sensation long forgotten to him. A spark that made him feel alive again.

"Pretty good, wasn't I?", he said to Whistler.

Whistler smirked, playing with the knife in his hands. "Yeah, I guess you were-

And then he hurled his knife twirling through the air—

burying itself deep in the forehead of the Bringer sneaking up behind Lindsey.

"Except for the part where you turned your back", Whistler sneered.

Lindsey sheepishly looked down at the Bringer's body, then back to Whistler. "I saw him!", Lindsey defensively retorted.
Whistler rolled his eyes. *Youth really is wasted on the young*, he decided.

A loud roar was heard behind them, followed by an ear-piercing wail.

They whirled around to find a graphic and disturbing scene, featuring Oz, werewolf version 1.0, snarling wildly as his jaws clamped shut around the Bringer's throat, shaking the minion much like a dog with a chew toy. From the way the blood gushed everywhere, Whistler guessed that Oz had found the jugular. Lindsey stared wide-eyed in disbelief at what he was seeing.

"Jesus…a werewolf…so that's why you stopped for this kid?", Lindsey asked, stunned.

"Part of it, anyway", Whistler said.

The Bringer's arms finally went limp, its struggles ceasing to the point where the only reason it was moving at all was because the wolf was still shaking about, its prey in mouth. Dropping the dead Bringer to the ground, the wolf managed to stand on its hind legs, oddly enough with its clothes still intact. Letting out a howl of satisfaction, the wolf's features slowly receded back into human form, as the wolf disappeared and made way for Oz to return to his birth form.

Oz shook his head, taking a moment to collect himself. "Whew…that was…a rush."

Off of both Whistler and Lindsey's stares, Oz sheepishly shrugged. "What? Do I got bad guy stuck in my teeth?"

Whistler chuckled. "I like this kid."

Lindsey stepped right up to Whistler, his blue eyes hardened like ice. "Alright, you little sneak, you've been going on with the cryptic and the mysterious rendezvous as long as I can put up with it!", Lindsey snapped. "Now I wanna know what the hell is goin' on here! Who the hell were those freaks with the robes? And why the hell were they after us?"

Oz gave Whistler a glance. "Uh…what he said."

Whistler sighed, rubbing the back of his head. "Alright, I'll be honest, here. The truth is…" he paused, taking a look over Lindsey's shoulder. "There's a Bringer behind you."

No sooner then the words left his mouth, Lindsey whipped around and drilled the last approaching Bringer with a perfect shot between the eyes from his smoking pistol, dropping the minion stone cold on the ground.

Lindsey took a look back at Whistler. "A what behind me?"

"Bringers", Whistler said. "Short nickname for Harbingers. Nasty little guys, come in big numbers. They-"

"Work for the First Evil", Oz finished, his eyes lit in recognition.

"Wait, wait, wait—you know what these things are?", Lindsey asked in astonishment.

"Little bit", Oz shrugged. "A friend of mine, Buffy, once told me about them. They work for this mega big-bad."

The ex-lawyer was floored. "Buffy? Buffy Summers? The Vampire Slayer?"

"Seems you know of our favorite stake-driving superheroine, don't ya, Slick?", Whistler nodded.
"Only what I've read in the files on Angel", Lindsey said. "And a couple of stories I heard 'round some demon bars. Angel's ex-girlfriend, died saving the world twice, you know, that sort of thing."

"You know Angel?", Oz directed towards Lindsey.

The former lawyer unconsciously rubbing his right hand, which Angel had sliced off years ago. "All too well," he muttered.

Whistler cleared his throat loudly, drawing their attention back to him. "As you could probably tell by now, it's not an accident that you two are here. There's a lot goin' down right now. Mostly in Killer Kali. Major end-of-the-world stuff."

"So", Oz shrugged. "What's that got to do with me? Not that I'd like the world to go 'boom!', but…"

"Well, some of your old friends are gonna need help", Whistler said. "Some, particularly, will need your help, in particular."

Oz's eyes widened as a sense of dread crept up on him. "Willow?", he asked, a tinge of fear in his voice.

"You guessed it", Whistler nodded. "Your little Sabrina's in the middle of a major-"

"Where is she and how soon can we get there?", Oz said, his voice hardened.

Lindsey noted the spark in his eyes when his fears were confirmed about this 'Willow' whom they spoke of. There was no nonsense. No fooling around. This little spiky-haired blonde kid was making clear with his tone and his looks that he would get to this person, girl, from the sound of it, at any costs. He instantly gained a measure of respect for the kid. Because that's how he felt about getting to Darla. Nothing else in his life was important anymore, except getting to her, wherever that was.

"L.A…About another 12 hours driving time, if we speed", Lindsey said. "My pickup truck's got some good mileage on it, though."

No sooner had he said that then did Oz whip out a small black device from his pocket. Pressing the small red button, he uttered a few simple words: "Lock in on current position."

The box squawked back in mechanized voice : "Password?"

"Canus", replied Oz.

The distant roar of a vehicle amplified as a large white van pulled up out of nowhere into the alleyway. Whistler and Lindsey jumped back, startled at the sudden appearance of the van, stopping to a halt just a few feet in front of Oz himself. From the outside appearance of the van, there seemed to be nothing particularly special about it.

Except that there was no driver behind the seat of the vehicle.

"Whoa", was all a stunned Lindsey could muster.

Even Whistler seemed astounded. "Yo, check out the wheels…how'd you get a ride like that?"

"I know a guy", Oz simply explained, before talking into the black device. "Open driver and passenger doors."
The doors instantly unlocked at his command, as Oz swung around to the driver's seat.

"We can make it there in half the time it takes conventional cars in this one", he said. "Whichever one of you knows how to give directions to wherever it is we're going, hop in shotgun".

"That'd be me", Whistler piped as he eagerly sat in the side passenger seat. "You coming, Slick?"

"What about my truck?" Lindsey asked, not pleased about the prospect of leaving his beloved '57 in the streets of Seattle unattended. "I can't just take off without my truck!"

"Nice set of priorities ya got," Whistler sarcastically smirked.

"Look, you little pipsqueak," Lindsey ground out. "That truck was given to me by my father, it's the last thing he ever gave me before he died! I'm not leaving it behind in this…pisshole of a-"

"You won't have to," Oz said. "There's a grappling hook underneath. We can tow your truck behind us on the way."

Lindsey paused for a moment, giving it consideration. At last, he nodded. "Thanks, kid."

He stepped in the back of the van, the doors closing immediately upon his entrance.

Whistler took a glance at his new traveling companions. A gun-wielding ex-lawyer with a burning passion for an ex-vampire, and a short blond kid with a werewolf's blood and a supped-up van. He just hoped that the Powers That Be knew what they were doing.

"So, this is it", he said. "We're off to save the world."

"Right. Now, make with the chatter. I need to be filled in on exactly what it is we're dealing with", Lindsey said.

With that, the van roared to life, its lights piercing the darkness of the alley like a beacon.

"Okay, gentlemen. Let's get rolling", Oz said as the van rumbled down the alleyway, off to the adventure of a lifetime, off to save mankind, off to save the women they loved…

And off to the side of the road, as the van suddenly halted.

"Um…directions would be nice," Oz said.

Whistler just looked at him, sheepishly.

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**Hyperion Hotel -- Wesley's (former) Study Room**

**Later**

Giles paced the floor, thumbing through an old text as Wesley stood behind his desk, palms rested on the flat top, leaning slightly on the wood for support. Darla sat in a chair opposite him, her hands wringed tightly.

"I just don't, for the life of me, understand why something like this could've happened without a-warning of some sort", Giles said as he perused the book quickly.
"Well, Rupert, it's not as if the forces of darkness are accustomed to giving out warning signs or caution labels in the event of an apocalypse," Wesley wryly smirked. Darla barely stifled a chuckle at his witty response, but Wesley caught her, and managed a small smile in her direction.

Giles glared, irritated at the younger man. "What I meant", he elaborated, "was why there wasn't any sort of prophecy or some written account of a vision detailing these events. Usually, the larger events, like this one, have a-a form of detail, a…something to describe the warning signs."

Wesley gave in to deep thought. "Hmm, now that you've mentioned it, it does seem rather odd that some of the more glaring signs of these events were undocumented. Between all of what transpired between our respective quadrants, the Rain of Fire, the rise of the Beast, the disappearance of the sun…"

"…the systematic murder of the Slayer line, the destruction of the Watcher's Council, the emergence of the Seal of Danthazar…", Giles continued his musings. "But these are signs that could have been, in most cases, should have been foretold."

"Maybe they were", Darla spoke up. "But what if…maybe someone, or something, more powerful kept a lid on it?"

Both men stared at the small blonde for a moment in shock. Darla squirmed a little under the attention.

"Are you suggesting that these events were…covered up, by something?", Giles asked, in astonishment.

Darla ventured, "Think about it. Events like these should have been caught through any number of seers and visionaries throughout time, but they weren't. At least, not in anything you have access to."

Wesley glanced at Darla, his brow knitted in focus. "Darla, what is it you know, exactly?"

Darla sighed. "I knew everything…maybe I still do. But whatever force the creature in Cordelia used to re-corporealize me scrambled my memory. I remember a few bits and pieces, but most of it…"

"Is gone", Giles finished for her, his features frowning.

"I'm sorry, I wish I could give you something, anything, but…" Darla trailed off, sadly.

Wesley gave Darla a soft glance. "You will, Darla. In time. For now, the most you can do is be here. Perhaps, as you said, something we find can help you recover a piece of vital information we need. Your time will come."

Darla smiled warmly at Wesley. "Thank you, Wesley."

"Don't mention it", he smiled back.

Giles was not daft. He could tell from the small looks the two were giving one another that there was more there than meets the eye. He could see the small speck of warmth in Wesley's eyes when he looked at Darla, and the softness in her eyes when she returned his gaze. So, Wesley was falling for Darla, he thought. That would explain his uncharacteristic protectiveness of her earlier.

"Ahem, getting back to the matter at hand", Giles pressed on. "You say that this pregnancy that Cordelia is experiencing will play a large part in whatever is happening?"
"Our hypothesis is that whatever this creature controlling Cordelia is planning, it is all centered around its birth", Wesley said. "It wasn't ever supposed to have happened in the first place. The child of two vampires, an anomaly of nature in and of itself, breeding with a half-demon, a Seer, such as Cordelia, somehow possibly serves as a vessel for-

"Half-demon?", Giles interrupted, puzzled. "Cordelia was...when she become half-demon? I was never made aware of this."

Wesley sighed. "Well, a lot has occurred in the past year, to say the least, Giles. To all of us."

"Of course", Giles muttered, derisively. "That'll clear it all up."

"Cordelia became a half-demon last year to be able to bear the visions she was receiving from the Powers That Be", Wesley detailed. "Her bearing of the visions eventually led her to be made a Higher Being by the Powers themselves. Or at least, we thought at the time."

"H-Higher Being, you said?", Giles stammered, amazed. "Cordelia was chosen to ascend to the Higher Planes?"

"So they were led to believe", Darla cut in. "It turns out it was all a trap for the creature in Cordelia to be able to take over her body and descend to this dimension."

"Where it has been wreaking havoc from under our noses all along", Wesley frowned.

"I see", Giles said, taking his glasses off to clean them. "And it never occurred to you the oddity of how Cordelia, a normal girl with, albeit, a unique link, was suddenly chosen to ascend to a place where only beings of vast benevolence and wisdom could tread?"

"It seemed to...make sense at the time", was all a flustered Wesley could manage. "Cordelia has undergone so many changes since her arrival here in Los Angeles that we surmised that the Powers had greater purposes for her. Other than to become infected with the entity residing within her now."

"Well, obviously, something had a purpose for her, that much you've managed to decipher", Giles shook his head.

"I understand that this is all something of a shock for you to hear, Rupert", Wesley said, biting to control his rising hackles. "But I don't see how making derisive comments is going to be helping matters any."

"I just cannot believe that you would be so careless as to have allowed this to happen to her", Giles retorted.

"It's not as if we had a choice in the matter!", Wesley snapped. "We would've moved heaven and earth to prevent any harm from befalling her, but we were all manipulated! There was nothing we could do!"

Giles forced down his temper rising within his throat, taking a moment to compose himself. "You're right, Wesley. I apologize. It's just..." he broke off, wistfully. "Before any of you knew Cordelia, she was a member of our family years back. In some ways...she still remains a part of that...despite the distance, we all feel a bond with her in Sunnydale. And to lose her, would be very much like losing one of our own." He paused, considering. "We would be losing one of our own."

Wesley's anger faded when he saw the genuine care in Giles's eyes. In the grief and pain that the A.I. team felt over the loss of their beloved Cordelia, he had not considered how much this would
affect the Sunnydale group. They had known Cordelia long before any of them did. She had fought alongside them all for three years, up until her high school graduation, loyally, as she did with Angel Investigations. To have dismissed their feelings in the matter of Cordelia was a very grievous oversight.

"I understand, too, Rupert", Wesley nodded. "We all want to get her back."

Giles smiled weakly. "And we will."

A light dawned in Darla's blue eyes at that. "And maybe…we can", she suddenly said.

Both Watchers turned to her in surprise. "What's that?" Giles asked, hope sparking in his eyes.

Darla pushed herself up from the chair, taking a few steps back and forth, her hands rubbing her temples. She could feel something coming, memories, words, flickers of light, of knowledge…

"Infected", she mused. She looked at Wesley. "You said that…Cordelia was infected, right?"

"I did", Wesley nodded, though unsure.

"That's it, that's…", she broke off, shaking her head slightly at the fragments and pieces of information stabbing at her mind, teasing a thought, an idea, a solution. "What she had is a sort of…mystical infection. It's like a possession, but different."

"Different how?", Wesley pressed.

"The being inside Cordelia has its roots, deep in the annals of darkness", she said, her eyes staring outward, as if she were remembering some long forgotten secret. "More…More than one."

"More than one what?", Giles asked.

"There's more than one…in her", she said.

Wesley's eyes widened as he began to slowly understand what Darla was trying to explain. "Surely you're not saying that…the creature possessing Cordelia …isn't alone?"

Giles looked stunned as realization dawned on him. "There's more than one being possessing Cordelia."

Darla nodded. "Yes. I remember…the creatures inside her are old. Ancient. Two separate entities." The fog around her mind started to lift, memories slowly pacing themselves back into her. "But their relationship is a symbiotic one. They…need each other."

"What kind of relationship? Do you the…agendas of these creatures? Their purposes? What they want?", Wesley inquired.

"I don't know. But I do know that one of them is…protecting the other. Almost as if the former was taking a secondary role to the latter's."

"Almost like the parasite's…parasite?", Giles skeptically wondered.

"Perhaps", mused Wesley, his face scrunched in thought. "Unless…unless one of the entities has the specific purpose to bring forth the other one."

"You mean one of them is protecting the other?", Giles asked.

"Exactly", Darla said, turning her eyes to Wesley. "One of the entities is strictly a secondary. It's
main goal isn't in its own survival, but rather to ensure the survival...or birth...of the other one.”

"Yes, but is there anything you remember about...dispelling those entities?”, Giles asked, taking a step towards Darla. "Anything about releasing their control over Cordelia's body?"

Darla's angelic features frowned in thought, looking briefly to the floor before returning her gaze back to the Watcher's clear grey eyes. "I think there was...something about a book. A...codex?"

"Codex?", both Watchers practically jumped at the word. Between the two of them, Giles and Wesley had acquired or had access to some of the rarest, most ancient texts in the known world. A collection that would make any mage, historian or Watcher, ex or otherwise, green with envy.

"Which codex? Do you remember a name, a color, symbol...anything?”, Giles asked, his eyes infused with hope. Perhaps the answer to Cordelia's cure was in his possession right now.

"I think it was...Bisylline", Darla said.

"Bisylline?", Giles repeated. Darla watched as the hope faded from his eyes, his look of hope and the spark of enthusiasm once there now disappearing as his face fell. This didn't look good at all.

"You've...heard of it?", Darla tentatively asked.

"Yes, I have", Giles said as he took a step back, running his hand through his hair. "The Bisylline Codex. It's a...very rare book. One of the hardest to acquire. Very few have actually read it, only a description of it has been made public." His fingers ran at his chin as he recalled the intoned knowledge. "A-A golden stag, emblazoned on a cover as red as blood. Written only a few short years after the Crucifixion, by Marcus Bysylline, the head of an ancient, now extinct order of monks, whose origins date back to Saint Peter. It was, ah, reputed to have contained some of the rarest spells in this or any other world, as well as a very detailed description, a prophecy, of some event of...extraordinary and unprecedented magnitude. But there was only one copy of it ever written. Fortunately, the Council had the book in its possession."

"Then you have it?", Darla asked, looking hopefully at him.

Giles sighed heavily. "Ah...no. The book seems to have vanished from the Council's libraries. I looked everywhere for it, but it was nowhere to be found. Unfortunately, the possibility remains that...the explosion of the Watcher's Council claimed it. In which case..."

Darla shut her eyes in disappointment. "The only copy of it in this or any other world..."

Giles sadly nodded. "...has been lost. Forever."

Wesley raised an eyebrow at the older Watcher. "Not lost. Relocated."

Giles and Darla looked at him in surprise. "Wesley, what are you-"

But even as Giles spoke, Wesley walked over to the bookcase, pulling out one of the shelves from the unit itself, revealing a small safe box. After a few turns of the combination lock, the small metallic door opened up to reveal a small assortment of books, gems, what appeared to be various small demonic body parts and other rare treasures. From this hidden treasure case, Wesley pulled out a mid-sized, blood-red book, the cover of it bearing no title, only the small golden imprinting of a magnificent stag on it.

Giles's eyes widened in awe as he laid eyes on the book. "My God, Pryce."

Darla blinked in surprise. "Wesley, is that-"
"The Bisylline Codex", Wesley said as he walked towards them, the rare book in hand. "I've had this book in my possession for years. When the Council, ah, terminated my services years ago, I was, to put it lightly, disgruntled." He managed to suppress the urge to blush. "I snuck into the library and stole the book myself, hoping that eventually, when the Council needed it, I could barter with them."

"The book for your job back", Giles surmised.

"Or at least a nicer severance package in place of the one they didn't give me", Wesley shrugged. "Of course, it never worked out that way."

"No", Giles said as he drew himself forward, taking the book from Wesley's hands, staring at it as if it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "But it has worked out. Good show, Wesley."

Wesley barely had time to utter a 'thank you' before Darla, unexpectedly, walked over to him, beaming. She placed a light kiss on his cheek, catching the ex-Watcher completely by surprise.

"And they say that crime doesn't pay", Darla chuckled.

"Umm...yes, I...let's, ah, h-hope it does, for our sakes, a-and Cordelia's", Wesley said, lowering his head at his surprising blush. He mentally shook himself, regaining his composure. "The answers we need are in the book. We've better get started deciphering the text."

"Oh, good", Giles said as he perused the pages of the book. "It's only written in Latinate. Between the both of us, we should be able to decipher this fairly quickly."

"Just like old times", Wesley smirked at Giles.

"Indeed", Giles returned the smirk.

"The sooner, the better", Darla said as she addressed both Watchers. "Whatever's in that book, we'd better find it fast. Time is the one thing that's not on our side."

"I know."

Anna stared back at the teens, who were staring back at the pretty blonde with wide-eyed surprise.

Dawn shook her head, trying to process what she had just heard. "Wait, wait, wait, hold the phone-you know? What do you mean you know?"

"Vampires? Demons? I know they're real...and that a lot of them are here in L.A.", Anna nodded. Connor looked stunned. "But you didn't even know why that vampire who attacked you in the alley had his face all-"

"I knew", Anna said. "I just...wasn't sure if you guys knew...wouldn't want you to think I'm some nut." At that, her eyes ticked to Connor. An action that no one in the room missed.

"How did you know about all this?", Molly asked, ever so inquisitive.

"Well...m-my family, most of it, anyway, comes from Romania...I guess the term is gypsies, we're called", Anna explained. "My grandfather told me stories when I was little about all these wild things in the world...stories about vampires, and werewolves and sorcerers and magic. He practiced a lot of magicks, like my mom does. I was totally into it. Still am. They showed me so many things that can be done with a few words, a root of a plant, the sprinkling of
powder...they've told me this stuff since I was little. It wasn't the first time I've seen a vampire in
that alley, I've seen them before...just never so up close."

"That's the closest you want to get to one, believe me," Vi said.

"So, what, you guys, like, fight demons?", Anna furrowed her eyebrows.

"Basically", Dawn nodded. "Connor here is pretty strong, like...picture Spider-Man, minus the
dorky red-and-blue PJ's, but leaving all the Toby Maguire cuteness." She paused a beat. "And,
omigod, I just said that aloud, didn't I?"

"Dawn," Molly exclaimed scandalously.

"Um, I…," Connor awkwardly looked down, trying to hide the blush on his face. The pop culture
reference was not lost on him. He'd seen the Spider-Man movie twice before during the summer
with Fred and Gunn. During the time his father was, for lack of a better term, adrift.

Dawn quickly changed the subject. "And Molly, Vi and Amanda are Potential Slayers, so they've
all got superhuman stuff going on~"

"Slayers?", Anna asked.

Vi shrugged. "Yeah, that's that whole 'One-girl-in-all-the-world-with-the-strength-and-speed-to-
kill-vampires' bit."

"No, I know what a Slayer is", Anna said. "But...you're all Vampire Slayers? I heard there could
only be one."

"Not exactly", Amanda clarified. "We're all Potential Slayers...except for Dawn."

The words stung Dawn. Since last year, Buffy had taken a great deal of time to train her younger
sister in the ways of the Slayer, after realizing that she could handle herself well, even in the face
of scary-veiny-Willow's apocalypse. But since the arrival of the Potentials, Buffy had refocused
her energies on training the other girls and battling the First. Dawn's training had been left
unfinished, pushed to the back burner. As if she wasn't important enough to merit training.

"Yeah", muttered Dawn grouchily. "Everyone but Dawn."

Amanda caught onto Dawn's displeasure, and quickly attempted to mend her words. "Dawn, I'm
sorry, I didn't mean it like that-"

"S'okay", Dawn waved her hand. "I'm accustomed to the fact that I'll never be more than your
average muggle."

"But you've still got that whole cool Key thing going for you", Amanda smiled. "That's pretty
neat."

Dawn smiled a bit at that. She had filled in Amanda, Vi and Molly on her, unique, situation soon
after the four became fast friends. They had been taken aback at first, especially about the part
where Dawn wasn't, in her words, 'semi-technically real'. But given the chaos they had
encountered since the First began its mayhem, they accepted that fact rather quickly and the girls
became even closer.

Connor scrunched his brow in confusion. "What's a muggle?"

The teenage girls stared at him as if he had two heads.
"Muggles. Y’know, humans? Non-magic folk," Vi said

"From the Harry Potter book series?", Molly looked at him expectantly.

Connor looked at them blankly.

"Where've you been living for the last two and a half years," Dawn gave him a strange glance.

"Quor'toth", he answered matter-of-factly.

Now it was their turn to look at him blankly.

"Quarter-what?", Dawn asked, bewildered.

"What's a…Quor'toth?", Amanda asked.

"Is that in…like, Europe or something?", Vi asked.

Molly shook her head. "Doesn't sound like any European city I've heard of."

"That's because it's not from this world", Connor said. "The Quor' toth is another dimension, a dark world separate from this reality. I grew up there my whole life."

The girls looked at him with incredulous, wide-eyed glances. "Whoa, whoa, hold the phone—are you saying you…didn't grow up on Earth?", Dawn asked, astonished.

"I guess", Connor answered in typical shortness.

"Wow!", Molly breathed, stunned. "Are you, like, some sort of alien, then?"

"Molly, get a grip", Amanda said. "Does Connor look like he stepped off a Romulan spaceship?"

"I'm just saying, is all", Molly replied defensively.

As the girls started to talk rapidly amongst themselves, Anna's voice rung up over their increasingly loud chatter. "Excuse me?"

All the girls ceased their talking and turned towards the timid girl. "I'm sorry, I'm getting lost. So, you guys are Slayers, Dawn's a…whatever, and he's some sort of crazy alien?"

"Um, looks that way", Dawn nervously chuckled.

Anna looked at them strangely before rubbing her head slightly. "And the rabbit hole goes even further", she muttered.

"You quoting 'Alice in Wonderland' or 'The Matrix'?", Dawn wondered.

"Well, I've read the book seven times. It was a favorite of mine…but I did like the movie; Keanu Reaves was really cute", Anna smiled shyly.

"Mmm, Keanu", Vi dreamily sighed.

"Please, he is SO overrated", Amanda waved her hand. "Now, Laurence Fishburne, there's a guy who doesn't get enough play."

"Interesting comparison", Molly mused. "But there's a reason why Keanu was the lead in the movie."
"Aside from the hair, the eyes and the gorgeous dimples?", Dawn smirked. "Yeah, he's a hottie, but Morpheus was sooo the coolest. Keanu's way too much of a Ken-doll for me."

Connor could barely put up with it anymore. "I hate to break up your little movie tit-for-tat, but I think we're losing focus here", Connor pointed out. "Shouldn't we be busy trying to figure out what's going on? The world looks like it's about to end, people are dying and we're sitting around here just wasting time."

"Well, why don't you go find that weird evil lady in black and give her a good right hook?", Anna snapped. "You seem to be pretty good at hitting girls!"

Connor looked away, shame washing through him.

"Hey", Dawn said, placing a hand on Anna, who was suddenly shaking, glaring at Connor. "Look, just be cool, alright? That's over, you're safe now."

Anna slowly nodded, letting herself calm slowly.

"Well, what do we know so far?", Dawn asked the group.

"Well, we've got the First Evil", Amanda chirped up. "Can't be fought, or killed."

"And its friends, the ones with the hoodies and the crazy alphabet eyes", Molly noted.

"I think we just call them Bringers now, Moll", Vi said.

"Harbingers to be precise…ooh, and there's the Turok-han vampire", Molly added, unzipping her backpack and thumbing furiously through her treasured notepad. "We also have the…Seal of Danthazar, which was used to summon it. Only able to be opened through a ritual blood-letting."

Dawn took a peak at Molly's very well detailed notes and her eyes widened in astonishment. Diagrams, notes, and accurate descriptions of the events of recent past were presented well in her large blue-colored artist's notepad.

"Whoa, Molly, who died and made you Watcher Junior?", Dawn said with a touch of envy. Researching was usually her element, as of late. But it looked like Molly was developing a flair for it, as well.

Molly smiled proudly. "I decided it would suit us best if someone kept record of these events. Perhaps these notes may come in handy sooner or later."

"Sweet! Cliff Notes!", Amanda excitedly beamed.

Molly stiffened a little. "Hardly, 'Manda. I pride myself on extreme detail", she sniffed. "Unlike those ridiculous one-shot solutions you Yanks are so head-over-heels about."

"Well, what about L.A?", Vi chimed in. "I mean, we all came here because of some major brouhaha happening here, right?"

Dawn glanced at the boy. "Connor? What can you tell us?"

Connor scratched his head, thoughtfully, before speaking. "Well, there was a rain of fire back a few weeks ago…"

"And the sun blocked out after that", Anna piped up.
Molly scribbled down notes furiously into her notebook, while the others pried Connor for answers.

"Rain of fire...yeah, I heard about that", Vi said. "You wouldn't happen to know what caused all that, huh?"

Anna shrugged. "I—not really, no. The weather guys on TV said that it might have been falling debris from a space satellite, or small fragments of a meteor rock, or-

"It was the work of the Beast", Connor cut her off.

For the umpteenth time, the girls looked at him with their wide-eyed stares.

"A Beast?", Dawn repeated, not-too-believingly.

Connor nodded. "This thing was...unbelievable. A good eight, maybe ten feet tall, horns on his head, body made out of rock...nearly invincible." He recalled the blows he suffered from the only creature he'd ever faced that had actually been able to break one of his bones, something that hadn't happened even when he grew up in the hellish nightmare of Quor' toth, darkest of the dark worlds.

He remembered a rough sketch drawing of the monster that Angel had drawn up, with color. Connor had stored it away in one of the drawers in the room, not giving it much thought. He stood and retrieved the sketch for the group to see, handing it to Dawn.

The girls gasped at what they saw, the hideous, horned head of the Beast, its sharp, jagged teeth, yellow eyes, and a solid strong body chiseled out of...well, stone, actually. It looked quite ferocious.

"Whoa", Vi blinked, staring at the picture. "Big whoa."

"That's...that's what caused the Rain of Fire?" Amanda gasped.

"And blocked out the sun, apparently", Molly said, studying the creature's sketch.

Even Dawn looked in dread of the creature, and it was only a sketch. She glanced at Connor.

"You're, uh, sure that this thing's what caused all the mayhem down here?", she asked. "And not something you dreamed up after one too many late-night pineapple pizzas?"

"Positive", he nodded. "Saw it with my own eyes."

"How strong is he?", she asked. As an afterthought, she added, "It is a 'he', right?"

"It's male, I think", Connor said. "It's...strong. It broke one of my ribs with one punch, it hurt Faith pretty bad, and it batted around the rest of us like we were nothing but flies." He paused, before adding. "It also stabbed my father in the throat with his own knife before tossing him off a 3-story building."

Dawn felt herself pull back in shock, Anna gasped, Vi and Amanda exchanged horrified looks with one another, and Molly looked up from her pad in surprise before scribbling down what Connor had said.

Dawn could scarcely believe what she had heard. She'd seen Angel fight before. Only a few times, granted, but she could tell he was a good, no great fighter. She'd never seen him lose a fight before; he was so strong, so fast and agile, like Buffy. So to hear that something was strong...
enough to have done that to Angel, of all people, er, vampires, was shocking.

A small "Oh", was all she could muster.

"Is it…is it still out there?", Vi asked nervously.

"No", Connor shook his head. "My father and Faith managed to kill it some time ago. We got the sun back when that happened."

The others breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, that's good news", Molly nodded, scribbling down more notes. "You don't mind if I keep that sketch, do you? It would be wonderful for my archive."

"Uh, sure, go ahead", Connor shrugged, puzzled by why Molly broke out in a wide smile at his approval.

"Score one for the good guys", Amanda smiled.

"Hold on a minute, guys", Dawn said, her pretty face serious. "Obviously, that's not the end of our problems. If tall, dark and horn-headed was as bad as it got, then we wouldn't be here right now."

"She's not wrong", Connor agreed. "There's also the matter of the Beast's master. She's the one who started all of this in the first place."

"You think something was controlling this thing?", Vi asked, her eyes widening at the thought.

"Not think, I know", Connor said, his voice hardening slightly. "Cordelia…or whatever's inside her, is the one who's been pulling the strings."

"Cordelia?", Dawn gasped. "She's the Beastmaster?

And, my God, how corny does that sound?, she thought.

"Who's Cordelia?", Molly inquired.

"An old friend of ours", Dawn replied, but her eyes still fixed on Connor. "She was one of the first original Scoobies before she left for L.A."

"She was your friend", Connor deduced.

Dawn shrugged. "Depends on whose version you're getting, but yeah, we consider her one of ours."

"Who, that crazy bitch in black from the factory?", Anna asked, distrustfully.

"Yes", Connor briefly replied.

"Why would you guys want to help her? She's evil!

", Anna exclaimed, her voice rising an octave or two.

"No, she isn't", Dawn said. "She's been taken over by something, right? That means whatever's in her is the one causing this, not Cordy. Which means the real Cordy's in trouble. And we have to help her."

Molly gave Dawn a skeptical look. "How? I mean, we're only just getting the hang of fighting vampires, we haven't been trained on fighting someone with other…powers."
"Besides, how do we even know where to begin?", Vi asked. "Or where to find this Cordelia person? Or what she even wants?"

"Pure blood", Connor mused quietly.

All heads turned to him. "What?", Dawn asked.

They could see the wheels turning in his head as he spoke. "She said…that for the baby to be born…she needed blood. From someone special, untainted." He looked at Anna. "Pure."

"Pure? I don't mean to play village idiot, but isn't blood mostly, I don't know, icky?", Amanda wrinkled her brow.

"I don't think he means a 'pure' kind of pure", Molly said.

"So, what, then we're looking for an 'impure' pure…er?", Amanda said, frowning as her logic train began to derail.

"Okay, is anyone else here totally lost?", Vi raised her hand.

"She needs the blood of a virgin", Anna finished softly.

All of the girls' eyes widened at her words.

"A…virgin?", Dawn swallowed. She turned to Connor. "That's why you…kidnapped Anna?"

Connor nodded, averting his gaze to the floor.

Dawn's eyes narrowed in thought. "But how did you know she-"

"Super senses", he explained. "I could smell it on her. She was pure."

Anna blushed furiously, ducking her head. "Oh, swell", she frowned. "Just what a girl needs to hear. That I smell like a prude."

"What is it with the whole 'virgin sacrifices' thing, anyway?", Vi scoffed. "The blood of a virgin, the spit of a virgin, my God, don't these occult spell-writing-guys ever get laid or what?"

"Blood signifies life", Molly explained, her hands folded neatly on her notepad, pencil tucked above her left ear. Looking ever intellectual. "It's what keeps beings alive, grants us life. And a virgin represents purity...A being as clean and many ways unchanged as when they first entered the world. My Watcher taught me this once. The offering of a virgin's blood is seen as the offering of a pure, untainted life. Tabula Rasa. A clean soul, untouched by the darkness of the world. That's why virginal fluids are so potent."

Amanda nodded, impressed by Molly's display of intellect.

"Still think it's a whole big sex crock", Vi muttered.

"So, what you're saying is", Dawn said as an idea began to swirl in her mind. "She just needs any…um, virgin sacrifice?"

"Looks like", Connor said.

Each of the girls exchanged glances, before quickly looking away, uncomfortable. Connor did not miss this action. Even if he couldn't smell it on any of them before, their body language was more than enough to let him in on their silent admission.
They were all…pure.

Suddenly, Dawn stood up. Her eyes, though sparkling with a new idea, were hard and serious, her posture straight and upright. Commanding. "No problem", she addressed the group. "She wants virgin blood? I say we give it to her."

A low mumble of 'What's could be heard among the girls. Anna's eyes widened in fear as she began to retreat from the group. "No, no! I'm not going back-"

"No", Dawn said, her voice calm, her eyes meeting Anna's. "You're not." Her next words, however, stunned them all. "But I am."

They were stunned into silence. For a whole 5 seconds.

And then, they reacted.

"What? You can't!" Connor practically roared.

"Dawn, that's crazy!", Amanda chastised.

"She'll kill you, Dawn! Without a thought!", Molly shook her head, completely opposed to the idea.

"Or", Dawn mused. "I might get lucky, and bring her down. Whichever comes first."

Molly stared at her incredulously for a moment. "Oh, good, that really inspires confidence."

"Buffy's not gonna like this", Vi warned.

"Which is why nobody's going to tell her", Dawn said, blue eyes narrowed, her voice leaving no room for argument. "Connor, do you remember where Cordelia was last time?"

The boy was quiet for a moment, before responding. "Yeah."

"So you could take me there if I needed to get there, then?"

"I could", he said, frowning. "But I won't."

"Wrong", Dawn's steely voice shot back. "You can, and you will."

"You don't even know what you're doing!", Connor said bitingly.

Her blue eyes flashed. "Don't talk to me like I'm just some stupid kid!"

"You think this is going to be easy? Just sweep in and take her down?", he snapped. "You haven't seen Cordelia, not like this. Your friends are right. She'll kill you before you can even think! And she can use your blood to finish the ritual!"

"Then, what?" Dawn retorted, irritated. "We just sit here on our asses while she finds some other poor, defenseless girl to go all Helter Skelter on? Wait until the world goes to hell in a hand basket anyway? Thanks, but I'll pass."

"She's dangerous", Connor quietly said, his anger starting to turn into dread. Not for himself, but for Dawn. The thought of putting Dawn in harm's way, let alone in the path of 'Cordelia' right now, scared him beyond belief.
"I know", she nodded. "But this might be the only way to draw her out. And the only way to save some lives. And let's face it, we don't have much time." She added. "Besides, do you have any idea how hard it is to find virgins in L.A.?"

Anna, once quiet and shy, now barely stifled a laugh, while Vi, Amanda and Molly all exchanged knowing smiles.

"But", Connor softly began.

"Connor", she put her hand up. "I know. But I'm going, whether you like it or not. I just need to know right now…" She put a hand on his arm. Their eyes met, and something like electricity jolted through them at the contact. "Are you in or out?"

_This is insane, _Connor thought. _She's so naive, so…vulnerable. She can't go up against something like 'Cordelia' alone._

_No._

_Not alone._

He took her hand in his, and he made his decision. "I'm in", he said softly.

He smiled at her, and she smiled back. "Thank you."

"Me, too", Vi said, standing up. "No way am I letting you face certain death alone. Where's the fun in that?" The redhead wrinkled her nose.

"I second that", Molly nodded, smiling as she stood up.

"So do I", Amanda said, also standing up.

Dawn was touched. She could scarcely believe that her newfound friends cared about her so much that they were willing to walk into the belly of the beast (master) to ensure her safety. She knew she had chosen her friends wisely.

"Thanks, guys", Dawn smiled warmly. "But someone's got to stay here with Anna, keep her company."

"We're probably going to need some backup", Connor suggested. "Just in case something goes wrong. 'Cordelia' is smart, she can figure things out quickly. We might need some extra muscle to make the save."

Dawn considered his words for a moment. "Strength in numbers. Alright then. Amanda, you stay with Anna. Try to stall Buffy if she comes in to check on us. Make up something, anything."

Amanda nodded. "I can do that."

"Good", she nodded. "Vi, Molly, gather your weapons. Knives and crossbows should do the trick. You're coming with us."

"On it", Molly said crisply as she moved to grab her weapons bag.

"Cool, I'm the muscle!", Vi happily chirped.

Dawn smiled at her enthusiasm. "Just be ready to move at a moment's notice. Think you can do that?"
"No sweat", Vi said, her voice unwavering and confident.

"Good", Dawn said, before sheepishly adding. "'Cause we're kinda making this up as we go along."

"Not exactly singin' my tune", Molly smirked as she handed Dawn a small knife with a black handle.

"There's an side exit passage down the hall, third door to the right", Connor said, checking his boot knives and his stake in the back of his pants waistband. "We can be gone before anyone notices."

Dawn gave him a knowing smirk. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

He grinned wickedly back at her. "More than you know."

"Good. We better get moving", Dawn said before heading for the door, Connor at her side, Molly and Vi anchoring them, weapons in tow.

"Dawn", Anna's voice called out to the group.

The Slayer's sister paused, and turned to look at the newly found girl.

Newly found friend.

"Yeah?"

Anna gave a small smile. "Good luck."

Dawn gave her a grin. "Thanks."

"And don't get killed", Amanda added.

"We won't", Dawn sighed exasperated, before the four young warriors-in-training headed out the door.

"I'm going to hold you to that", Amanda said quietly, exchanging glances with Anna. She prayed to whoever was listening, whatever Higher Power would hear her, that her friends would come back quickly, alive and in one piece.

Because a pissed off Slayer was not good for anyone or anything to be around.

Ally or otherwise.

But then again, some lessons can only be learned the hard way.

Or in Angel's case, relearned.

For quite a bit of time since they retreated up to Angel's private study, they sat across from each other, a small bit of space the only barrier between them.

Her thoughts were cautiously measuring him. She could feel Angel's anxiety coming off of him in waves. Even if they hadn't shared the bond they did, any one could tell that, aside from his good clothes, his face was looking rather worn. Like he hadn't slept in a while. Granted, while he was always master of the brooding from what she remembered of him, he hadn't looked this stressed since the days of his recovery from returning from Hell. But Angel wasn't meeting her look, only
glancing down at his hands, wringed so tightly they could've strangled a horse. He had barely
spoken since they got to his room. So, she decided to catch him off guard with the one thing she
knew was guaranteed to shock him into motion.

"So", Buffy cleared her throat before she spoke. "A son, huh?"

Angel's eyes flickered up to meet hers, and for a moment, he hesitated. This was a topic that he
hoped wouldn't come up between them. "I, uh...how did you know about-"

"Word travels fast in the underworld", Buffy noted. "And if that wasn't enough, I found one of
your letters to Willow lying around the house earlier this year. Told her all about your son, who
you had with...Darla." She had to swallow hard before finishing that sentence. It was like
swallowing a small rock in her throat.

He looked down for a moment, shame washing over him. He could see a faint trace of pain in her
green eyes and he cursed himself for causing her pain. Again.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you", he began softly. "I just...I wasn't sure how to."

"Well, see, there's these nifty little things that were invented a little while back. They're called
telephones", she sarcastically retorted.

"Would you really have wanted to hear it over the phone?"

Buffy paused for a moment, reconsidering her last comment. "No...I guess not." She stared at
Angel for a moment, holding her gaze until he met her eyes. "Angel, what's happened to you
down here? I mean, Cordy's gone apocalyptically evil, Wesley's sprouting chest hair, and you're...a
dad." She had to stop herself for a moment before going on. "Wanna tell me what happened?"

Angel sighed, folding his hands in his lap. "It's more of a question of what hasn't happened."

"Well, then", Buffy suggested, leaning on her knee, her hand raised up to rest her chin. "How
about we start at the beginning?"

"Not really sure when this all began, honestly", Angel shrugged.

"Then how about after my last visit here?", Buffy suggested. "You know, the Thanksgiving
weekend about four years ago?"

Angel felt his stomach flip-flop at the memory. What Buffy probably remembered was coming to
LA, yelling at Angel for his interference with the Native American demons that nearly killed the
Scoobies on Thanksgiving, the Morah demon attacking them both, with Angel killing it with a
single blow to the head, a flashy light show from the Morah's demise, and then her leaving after
about 5 minutes. What she wouldn't remember was how they went hunting for it together in the
sewers of LA, of Angel's blood mixing with the demon's during the fight, and killing it, but in the
process, becoming fully and completely human.

Or how wondrous her eyes looked at him before she and Angel shared a passionate kiss in broad
daylight on the Santa Monica Pier, something out of her wildest fantasies, or their all-day, all-night
passionate love sessions, finally getting back together after 3 months apart. Or how they ended up
battling the Morah a second time after it regenerated itself, Angel barely able to stand while Buffy
fought it alone. Or the demon's ominous words about the End of Days, and its deadly prophecy :
"Together you were powerful, alone you are dead." Or how Angel convinced the Oracles to
swallow back the day so he could protect Buffy and prevent her death when the End of Days
would arise. Or their grieving, passionate, and tearful goodbye as the final seconds of their day, of
their happiness, of their one chance to finally be together ticked away to a close.
With a heavy sigh, he proceeded to unravel the story of the ongoing saga of Angel Investigations from there. He started with Doyle's noble sacrifice of himself, and his passing of the visions to Cordelia. He then got into Wesley's joining the team in the wake of Doyle's death, and later, the recruitment of Gunn from the streets of L.A, just after losing his sister to vampires. He told her how the team met Lorne, a wisecracking, but gentle empathic demon who ran the now-demised demon karaoke club Caritas. He then told her of Darla's first return from the grave, of Wolfram & Hart's sinister plans to corrupt him, of enduring the Trials to earn a dying Darla's last chance at a normal life, a gesture that ultimately proved futile. Her heart hurt for him as he recalled painfully how Wolfram & Hart rubbed his failures in his face as they forced him to watch as a helpless Darla was...violated (there was no other word for it) by a returning Drusilla...and the reign of terror the insane vampire and newly Sired Darla had unleashed. Of the rift he caused within his team when he fired his closest friends, and his descent into darkness as he went on a one-man mission to wipe out his Sire, his lunatic Childe and the evil law firm once and for all. She shook her head in sympathy as his eyes lowered recalling Holland Manners' showing him the secret of what made Wolfram & Hart thrive: humanity's own penchant for evil.

"It was…demoralizing", he sighed. "Just...for him to show that what I was fighting for, nothing I did, nothing I could do, meant anything. That what I was fighting for, goodness, decency, was something that didn't exist. That I couldn't win, because there was nothing worth winning."

"No", Buffy shook her head firmly. "That's not true. Angel, he was evil. He tried to corrupt you with lies. There are things worth fighting for, you know that. You told me that long ago, remember?" He lifted his head and couldn't help but to smile a little at the little glitter of a memory in Buffy's eyes. "You once told me, that we don't fight just to win completely, because we can't. We fight because there are things worth fighting for. Our friends, our family…children." She worked a bit to knock the wistfulness out of her voice. After their high school graveyard talk all those years ago, she never gave any thought to Angel having children. Or at least, not with her, anyway. But still, it did hurt that she knew he had a son, a joy fate decreed that she could never share with him.

"I know that now", he assured her, resisting the impulse to reach out and take her hand in his.

He shamefully lowered his head and went on to his admission of defeat, taking shape in his very harsh, physical one-night stand with Darla. Something that he initiated. He could see Buffy's jaw muscles clench hard, her eyes flashing with anger, pain, hurt, betrayal and revulsion, perhaps at Darla, perhaps at him, perhaps both.

He immediately felt the self-loathing creeping into him, angry, no, enraged at himself for putting his beloved through this, for letting her see him falter so badly. She looked away for a moment, resisting the impulses to stand up and storm out of the room, or to backhand Angel across the room and back again for his act of betrayal, of blind stupidity, or to let her tears fall like rain and cry like the girl she was when he first met her. Instead, she simply took deep cleansing breaths, a technique Giles taught her, and nodded.

"Go on", she managed in a small, strained voice.

Angel hesitated. "W-we don't have to if-
"

"No", she bit out, before calming herself. "I...need to know the rest of what's happened to you. To stop all of this."

He warily continued, with how he kicked Darla out of his home just after, something that he noticed brought a faint glimmer of delight to Buffy's eyes. He told her of how he worked to mend the bridges and reconcile with his teammates, the hardest of whom was Cordelia, who only
forgave Angel after buying her what amounted to over $2,000 in expensive clothes, which was painstakingly hard to find given Cordy's exquisite tastes.

He continued with their visit to Pylea, a word she recognized Lorne using from before, to rescue Cordelia, who went from slave to Queen in just one day, and how the world's different physical laws allowed him to bask in the warmth of two suns and see his reflection in the mirror. Despite her current emotions, Buffy couldn't help but to smile a little bit at the thought of seeing Angel in the sunlight. She had always wanted him to be able to feel those little human things she always took for granted, at least until she met him.

He told her then of his rescue of Fred, nearly insane after five years as a slave in a demon world, and their adoption of her into their family. She chuckled as he recalled the first words she said to him after saving her from an execution: "Handsome man. Saves me from the monsters." Oh, but how many times Buffy had known herself to have 'handsome man' save her on many an occasion. Without Angel, she never would've made it past her first year in Sunnydale. That much she (grudgingly?) accepted.

He paused for a moment, swallowing hard as he vividly recalled, to excruciating, on many levels, detail of their return to the hotel following their adventure, only to find Willow waiting for them, bearing mournful and devastating news…that Buffy was dead. She felt her own eyes start to mist as she saw the flashes of grief pass through Angel's handsome features, even at the memory of it, even as Buffy sat not a few feet from him, alive and well.

"The whole time I was away during that summer", he said, his voice heavy with long-forgotten grief. "I just…I just kept thinking the 'what if's…What if I'd been there? What if I could've stopped it, what if I could've helped her? Or at least…what if I could've died for you…or with you?"

"No!", she said suddenly, fear freezing her heart for a moment, before calming down. "No… Angel, that's exactly why…why do you think I never called you to tell you about what was happening?"

Angel's head shot up and suddenly his eyes became hard. "Why didn't you call me?", he said, frowning. "Buffy, I…I thought you knew that you could always call me if you really needed help. You died and you…you didn't call me", he finished softly.

"That was something I had to do alone, Angel", she said simply.

"What? To die alone?", Angel shook his head incredulously.

"No", she said. "Glory was…she was threatening Dawn. She was going to kill Dawn. My sister. My family. I…I had to do this alone. It was a family affair."

"Which automatically excludes me", he finished softly, a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

Buffy sighed, her patience teetering at its limits. "Not with the excluding", she insisted. "There's just some things I have to do sometimes that don't involve having my guardian angel…or at least, his tall, dark and handsome demony replicate. " He let a small chuckle loose at her words. So similar to what she had called him years ago, her '200 year-old, cradle-robbing, creature-of-the-night boyfriend'.

"Tell you what", she told him. "I'll get to that part later…just tell me what's happened to you first."

He continued with his return in the fall, of how shortly after, he received Willow's miraculous phone call that Buffy was alive, after their meeting together, of which both remembered the
passionate, angst-filled and fiery moments of, and then how Darla had reappeared in the hotel…
carrying his child. What was more shocking for her to hear was how Darla had human feelings,
maternal instincts for the child that would be Connor. But none of that compared to the wide-eyed
gaze she fixed on him when he revealed of how Darla, to save her son, their son, would make the
ultimate sacrifice: her life for Connor's.

"She really did…does love him", Angel said. "I was shocked, too. 150 years with her, I knew her
like the back of my hand. And not once did she ever care or love anything or anyone…not like
she did Connor."

"She actually…staked herself?", Buffy asked, still in disbelief.

Angel nodded. "It was either her or Connor. When it came down to it, there was only one choice
for her to make. She did what any good mother would do…she protected her child."

After the shock wore off, Buffy actually started to reconsider her opinion on Darla…slightly. She
still couldn't forget the whole 'tried-to-kill-me-my-mother-friends-and-Angel' bit, but still, to hear
that Darla, of all creatures, would make the ultimate sacrifice for someone other than herself, for a
child, Angel's child…well, that was something to consider. Perhaps there was more to this whole
'human Darla' thing after all.

Then he threw her for a loop again when he mentioned how Cordelia, in order to bear the pain of
the visions, and to keep fighting alongside Angel, allowed herself to turn into a half-demon. She
could scarcely believe that Cordelia Chase, Cordy, Queen C, the Queen of Mean herself, would
have willingly sacrificed a part of her humanity to help fight 'the good fight'. Clearly, her old high-
school nemesis had undergone a major change since arriving in L.A, getting closer to Angel in the
process. She felt oddly jealous of her for that.

He continued with the Fang Gang's attempts to raise infant Connor ( she smiled to herself
picturing Angel playing the doting father, changing diapers, reading bedtime stories, fussing over
a little baby boy), and of a demented Holtz's improbable return from beyond, thanks to the demon
Sahjahn. She had heard about Holtz from around the demon bars in Sunnydale, rumors about a
rogue, legendary vampire hunter out to destroy Angelus, but she was so overwhelmed dealing
with her own emotional torment of returning from heaven that she let Angel handle it by himself.
It was a decision that she had regretted now and again, especially after she heard the end result of
that story: a well-meaning Wesley's stunning act of betrayal, which led to Holtz's vanishing into
Quor'tothing with Angel's kidnapped son in arms. She was horrified when Angel told her of how he,
in a fit of grief and rage, nearly smothered a dying Wesley in the hospital with his own pillow to
extract punishment.

He went on to tell her of Connor's astonishing return to Earth, as a supernaturally strong, yet
emotionally troubled teenager, raised with a hatred for his true father. She felt her shock and anger
rise when he revealed how Connor, tricked into believing Angel had killed Holtz, had played on
his emotions as a father to lull him into a trap, an ocean prison where he spent 3 months going
mad from hunger and horrifying visions. He went on to tell her of his return, thanks to Wesley and
Lorne's help, and how he subsequently kicked Connor out of his home. He told her of Fred and
Gunn's relationship, and how that dissolved thanks to Wesley's romantic attentions and the murder
of Professor Seidel, whom Fred blamed, rightfully, for her exile into Pylea; how Wesley led his
own demon-hunting operation in the wake of his exile from the team, and his twisted involvement
with Wolfram & Hart's Lilah Morgan (Angel had once mentioned her to Buffy) and Lorne's return
to and from Las Vegas.

She was stunned when Angel told her that Cordelia had been made a Higher Being, something
she found very suspicious and highly unlikely. Granted, while Cordy's sacrifice was noble, there
was no way in hell that could merit nearly enough for that kind of reward. Hell, Buffy herself had
saved the world more times than she could count, dying *twice* in the process, and *she* wasn't any Higher Being, so how could this be made so easy for Cordy?

He finally revealed that this was ultimately the grand design of an unknown evil power, whom had manipulated Cordelia and possessed her in the Higher Planes, and upon her return to Earth, right under the team's noses, unleashed total havoc on L.A., beginning with the rise of the Beast, the devastating Rain of Fire, the attack on Wolfram & Hart, the blocking out of the sun, the city's horrifying conversion from buzzing metropolis into demon-run warzone, and, when the AI team was desperate for answers...the return of Angelus.

She sat frozen, her green eyes wide in shock. It took her brain a full 15 seconds to comprehend what Angel had said. She shot up quickly from her seat, pacing back and forth restlessly.

Now Angel worried. He knew that when she began pacing, she was in full anger mode. Battle mode.

"Buffy...", he began.

"I…you…I can't *believe* that you let them *do* that!", she exclaimed. "Angel, *how* could you let them bring *him* back into the world? After everything he's done, everyone he's killed, you actually *let* your closest friends bring back your psycho evil twin?"

"Believe me, I didn't want him back anymore than you did", he said. "It was actually Wesley's idea, really."

"Figures", she muttered. "Mr 'I've-had-Field-training' jumps on the first stupid idea off of Page One of the 'Apocalypse-for-Dummies' Handbook and you just go along with it?"

"Like I said, I never wanted him back in the first place", he sighed, growing weary of her argument. He knew she, more than anyone, was well within her rights not to want Angelus back, but L.A. was *his* city, therefore *his* responsibility. "But you didn't see what we were seeing, Buffy. People were dying, the Beast was unstoppable, the city was in ruins, every single vampire, demon, and creepy-crawly crawled out from every corner of hell and began overrunning this city with death, torment and destruction, and we didn't have a clue of where to look for answers...We didn't have a choice."

"Hel-loo? I'm the *Slayer*?", Buffy said incredulously. "Chosen One? Little Miss Save-the-World? Scourge of the demon underworld? Ring any bells? Why didn't you call me? Why would you have possibly thought that the better option was letting loose Sir-Stalks-Maims-and-Kills-A-Lot into, hel-lo, *an apocalypse*?"

"Probably because putting my ex-girlfriend smackdab in the warpath of an indestructible evil juggernaut wasn't exactly ranking high on my 'To-Do' list ", he said, his tone frank.

"You still should've called", Buffy said tautly. "Maybe we could've used Willow, or Giles or…anything but let that snake out of his can!"

"A Slayer wouldn't have made much difference", he said. He braced himself. "The others tried that."

It took Buffy a few moments before she realized what he was talking about. "Faith."

Angel nodded. He told her of how Angelus escaped his prison, how Wesley had contacted Faith, helped her break out of prison to help fight the Beast. How the sheer force and strength of the monster nearly murdered her sister Slayer until Angelus, in true-to-form fashion, stabbed the Beast...
from behind with a knife forged of the monster's own bones, killing it and bringing back the sun. He proceeded to tell her of how an injured Faith's fight-to-the-death with Angelus left her near death, and how Willow was called in from Sunnydale to help restore Angel's lost soul. She was miffed at her best friend for keeping such a secret from her, especially anything that concerned Angel.

Then she let out a bitter chuckle as she realized Willow's earlier deception. 'Sovereignty', she thought. Good one, Willow...I'm such an idiot.

He went on to tell of Faith's mental mind walk with Angelus through Angel's mind, and how they finally restored his soul, allowing Buffy to breathe a silent sigh of relief. He then revealed Cordy's mysterious pregnancy, and their discovery of her manipulation of Connor and everyone else, and what Skip had partially told them when Connor, a mysterious girl and a white-clad, human Darla dropped into the hotel, bearing news of the End of Days drawing closer…and 'Cordelia's connection to the First Evil. Which led to their phone call to Sunnydale and the subsequent crash landing arrival of the Scoobies.

When he finished, she felt her legs begin to give way and she quickly sat back in her chair, feeling somewhat overwhelmed at hearing Angel's whole story from beginning to end. Wow, and she thought that she had problems...although she did. Major ones. And not just the impending apocalypse. But she doubted if she'd have had it any easier if she switched shoes with Angel.

"Wow", she said simply.

"Yeah", he replied.

"That's...a lot", she said, frowning.

"Feels that way, sometimes." He paused. "A lot of the time, actually."

Then, unconsciously, she reached out and grabbed hold of his hand. It never ceased to amaze him how that touch, that gesture would affect him, how his tense muscles would relax, how his tension would immediately dissipate, how his head would suddenly feel 10 pounds lighter. It was a true connection. Soulmate to soulmate.

"It's okay", she smiled simply. "I know now it's been hard for you, but...I'm here now. And if I can help you out in any way, either with the fighting, well, obviously the fighting", she chuckled. "But...if you ever want to talk to someone about this-

"I'll let you know", he nodded, his famous lopsided grin flashing. Buffy could feel her stomach flip-flop at the sight, God, how she had missed his smile, his eyes, his...everything, really.

"Now", he said, slowly, and, to both of them, regretfully, letting go of her hand. "I believe you owe me a life story."

She looked down for a second, a corner of her mouth slightly turned up. "And boy, is it ever a tale."

Angel chuckled. "Believe me, Buffy, after all of this, I don't think anything could surprise me."

Famous last words...

As if on cue, a knocking on the door was heard. A little annoyed that someone would intrude on their private discussion, Buffy sighed as Angel stood up to open the door…

…Which revealed a bruised, slightly hunched Lorne, clutching his jaw, a small trickle of blood
coming down the left side of his mouth.

"Lorne? What happened to you?", Angel asked, stunned.

"Your super-powered tyke and his Slayer junior friends, is what", he muttered, wincing painfully as he said it.

At those words, Buffy's inner alarm went off. "Dawn?"

"'Fraid so, kitten", he said as Angel helped him over to a chair.

"Tell us what happened", Angel said.

"Well, I was coming up the stairs, just finished showing some of the girls around their rooms", Lorne began. "I mean, I would've come up sooner, but when they found out I could sing, they asked me to do a few requests. And for some strange reason, a lot of them took to either Celine Dion or Pink. Not that I mind Celine's numbers, but-"

"Lorne!", both warriors exclaimed.

"Sorry, I digress", Lorne shrugged. "Anyway, I ran into Connor, your kid sis", he pointed at Buffy, "and their friends barreling down the stairs. They were going somewhere in a hurry, with a bag load of, my guess, weapons."

"Well, maybe they went to train", Buffy suggested, although that was her hopeful side talking, not her rational, legal guardian side, which was screaming at her that Dawn was about to do something incredibly stupid.

"That was my guess, too, Cherry Plum", Lorne sighed. "But just as soon as I ask them where they were headed to, WHAM! Your kid shoots out a wicked left hook, I'm doing a Mary Lou Retton tumble down the stairwell and I see them head off past me before I could stop them."

"You... you're not saying that-" Buffy started.

"Sorry, guys", Lorne said. "Your kids are gone."

Buffy and Angel exchanged worried, parental glances with each other. Neither Dawn or Connor had been renowned for their rational planning, or any kind of planning in general.

Together, this was a recipe for disaster.

To Be Continued…

______________________________________________________________

Please read and review! Next update coming Monday, June 27!
A/N: Hey, all! Sorry 'bout the long delay, but things have been getting chaotic in my life, and I'm working full time at two jobs now (growing up's a bitch, ain't it :) ) But my commitment to this story is unwavering and steadfast. Mark my words, you will see an ending. And this story's only begun to unravel.

Now that Angel and the Buffy-verse are basically over, I guess it falls to us to keep the story of Joss's blonde Slayer and the dark-haired vampire-with-a-soul alive. The next few chapters will be updated sporadically during this summer, so keep your eyes peeled. In the meantime, on to the story!

Without further ado, I present to you, the next chapter of….

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**Sewers - Los Angeles, CA**

**Now**

"This way," Connor instructed the group as they maneuvered down a sewer tunnel, one of the many they'd passed through in the last half-hour since their hit-and-run escape from the hotel.

"Did you really have to hit Lorne that hard?" Dawn scolded him. "You realize the first thing he'll do, once he wakes up, is tell your dad and my sister what happened. My more-powerful-than-a-locomotive Slayer sister."

"I…kind of panicked," Connor flushed. "Seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"Hit first and ask questions later," Dawn smirked as she stepped over a puddle of rather gross-looking fluid at her feet. "You really are just like Angel…and maybe a little of Spike."

"That vampire with the English accent?" Connor turned up his nose in disgust. "I think I almost prefer you comparing me to my father than to that trash."

"Suit yourself, Junior," Dawn rolled her eyes at him. He turned to scowl at her, but one look at her impish grin staring back at him, and Connor's intimidating glare faltered, and finally melted into an almost shy smile.

"Are you guys sure this is a good idea?" Molly asked as she crept along behind them, Vi bringing up the rear.

"Chill, Molly," Dawn sighed. "We've got a plan…sort of…so, what's with the butterflies in your stomach?"

"We're just a few moderately trained young people about to take on possibly, from what you've
told us, the most dangerous person walking the face of the Earth right now. You'll have to excuse me if I get a li'l skittish," Molly replied, a little sarcasm creeping into her voice.

"No lie," Vi spoke up, looking up cautiously at her surroundings. "Plus, do we even know where we're going? All I keep seeing is smelly sewer after smelly sewer."

"This is the way," Connor insisted as the group crept closely along the walls of the tunnel. "I scanned the tunnel routes myself. I pretty much know how to get anywhere in this city from here."

Molly spotted an enormous rat, which looked like it had gnawed on steroids, waddling slowly along the other side of the tunnel. "You live a charmed life, huh?" she muttered, revolted.

"You have no idea," Connor said, a note of distaste and regret in his voice. He didn't like knowing all the things he knew sometimes, living the life he was living, but it was all he'd known for so long. What else could he do but live it?

The group went some time without speaking, as they continued to make their way through the labyrinth maze of sewer tunnels. The smell of the sewers was enough to make them nauseous, and the only shafts of light came from the occasional water drain up in the streets, but they pressed on.

The four teens had a mission to accomplish. Granted, it was a self-appointed, risky mission, but it was theirs nonetheless. And the longer they walked, the more determined they became to reach their destination.

"So, what exactly is the plan again?" Vi asked.

Dawn rolled her eyes. "How many times have we been over this? Connor and I will provide the distraction, and we wait for Cordy to drop her guard. Once she does, we'll have the opportunity to knock her out and grab her. If anything goes wrong, that's where you guys come in. Vi, you come in from behind. Molly, I'm counting on your skills with that crossbow in this scenario."

"Shouldn't be too hard," Molly beamed, proudly, patting her crossbow. "With all my target practice lately, I'm becoming quite the crack shot."

"No killing!" Dawn and Connor managed to simultaneously blurb out.

"Well, of course not," Molly shrank a little, a bit hurt that they were skeptical of her skills as a bowman…er, bowperson. "I can aim just as well for a kneecap or a shoulder blade as I could a direct hit to the heart or the head."

Connor fought off the urge to cringe at the thought of further injury to Cordelia…even if she was currently possessed and evil.

"Oh, well, that's good." Dawn had a moment to consider her friend's words. "And also…a little disturbing."

"Glad I'm not the only one that thinks so," Connor smirked.

Dawn giggled a bit at Connor's unwitting joke. At the sound of her lovely voice lighting up with a hint of laughter, it drew the boy's eyes to hers, two twin sets of blue eyes meeting their respective gazes.

Dawn had to avert her gaze, so that she could keep Connor from seeing the lovely pink tinge coming to her cheeks, just as Connor had to feign checking on his shirt's cuff, suddenly finding it fascinating, than to let Dawn watch as he, the Destroyer, started to blush.
"So, um... how much longer do you think we should be from the factory you said 'Cordy' is hiding at?" Dawn abruptly switched gears.

"Not much longer," Connor said, scouting up ahead with his hawk-like vision. "We should be there soon, no problem."

"I wouldn't count on that, pretty boy," a menacing growl came from behind the group.

The teens whirled around to find a small contingent of vampires, sporting ripped leather jackets and heavy chains dragging from their hands.

Molly held up her crossbow defensively, her eyes widening in surprise, before they narrowed into slits, steeling herself as best she could to take aim at the demons. Vi reached for her stake, her hands trembling fiercely as she struggled for a good grip with it. And Dawn, feeling a little naked without a weapon, suddenly began to wonder if this little underground odyssey was such a good idea, after all.

Connor, however, was not intimidated. In fact, his thin, handsome face bared a calm yet feral smile, even as he instinctively stepped up, brushing Dawn safely behind him, placing himself as the lone barrier between the girls and the pack of murderous demons. Ever the alpha male. Ever the warrior.

Connor's voice was like smooth, cold steel. "Hello, Cage. Been a while."

He addressed the head vamp, a bald-shaven, stubbly, thickset soulless demon, bearing brass knuckles on each hand, ripped jeans, leather biker vest underneath a bloodstained white undershirt. Every bit the stereotypical biker. Well, except for the bloodstain in place of the beer stain.

"Well, well, well," the vampire sneered. "Lookie here, boys. If it isn't the SuperPunk himself. I've been just dyin' to see you again."

"Thought you were already dead. Though that's something I can help you with," Connor glared, but that predatory smile never left his face.

Dawn wasn't sure whether she felt comforted by it, or just plain creeped out. But given the choice between him and the scary vamp chain gang, she was with Connor all the way.

"And still with that smart mouth of yours," Cage flashed a wicked grin, showing off his stained yellow and slightly red-pinkish teeth. No need for the girls to wonder where a vampire would get the reddish color from. "Maybe I'll keep it as a prize on my boots after I rip out your throat."

"Connor, you know this guy?" Dawn whispered up to him.

"We've had our run-ins," Connor briefly explained, but keeping his eyes on Cage the whole time. "I first met him back when the Beast blocked out the sun. I killed most of his crew, but he got away. Slimy bastard kept turning up with new gang members each time I saw him, and every time, he ends up leaving as a one-man gang."

"You've gotten lucky," Cage scoffed.

"Five times in a row?" Connor cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Beginner's luck," Cage growled. "I would've had southern L.A all wrapped up by now, but your pissant daddy - the big, bad Angelus - had to go and drop the Big Stone and bring back that nasty
sun. The undead community's just a little pissed about that."

"Oh, yeah, I'm sure Angel and his gang are peeing in their pants," Dawn snarked, surprising herself, and her friends even more so. "I mean, given that what they do for a living is hunt and kill demons and vampires, I'm sure they're just petrified at the thought of a couple of sorry demon imitation Hell's Angels being annoyed with them."

The vampire cocked his head to look at Dawn, incredulously, before his demonic face began to leer at her, creeping Dawn out to the max.

"Hey, Junior, who's the jail bait you got there?" Cage taunted. "Not that I mind you bringing along a couple of extra rounds for me and my boys, in all senses of the word…" The rest of the demons began to laugh darkly.

Dawn, Molly and Vi collectively shuddered. The innuendo was not lost on them.

Connor's dark smile began to twist into a cold, hard battle glower. "Your dust will be blowing in the wind before you touch any of them."

"Is that right?" Cage snarled. "Do you really think you can beat us down here? Daddy and his playmates aren't here to save you this time, freak."

"They weren't there the last couple of times I whipped your asses, either," Connor retorted, an evil gleam in his eyes as he took a small step forward towards his opponent.

"Yeah, but you were by yourself that time," Cage reminded him, turning a hungry gaze behind Connor towards the two nervous Potentials and Dawn. "Didn't have to worry about protecting a bunch of scared little girls."

A light bulb went up in Dawn's brain at his words.

"You're the one that should be worrying, Platelet Breath," Dawn puffed up, mustering her bravest stare.

"Oh, is that so?" Cage asked patronizingly.

"Yeah, that's so," Dawn evenly shot back, summoning bravado she had no idea she had. "Or maybe you haven't heard the term... Here goes nothing... "Vampire Slayer?"

Cage's grin fell off his face at hearing those words.

Connor's eyes turned to her, the boy staring at Dawn in disbelief.

Murmurs of "Slayer?" "Another one?" and "No way!" ran like wildfire though the stunned and suddenly very wary vampire gang.

Molly and Vi were staring at Dawn in shock. Molly said to Dawn in a low hiss, "What the bloody hell are you doing?"

"Yeah, I'd like to know that myself," Connor cut in, glaring hard at Dawn. Just what was this girl thinking? If she was even thinking at all!

"Saving our asses, maybe, so shut up and get ready," Dawn whispered through clenched teeth, hoping that the vampires didn't hear them.

Cage composed himself and scoffed. "Nice try, sweetheart. But I've seen the Slayer during the
sun-go-bye period here. She's taller, wears a ton of leather and has black hair. You don't even come close to that description. You're no Slayer. Just a tasty bite-sized appetizer waiting to happen."

_TIME to play my trump card_, Dawn thought.

"You saw Faith, the _other_ Vampire Slayer," Dawn smiled knowingly, drawing herself up to her full height, which was about an inch taller than her sister. "The one that came after _me._"

Cage raised an eyebrow, confused. "_After_ you?"

Vi got the idea suddenly of what Dawn was about to do. And she was hoping to God that she was wrong. But, then again, given Dawn's increasingly zany plans, she knew that the odds were such that she wasn't wrong, that the Key was about to do something real stupid.

"That's right," Dawn mustered up a cocky grin. "Allow me to introduce myself. Maybe you've heard of me." She took in a deep breath, her hands rested on her hips, her best superheroine pose. _Please let this work, please let this work…_

"I'm Buffy Summers. _The_ Vampire Slayer."

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**Hyperion Hotel**

**Same Time**

"I don't care if you're the construction foreman of the freakin' millennium, you're _not_ getting this room!"

Anya stood unwavering, her hands placed on either one of both perfectly sculpted hips. Her pixie-ish features were hardened into a merciless scowl, as she laid down the law to her former fiancé.

Xander, not one to be intimidated easily - not by his ex, anyway - glared back. "I put my bags in there first, Ahn! First come, first served. You oughta know that, what with being in the retail business for two years and change."

"Wanna know what else I learned about during my time in the Magic Box?" Anya retorted as she stormed back into the room, only to emerge not five seconds later, Xander's luggage in hand. "Right to refusal!" she snapped, as she disdainfully threw down his luggage at his feet.

All the while, Fred and Gunn stood by, watching the entire display between the ex-almost-newlyweds; and, as anyone would seeing the dynamic between the two, they watched amazed.

"Well, that's just great, isn't it?" Xander snapped. "You think you can just do whatever you want? Queen Anya just snaps her fingers and 'hey presto!', we all bow down to her infallible will! After all, who are we lowly non-exvengeance-demon types to question her?"

"Listen, Harris," she began warningly. "If you think -"

"There's another room just like it!" Fred blurted out.

All three heads swiveled to the petite Texan, making her blush somewhat at all the attention. She wasn't accustomed to having so much attention - or any attention, really - thrown her way.

"What other room?" Xander asked.
"Yeah, what other room?" Gunn frowned.

Fred rolled her eyes as she glanced at her ex-boyfriend. "This is a hotel, Charles. Or it's s'posed to be, anyway. What about the room upstairs, directly above us?"

"The one with the balcony view?" Gunn asked.

Xander considered it. "How good of a view is -"

"There's a view?" Anya asked abruptly, her hazel eyes wide.

"Well, sure there is, yeah," Fred nodded. "You should see it during the sunrise, the way the sunlight bounces off the city skyline is just…"

"Wonderful!" Anya brightened, picking up her valises. "I'll take it. And you can show me where it is, so I can sleep there first. Before Xander." She turned to her ex-fiancé with a triumphant smile.

Xander thrust his hands into his pockets, attempting to keep himself civil. "You know, Anya, this whole 'I-get-it-before-you-do' phase might be interpreted by someone as kind of sad, if not outright pathetic." Key word, attempting.

Anya smirked. "Well, gee, now, that hurts real bad, Xander." She feigned a sigh. "I guess I'll just go up to my giant, spacious balcony room and cry, cry and cry away, and watch as the tears sparkle…as I'm greeted by a majestic sunrise, with a balcony to tan and eat a wonderful breakfast to bask in the glow of the city."

She patted him with mock affection on the arm. "Oh, but don't worry, I'm sure you'll see them. That is, if you can stick your head out of the small, cramped little windows in the room, or squeeze it past the air conditioner lodged in the biggest window in the room. You shouldn't miss it."

She turned back to Fred. "My room, please?" she smiled with abundant enthusiasm.

Fred managed to suppress her laughter and nodded, showing her up the stairs.

Xander gritted his teeth, calling back resentfully, "Well…fine! Go, and…enjoy your stupid room! Who needs a balcony view, anyway? All that…fresh air, and…sunbathing, and…view?"

Gunn smirked. "Uh, yeah…'cause then she might get a really nice tan. Who wants that?"

Xander sighed, deflating. "Have I mentioned how much my life completely sucks, lately?"

Gunn patted the other young man sympathetically on the shoulder. "Welcome to the club, bro."

"I hate this club," Xander muttered. "Been a member of it ever since I was born. I don't see any fringe benefits with my membership yet."

"All the misery and donuts you can possibly stomach?" Gunn offered, grinning.

His offbeat joke drew a small chuckle from Xander. Finally, someone with a sense of humor around here!

"Sorry, didn't mean to sound off with the whining," Xander smiled faintly. "God knows I didn't need to add my own flaming hoop to the circus of angst and drama around here. Gunn, right?" he asked as he extended his hand.
"One and only," Gunn nodded, shaking Xander's hand.

"That's a mighty cool name. Strikes fear in the hearts of bad guys," Xander said, approvingly, before wistfully adding, "The only thing my name would ever evoke is the reminder that the shingles need repair."

"I dunno 'bout that," Gunn said thoughtfully. "Xander's a…different name. Maybe if you just kept the 'X' and dropped the 'ander'?"

"Right," Xander snorted, before adding dramatically, "Fear me, evil demons! For I am 'X'! Mister X. Scourge of the darkness, seedy underbelly of the underworld!" Then he thought about it.

Really thought about it. "Well, actually, now that you mention it…"

Gunn laughed. He was starting to like this guy. "Come on, Scourge Boy, let me show you 'round the joint."

After grabbing his bags and entering the room, Xander looked appreciatively at his surroundings as he basked in the room's décor.

Wow, he thought, no wonder why Ahn was so mad-on for this room. This place is bitchin'!

"You know what the sad part of all this is?" Xander mused as he ran his hand appreciatively across the shiny polished wood of a hand-built coffee table, set aside a giant, cushy cedar brown leather chair. "This whole room is probably worth more than the cost of my entire apartment."

"Try seeing this place when you've been living on the streets for a few years," Gunn smiled nostalgically, thinking back to the first time he actually came to settle down in Angel's hotel.

Xander whipped his head around at Gunn after hearing that last comment. "Whoa, hang on…you were homeless?"

"Not exactly homeless in the traditional case," Charles said. "Only in the not having a real house, crashing with your crew in an abandoned warehouse basement sense…so, yeah, I guess you could say that."

Xander frowned, confused. "And I'll take a side order of 'huh?' with that 'what?', please?"

"I used to run my own demon hunting operation back in the day," Gunn explained, and Xander nodded, remembering that little tidbit from earlier on. "We were more in the wagin' war stage than looking at 'Good Housekeeping'. We never had homes, only a base for backup and support to keep fightin' the vamps in LA. After my folks died, I guess I never cared much for the whole white-picket-fence deal, you know?"

Wow, and I thought I had it rough when I had to sleep in the basement while paying rent, Xander thought sympathetically.

"Yeah. Harsh," he managed to say.

Gunn waved it away. "Ah, no big deal, I got over it. Besides, got a whole room up here to myself now."

"Yeah, well," Xander said as took another appreciative look around the room. "Let it never be said that Dead Boy never treated his pals well."

"Mmm, true," Gunn chuckled, idly picking up a framed picture on the dresser. "Cordy really loved coming in here a lot."
Xander looked up for a moment, a little unsure why those words spoken so casually made his gut wrench a little. "Oh," he said, working to make it sound as casual as possible. "She did, huh?"

"All the time," Gunn said as he began to lean on the cabinet behind him. "It got to the point where we just told her, 'Girl, either you move on in here or' -"

His sentence was cut off, when a box suddenly fell on him from the top of the cabinet.

"Ow! Damn, what the…" Gunn complained, rubbing his head.

The box had spilled most of its contents out onto the carpeted floor. Gunn grumbled as he bent down to pick up the items, "Man, I told Cordy once I told her a thousand times, not to leave her stuff lyin' 'round the damn room. But does she listen?"

"As I recall, listening isn't historically one of Cordelia's strong points," Xander smiled knowingly as he crouched down to lend a hand. Most of it was work-related stuff; invoices, client transaction numbers, and the typical office minutia that came with running a business.

Had this been four years ago, Xander would have burst out laughing at the thought of Cordelia Chase doing office work for anyone. Even when they were dating, he had always expected her to go somewhere important or exotic after Graduation, leaving Sunnydale behind in her dust faster than Buffy could stake a fledgling vamp.

Working for Buffy's ex-boyfriend as a secretary in an LA detective agency had never even made the radar. Funny how life works out, sometimes.

Xander paused when he took notice of something out of the past that caught his eye. Lying face up, amidst the debris of papers and folders, was a bright red book, engraved in gold letters. 'Sunnydale Class of 1999', the book read. It was her high school yearbook.

Harris could scarcely believe that Cordy had held onto it. He had assumed that she would have wanted to purge any proof or memory that she'd ever attended Hellmouth High, given her experiences there - including several obsessed high school enemies and crushes trying to kill her, the constant mayhem that included being a member of the Scooby Gang, and, lest we forget, the painful and ill-fated breakup between himself and her.

And yet, there it was. Plain as day, the book of her high school memories was right there, not a few inches from him. Before he could stop himself, Xander's hands gravitated towards the book, lifting it up from the clutter.

"Oh, hey, I haven't seen that in a while," Gunn mused, as he caught sight of the book in Xander's hands.

"Yeah, uh…" Xander was struggling with his words for a moment. "I just…I figured she would've gotten rid of this by now. High school wasn't exactly a paragon of fun for Cordy."

"She used to mention that place a lot...at first," Gunn said, absently shoving more documents into the box. "Before...all of this started to happen. Sometimes, I'd walk in here to call her down for a meeting we'd be having, and I'd catch her laughing or crying or something touchy-feely over some of the pictures in there."

As he spoke, Xander cracked open the book. As expected, there was a cramming of signatures up to infinity there. He was sure that everyone who'd been anyone back in Sunnydale would have signed the yearbook of Queen C, their 'It Girl'. He wasn't disappointed.
Pretty much the entire football team, all of the Dingoes, the cheerleaders and the long list of admirers and hangers-on (see the 'Cordettes') had all but filled it up to the brim. Xander grimaced as he passed over Harmony's signature and her lame yearbook message, when a few photos came sliding down the page. He caught them, and the images burned into the paper blasted him right back to his past.

In those pictures he and Cordelia were sitting, side-by-side, practically in each other's laps, basking in the warm glow of a bright summer day, behind them the carnival-like festivities of the Sunnydale Pier, on 'Town Appreciation Day', back in their senior year of high school.

The perfect picture of young love...before it had all gone so horribly wrong.

Yet another one, this time with a giddy, smiling Cordy piggy-back riding on top of a laughing Xander, her arms affectionately wrapped around his neck. He remembered that one pretty well. Harris remembered that he had made some Xander-esque comment about her weight, after she went on about how she couldn't eat the cotton candy for fear of going over her five-ounce daily limit of sweets.

Though visibly displeased, she'd quickly distracted him by pointing over to where she claimed some scantily-clad blonde was falling out of her top. As predicted, he turned around to look for some free action. Unpredictably, however, a playful Cordy took the opening and pounced right on top of him, surprising him to no end. He hadn't pegged Cordy as the playful, fun-loving type, and yet there she was, pranking him and having fun with him.

The girl had actually managed to topple him to the ground, landing right on top of him as the two erupted into a fit of laughter and a few soft kisses. But not before a smiling Oz had managed to snap the photo, a grinning Willow in the background, watching them.

Xander hadn't admitted it to anyone else yet, but it was at that moment when he officially saw her as more than just his girlfriend. She was one of them. A Scooby Gang member. At that moment, he'd felt completely blessed that she was his, and he was hers.

It had been one of the best days of his life, during high school.

But Xander honestly hadn't anticipated she would have treasured those photos. Or have shown them to anyone. Until one day, when he was trying to cajole her into celebrating the Scoobies' success in the SAT scores with a double date concerning bowling, which Cordy was firmly against, until some smooth talking from Xander had finally made her cave, no easy feat. And then something hanging in her locker door had caught his eyes...

Flashback - Sunnydale High School, Sunnydale

November 24th, 1998

"Hey, those are from the pier," Xander noted as he looked up at the collection of photos of he, her and their friends having fun at the pier over that summer.

Cordelia shrugged. "Yeah, I just got them developed. Why?"

Xander was astonished. "There's pictures. Of me. In your locker."

"So?" Cordelia shut the locker door, suddenly feeling a little defensive about her choice to display her boyfriend's face in her locker for all eyes to see. "I put them there because I wanted to see your face between classes, get it? So thinking about us together makes me...I don't know...HAPPY, okay? Is that such a big deal?"
Xander could tell that this was a bit hard for Cordy. She was trying to maintain her rational explanation, but the fluster and sincerity in her voice and the slight vulnerability flickering in her beautiful hazel eyes gave her away. It was very moving, seeing this girl, whose reputation had been lofted higher by her unflappable, breezy façade suddenly struggling for words, showing a little glimpse of her heart to him. Just him. Only him. He almost felt unworthy of such an honor, and yet, this was one of those things that she, in his relationship with her, had simply surprised him with yet again.

Smiling gently, Xander took her soft hand into his. "It is to me. I never knew I was locker door material."

They stared into each other's eyes, as if they were the only two people in the world, he with understanding and warmth in his eyes, she with unbridled adoration. Things that neither one of them were accustomed to. Until now.

Of course, she had to return to form.

"Well, just barely. Besides…I look really cute in those pictures," Cordelia sighed, but linking her arm in his as they walked down the hallway to meet their friends…

"Yeah, those are her favorite," Gunn said with a small chuckle as he finally finished putting away all of Cordelia's things. "If I had a nickel for every time I caught her looking at those photos, man…"

Xander kept looking at the pictures. "Yeah…I…I just…I thought that the last thing she'd have lying around are pictures of me. Well, of us. She told me she'd burned everything after we…stopped seeing each other."

Gunn looked at him, confused. "Why would she want to do that? Unless you were…" Suddenly, the black man's eyes lit up with understanding. "Holy shit. You're him, aren't you?"

"Him? 'Him' who?" Xander asked, a little puzzled.

Gunn snapped his fingers, trying to recollect a name on the tip of his tongue. "Harry…Harlis…Harris! Xander Harris, right?"

Now, Xander's wig radar had gone completely blinky. She had mentioned him? Gunn knew his whole name?

"Uh…I guess," he replied cautiously.

"Man!" Gunn laughed. "I can't believe this! You're the guy that had her wound up in knots in high school?"

Xander shrugged. "Well, yeah, but…" He paused, slightly smiling. "Huh. Did she say I had her wound up in knots?"

"Damn, dog!" Gunn slapped his knee. "She used to go on and on about you when she'd look in this book."

"Really?" Xander couldn't help but to grin. Cordy had talked about him? Cordelia? Still talked about him? About them?

"Yeah, there was a whole mess o' names she called you," Gunn snickered. "Let's see, there was 'Noodle Boy', 'Zeppo Boy', 'Wal-Mart Boy', 'Fish Boy', 'King-of-Monster-Love-Boy', 'Lame
'Boy', a whole lotta other 'boys' too."

Xander felt his jaw drop and his little balloon of hope for...something...deflate. So, even after all these years, Cordy still had that bite to go with her bark. Even though their verbal repartee, which was legend in Scooby lore, was something he had actually looked forward to - deep down, he couldn't deny that her scathing remarks were something that actually hurt.

His mistake was often underestimating her intelligence, which Cordelia had kept well-hidden under her cool, brusque façade, so often that Xander sometimes forgot himself. And because they knew each other so well, she knew exactly where the Achilles heel to his ego was, and she never hesitated to lash out whenever she was pushed or inclined.

"Well, that's Cordelia for you," Xander replied, slightly tart, slightly reflectively. "Sugar and spice and everything bile-y."

Strangely enough, one of the things I've missed about her, he thought.

"Yeah," Gunn said, his laughter dying down. "But you know, you really did hurt her back then, man. I could tell."

Guilt crept up Xander's insides at his words. Of all the things he had ever regretted doing in his life, one of the worst was his moment of weakness when he fell into Willow's embrace the night that Spike had kidnapped them - hurting one of the people he cared most for in this world, Cordelia, when she and Oz had risked their lives to actually come to save them.

"She told me 'bout what went down between you two. How you two went out for a while, then you cheated on her with Red. Girl wasn't the same after that," Gunn said, frankly. "She trusted you. Even though she wouldn't admit it, Cordy probably still carried a little bit of a torch for you. So, yeah, she was burned real bad."

Xander sighed heavily, looking down at his shoes. What was he supposed to say to that?

"I'm not proud of what I did," he finally said aloud. "It was stupid, it was a mistake, and it was incredibly selfish. Believe me, I tried to make it up to her, but she wouldn't have it. Cordy wouldn't even look at me after we broke up."

"Well, put yourself in her shoes," Gunn answered tartly. "Would you?"

Xander thought about it for a moment. "No, probably not," he relented.

"Forgiving somebody you love after they break your trust like that, that's harder than you could possibly imagine."

Xander's mind suddenly flashed with the revolting images of Anya in the throes of passion with Spike on the table within the Magic Box, their own hangout spot. He felt something die a little within him, forcing away those memories.

"Believe me," Gunn snorted bitterly. "I know."

"Yeah?" Xander's interest suddenly piqued up. "Care to share?"

Gunn's dark eyes peered back up at him. "You know that girl who just took your ex upstairs?"

Xander's eyes widened, abruptly recalling that part of the recent conversation downstairs. "Fred? Well, kudos to you, buddy. She's a real cutie."
"Yeah," Gunn sighed. "We were together for quite a few months…until recently. I mean, we were having some problems before, complicated stuff…” Charles could still hear the 'crack' of Professor Seidel's neck breaking before he'd shoved his corpse into the swirling vortex. "…but I thought we could work through them. Didn't count on Wes stepping into the picture," he ended up bitterly.


"I guess you're talkin' 'bout the old version of English," Gunn said, brushing that aside. "Giant glasses, iron-pressed shirts and whatnot?"

"Pretty much," Xander said. It was word association to him. He always associated Wesley with the stuffy, Pierce Brosnan-y looking suit from back during the old Hellmouth High days.

"That Wes couldn't have stolen a chick from a nest," Gunn said, shaking his head. "Did you get a look at the new version downstairs, though?"

Xander considered that for a moment. "Actually…now I can see your problem," he nodded. After all, Wes had finally hit puberty, so talk about steep competition.

Gunn scowled briefly for a moment. "Tell me about it. That's the thing. The whole time, I knew he was makin' eyes at Fred. I saw the way he was looking at her, I saw what he was thinking. But still…I never saw it coming."

"You mean…Wes and Fred…?"

"I walked in on 'em during a research party a few weeks back," Gunn recalled. "They had that awkward 'Uh-Oh-Hand's-In-the-Cookie-Jar' look on their faces. You know, faces flushed, that guilty look, glancing everywhere but at you? Anyway…that's when I knew Fred had started lookin' at other fish in the sea."

"Ouch," Xander winced in sympathy, he knew that look well. "How'd you deal?"

The ex-gang leader shrugged. "Wes and I threw down, I accidentally hit Fred in the process, and we broke up a few hours later."

"Huh," was all that Xander could reply. That sounded way nasty, even compared to his and Cordelia's disastrous break-up.

Xander knew the feeling that Gunn was talking about. That horrid, ripping sensation when you know that the person you love had just ripped out your heart, thrown it in the mulcher, and fertilized the lawn with it. He remembered with vivid pain how he, in a fit of jealous rage, had nearly killed Spike that night that he'd seen Anya and him having sex. The fury, the betrayal, the hurt and anguish and pain…

*And, oh dear God, Harris suddenly thought with remorse. That's how Cordelia felt when she saw me kissing Willow.*

"You, uh…you think you've still got a shot with her?" Xander asked. Off Gunn's stare, he clarified, "Fred, I mean. Not that it's any of my business, of course; just wonderin'."

Gunn paused, thinking pensively. He hadn't actually considered that. Since their breakup, he had often thought, even dared to hope that maybe, somehow, some way, he and the beautiful physicist could finally patch things up. That Fred would tell him that she only had eyes for him now, that Wesley was only a passing phase of temporary insanity, that they would end up together under the
covers making sweet love again, be together like he knew somewhere deep in his heart that they
should be.

"Don't know," Gunn sighed honestly. "I don't know what's gonna happen, I don't even know if
I'll be breathin' long enough to figure it out."

"Well, I'm no Dr. Phil or anything," Xander ventured. "Cause you could tell by the way I've still
got hair, but...knowing what's going down, what may go down, knowing what you just told
me...isn't that all the more reason to tell her how you feel?"

"No disrespect, bro," Gunn said practically, but not mean-spiritedly. "But if you're so sure about
that, isn't it about time you start applyin' that to your own life? Practice what you preach with your
own ex?"

Xander wanted to say something, but he could not. Gunn was right. What could he really say?
And how could he practice what he preached, when he wasn't even sure what he wanted?
Assuming that Anya and he didn't get killed anytime soon...

The discussion was abruptly halted, however, when the door swung open fast to reveal Lorne's
bruised face.

"Hey, guys, sorry about the raid entrance," the Host said rapidly. "But we've got trouble."

The Sewers

Now

There was an audible gasp, or as much as vampires could gasp without breath.

Molly's eyes looked like they were about to explode out of their sockets, Vi's mouth hung agape,
and Connor was staring at Dawn as if she had two heads.

And, much to Dawn's and everyone's surprise, the demons actually took a few steps back.

A few fearful steps.

Their murmurs were heard loud and clear:

"Buffy Summers?" one vampire asked, disbelievingly.

"Buffy freakin' Summers? The Vampire Slayer? She's here?" another exclaimed, panicked.

"I heard she defeated a god!"

"I heard she killed the Master, choke-slammed him right on a stake!" yet another said. "She even
ground his bones into dust with a sledgehammer!"

"I heard she took down the Order of Taraka's finest!"

"I heard that she sent Angelus to Hell one time!"

"I heard she actually dated Angelus! Turned him into a good guy, even got him to stake Darla, his
own sire!"
"I heard she kicked William the Bloody's ass like a bad habit! Got so bad that he actually changed sides to fight with her to save his own life!" another chimed in, awed. "They say she has some sort of witchcraft on the really badass vampires!"

"Yeah? I heard she killed Dracula! Twice!"

"I heard she blew up a pure demon! During an Ascension!"

"She's crazy, man! She blew up two school buildings with people inside just to get rid of all the demons!"

"They say she doesn't die...that she came back from the dead twice!" one vampire uttered. "I heard tell that she's actually an immortal!"

"She's the greatest Slayer who ever lived! She's killed thousands of us!"

Dawn felt a little swell of family pride lit up in her. To think that her big sister was the main source of fear for the demons that bumped in the dark, for the evil that lurked everywhere, and that her deeds were so fabled, well...this had to be cool. She actually started to feel goose bumps, enjoying the feeling of being the center of attention, the most feared person in the room...or sewer.

*Wow, all I did was say her name - and these guys are practically wetting themselves, Dawn thought, amazed. Is this what it feels like? Is this what it feels like to be Buffy? To be a hero?*

Connor himself was taken aback. Sure, he was used to spreading fear among the demon populace himself. After all, one didn't get the title of 'The Destroyer' by playing nice. But while he was feared in Quor-toth, even he had never inspired such fear within the demons in LA as to make them panic with the mere mention of his name.

But all Dawn had to do was mention that girl's name, Buffy, and the vampires went into full panic mode, something even he hadn't been able to do. This increased his curiosity towards the blonde woman whom he'd fought with earlier at the hotel, and strangely enough, even more towards her sister. Perhaps there was something that Buffy had taught Dawn that made her look so amazing, in his eyes. So willful and daring.

So...special.

"Cage, man, this is nuts! I ain't goin' anywhere near those chicks if Buffy the Vampire Slayer is backing them up!"

"She'll kill us. She'll kill all of us!" one of the vamps closest to Cage whimpered.

Cage, silent until then, responded by backhanding the underling, hard. "Shut up, you pathetic worm! You're making us look bad!"

"And, what, before you were all cover candidates for GQ or YM? As if!" Dawn scoffed. I think that's what Buffy would say, she thought apprehensively to herself, before straightening up, emboldened. *Yeah, that's so a Buffy line!*

Cage took a beat, measuring his words carefully. This new development was unexpected. He had anticipated a tough but victorious fight with Connor, the child of two of the most feared vampires of all time. But he had not anticipated an encounter, here, in his territory, with a living legend. With the greatest single Slayer in history.
He'd heard all the stories about this girl, this…Buffy Summers. Her reputation was nearly mythic. She had beaten some of the most feared and revered demons, even gods, who'd ever lived. Now he was having serious second, third and all the way down to eighth thoughts about messing with these kids if one of them was the legendary Slayer with the blonde hair who had...

*Blonde?* Cage's head started to put two and two together. *Wait a minute -*

He took another leering look at Dawn, who fought back the instinctive urge to cringe, as he let out a small chuckle.

"Hah! Nice try, sweet thing," Cage smiled evilly as he sauntered forward. "You almost had me there for a second. But you see…*Buffy,*" he spat sarcastically. "When one builds up a rep like you have, people tend to remember the little things. Like that the infamous Buffy Summers is a small, but powerful, unbeatable…*blonde* Slayer. Not a small, powerful unbeatable *brunette.*"

*Uh-oh! Busted!*

Dawn's mind started its segue between panic and quick thinking. *Damn it, why couldn't Buffy have inherited Dad's hair color instead of Mom's? Come on, think, Dawn, THINK!*

Luckily, she quickly came up with an answer. "Ever heard of *hair dye*, Fang Face? Girls use it, you know. Oh, wait," she paused, looking over Cage's balding head. "I guess you *wouldn't,* huh?"

*Hair dye? Oh, my God, that was sooo lame,* Dawn mentally winced.

*Cage let out an angry growl, moving to advance, which drew Connor to step further in front of Dawn. But one of the vampires held him back.*

"That's *gotta* be Buffy Summers, man!" he said. "They say she toys with her victims before she…" he drew a finger across his throat. "She's like a big cat playing with mice -"

"The only mouse here I see is you, Charlie," Cage snapped as he grabbed a fistful of the vamp's jacket and held him closer with one hand. "Now, shut up and let me do the talking, unless you want me to stake you myself - got it?"

The fledgling only nodded dumbly as Cage shoved him away, not taking his eyes off the youths. "He's not *buying it,*" Vi muttered in a small singsong voice to Dawn.

"Let's wait 'til we *know* that," Dawn sing-songed back.

Cage sauntered forward, a confident look playing across his demonic visage. "What do you think, that I was born yesterday? Well, my 79th birthday actually was yesterday, but that's besides the point…nothing about you screams 'Slayer', little girl. If you *really were* the infamous Buffy Summers, the Slayer of a Thousand Vampires, you'd be a lot more confident than what you are right now. I can smell your fear, sweetie. It's like a big, wafting perfume. Nothing that a *Slayer* would have," he grinned nastily. "Besides, look at you. You don't even have a -"

Without warning, Dawn reached behind a surprised Connor's waistband and was suddenly armed with the Slayer's traditional weapon of choice.

"...stake," Cage suddenly swallowed, caught off-guard.
With a silent prayer that this next move would work, Dawn kept her eyes on the vampires, her eyes on Cage, while she twirled the stake readily in her hands, her fingers working frantically to keep the balance of the wood between them as it twirled rapidly.

She was only going from what she'd seen Buffy do a thousand times in training, playing with the wooden weapon in her hands like it was a piece of yarn, effortlessly speeding and spinning back and forth between the Slayer's hands. Buffy had only given Dawn a quick crash course in the technique one time earlier during the summer, while training her little sister.

Dawn was only paying half-assed attention to it that night, though, something she was partially kicking herself for mentally right now. But she did remember one bit of advice from her famous big sister:

_The key to the stake, like with fighting, is balance. Lose your balance, lose your weapon...lose your life._

Never had that statement held more weight than in this very moment. Where her life, and Connor's, and the lives of her friends were relying on whether she could do tricks with a piece of wood, like her sister, the world-renowned Buffy Summers.

_Please, oh, please, oh, please, don't slip_, Dawn silently pleaded with the stake. _Or fly loose, or, or...just don't, okay?

For a while, it worked perfectly. She spun the stake, seemingly effortlessly, up and around. Frontways and sideways. To the left and to the right. Round and round. Back and f -

- flying.

Away. As in, out of her hands.

Dawn panicked. _Oh, NO!_

Vi and Molly gasped loudly, and Connor tensed himself for battle as they watched the stake soaring through the air -

- and slamming home in the chest of one of the vampires just to Cage's right.

_Bull's eye._

Dawn's eyes widened in shock as the vampire looked up, dumfounded before he exploded into dust, the undead skeleton appearing for a mere fraction of a second.

Cries of awe and fear spread like fire though the vampires as they looked wildly between Cage, the dusted remains of their companion, and the infamous 'Buffy'.

Molly, wide-eyed, shook her head in amazement. "Wow! You never told me you could do that, Da - uh, Buffy!" she caught herself just barely, remembering about vampires' super-enhanced hearing.

"Holy crap!" Vi said with wonder, trading glances between Dawn and the suddenly terrified vampires. "You just dropped that vamp like a bad habit! That was so cool!"

Dawn, still in shock, barely acknowledged their enthusiasm. "Uh...thanks?"

Connor looked at her intently. She felt a little self-conscious under the handsome boy's scrutinizing gaze. Finally, he gave a faint smile and nodded. "Not bad."
Dawn's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Yeah…" He looked back at the pile of dust. "For 'Buffy Summers', anyway."

The Slayer's sister smiled back sheepishly at him. "Yeah, well…that'll be our little secret, 'kay?"

Cage stared back up at this young girl, who had just staked one of his gang in the blink of an eye. If he wasn't a believer before, well, there was his proof, in the form of vampire dust at his feet.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, a touch of awe in his voice.

"Already are," Connor retorted.

He stared at Dawn. "You really are her, huh? Buffy Summers. The Buffy Summers. Living legend."

Dawn squared her shoulders and straightened her posture, a gleam coming to her eyes, the confidence shooting right back into her. "Told ya." She looked at the vampires, who were suddenly quaking in fear. In her best cocky voice, "I'm Buffy Summers. The Vampire Slayer. Scourge of the Underworld. Slayer of gods and demons…"

*My God, could I sound any more like a bad episode of Xena?* Dawn rolled her eyes inwardly, before summoning a cold smile at the demons. "Now…who else wants to play?"

"Screw this, man, I'm getting out of here!" one of them shouted as he headed for the exit.

Cage whipped out a stake of his own, and, without looking, let the stake fly, hitting the minion square in the back, piercing the heart. The vampire groaned just before he exploded in a cloud of dust.

"Cage, have you lost it?" another one cried. "He was one of us!"

"No one turns chicken and runs out in my gang," Cage retorted angrily.

Dawn stared in shock at the head vampire. Without hesitation, he had just staked one of his own kind. Clearly, this bloodsucker was particularly vicious.

"Besides," Cage said, his malicious grin growing wider as he took two steps toward Dawn. "A thought just occurred to me. Not only do I have Mr. Souled Vamp's kid right in front of me, ripe for the pickin'," he said as his eyes ticked between Connor and back to Dawn.

"But now, I'm being graced by the presence of Buffy Summers, the Slayer. The Legend, the greatest and biggest and baddest of them all. Now, imagine how it'll look on my resume…if I can say that I snuffed out the great Buffy Summers with my own hands."

Cage's demonic yellow eyes glowed with glee as he dreamily anticipated his future. "My rep will be set up for life. Everywhere I go, in whatever town, in whatever bar, I'll be known as 'Cage, The One that Killed the Greatest Slayer Ever'. They'll be flocking in drones to join my gang. I'll have demons linin' up from Tinseltown to Tallahassee beggin' me to let them in, hell, I'll have to become exclusive - only the baddest, only the toughest. Forget about LA, I'll be respected and feared throughout the whole world. And the women…" he licked his chops at the thought, "I'm talkin' chicks up the wazoo, sweetie…and all I have to do, is wrap my hands around your pretty little throat and make you just a bad memory."

Dawn felt a chill go up her spine. *SOO not the way I hoped this would go!*
"Oh, that's great," Molly muttered. "Now, he's even more determined to kill us!"

Although becoming increasingly terrified, Dawn kept up her bravado. "Okay, first off: 'The One that Killed the Greatest Slayer Ever?' Doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. Second: you really think it's that easy, huh? You just kill me, walk around with another notch on your belt? I've been killing vampires for years, Chrome Dome. The baddest of them. Hell, I even killed a god! You can't even beat Connor over here, so how the hell do you expect to take me on?"

"Hey!" Connor protested, annoyed.

"No offense," Dawn added quickly.

Remembering that it was all a part of her ruse, the boy nodded, although slightly miffed. "None taken…I guess."

Dawn returned her gaze at Cage. "Here's the deal. You're going to let me and my friends get to where we need to go. After that, you're going to leave. And take your skuzzy little Lost Boys-wannabes with you. You leave LA and never, ever show your faces around here again. And in return, I'll be nice enough not to slowly, systematically and painfully kill each and every last one of you. Starting with you. And believe me, when I say that I am not joking…I'm the Slayer. Death Incarnate. I have the power here. Not you. Me."

For extra punch, Dawn scowled,threateningly. "You want to throw down? Try me."

As she uttered those words, as her glaring blue eyes radiated strength, she seemed so powerful, so convincing in her confidence in her own strength, that for a moment, even her friends, who knew the truth, believed that she, Dawn Summers, was indeed this urban legend of the feared Slayer.

The vampires seemed to fearfully retreat into themselves a little more, while Cage stared at her intensely, mulling over her words. Considering his choices.

The teens stood fast, watching his reactions carefully, all the while bracing themselves for battle. Connor had another stake in his pocket with Cage's name on it. Molly had her crossbow aimed at one of the vampires on the left and Vi was tensed for a fight…or flight. Dawn held her breath, awaiting the vampire's decision.

Finally…he nodded.

"Step aside, boys," Cage ordered the rest of his gang as he stepped to the side.

Dawn blinked, astonished. The others exchanged baffled, confused glances amongst each other. That was it? Was it really that simple? Had this vampire decided to simply let them off the hook at the threat of Buffy Summers looming over their heads?

"Really? Just like that?" Vi asked, hesitant, but awed.

"Just like that, Carrot Top," Cage responded with an all-too-phony smile. "Hey, I'm a badass, but I know my limits. After all," he shrugged as he ticked his amber eyes back to Dawn. "You're right. I'm just a lowly vampire. Who am I to argue with the great Buffy Summers, huh?"

"You'll step aside?" Dawn asked, suspiciously.

"Yeah," Cage said simply.

"You're…letting us go?" Molly inquired, still dumbfounded.
"Mm-hmm."

"And you'll leave town? Never come back here again?" Connor asked as he glared at Cage with steely eyes.

Cage nodded. "Guess so."

Dawn glanced at Connor, her eyes asking him for his opinion. Though the hesitancy and reluctance reflected in the taller boy's eyes, he shrugged, apparently agreeing.

"Well…good," Dawn said. "You've made a smart decision."

Cage's toothy smile flashed again. "Well, better hurry up, Slayer. Time's a-wastin'."

Connor took a moment to glance back at the other girls. "We move together. As a unit. If one of them decides to try anything, we can start fighting back a lot faster."

"So, what, you want us to, like, hold hands or something?" Vi raised an eyebrow.

"Vi, get in the center, Molly, get in the back, 'Buffy' will cover you," Connor told them. "I'll take the front."

"W-wait a minute, the back?" Molly protested, reluctant. "What if they grab me or something?"

"That's kinda why you have the crossbow, Moll," Dawn reminded her. "Use it."

The group moved slowly across the sewer.

_Well, this is…good_, Dawn mentally sighed as she and the others inched closer to the exit past the vampires, towards the factory. _No tell-tale signs of any_ -

Cage's hand whipped out at lightning speed, grabbing a startled Dawn by the throat and pulling her face-to-face with the demon.

**TROUBLE!**

"Dawn!" Vi cried out as she whipped out her stake, but one of the demons roughly grabbed her, while two others cornered Molly, who shakily struggled to get a grip on her crossbow, while another knocked Connor down to the floor, hard.

"Come on, sweetie," Cage laughed cruelly as he held a frightened, struggling Dawn fast in his grip. "You didn't really think I was gonna let an opportunity like this just pass me by, did ya?"

"Mmph! Let…go…creep!" Dawn gritted out, squirming in his grasp.

"Sorry, Summers," Cage smirked as he licked his lips. "But after everything I've heard about Slayer blood…I just gotta have me a taste -"

A steely grip suddenly shot up and caught Cage by the throat, stopping the stunned vampire's words in his mouth.

"Cage," Connor glowered as he stood up, his hand gripped firmly on his enemy's neck. "She's not on the menu."

With only one arm, the male teen then threw the vampire gang leader across the sewer, slamming him right into the opposite wall. One of the other vampires ran to strike him, but Connor's lightning fast reflexes evaded the demon's blow, while his hand shot out and struck him hard
across the face. After a quick kick to the kneecap, Connor grabbed the vampire and tossed him over to the one holding Vi.

The two demons collided into each other, and tumbled to the ground. Vi, thinking quickly, used the opportunity to wrench herself free, driving a stake into the one that held her. The vampire exploded in a cloud of dust. The other one got up quickly and lunged for her, but the redheaded Potential ducked quickly under his grasp, kicking him quickly and backing up to join Connor and Dawn.

"You okay?" Connor asked the Slayer's sister quickly.

Dawn only nodded dumbly, before her eyes widened. "Connor, behind you!"

Cage charged hard into Connor, who went sprawling on his back. The vampire pounced on the boy, pinning his wrists on opposite sides of him, but the cunning young warrior head-butted Cage hard. As the vampire recoiled in pain, Connor used Cage's backward momentum to his advantage, shoving him off hard, before capitalizing with a hard kick to the face.

"Help Molly! I'll take care of Cage!" Connor called out to Dawn and Vi.

Dawn pried her wide eyes off Connor's battle long enough to spot Molly in a corner, two vampires closing the gap between them fast.

"Come on!" she said to Vi before the two girls sprung into action.

Molly aimed her crossbow at the vampire on the right, but the one on the left batted it away from her, grabbing the British Potential by the scruff of her neck. Molly let out a slight whimper as the vampire growled, lowering his face to her neck. Just then, a pair of hands sent the vampire spinning away, revealing Vi standing protectively in front of her friend.

"Thanks," Molly managed, slightly clutching her throat.

"Don't mention it," Vi replied, patting her lightly on the back.

"Guys! A little help here!" Dawn cried out as she narrowly ducked under the other vampire's grasp.

"Coming, Dawnie, just a tick!" Molly shouted as she raced over to Dawn, Vi hot on her heels. The two Potentials tackled the vampire to the ground, hard. Dawn took the opportunity to help as she pounced on the vampire, all three girls now attempting to hold down the pissed-off soulless demon.

By now, Cage and Connor had made it to their feet, the vampire leering predatorily at the young warrior, who only had eyes for him.

"So, that's your backup, huh, freak?" Cage scoffed as he and Connor circled each other, testing the other's movements. "A couple of scared little girls you grabbed down here and a Slayer to do your job for you?"

He let a flying kick loose at Connor, who ducked under it and backhanded the vampire. "Not everything is about you, Cage. We've got more important things to be doing right now than play with you."

Connor lashed out with a hard right hook, but the wily Cage blocked it, grabbing the arm and twisting it behind Connor's back, hard enough to make even the super-strong male teen wince in pain.
"Playtime's over, Junior," the vampire snarled. "You won't live long enough to humiliate me again."

He shoved Connor hard to the ground, pouncing on the boy and punching him hard in the face, drawing blood.

Cage began rambling. "Every time I've come up with a new gang…"

He punched Connor again.

"Every new guy I've had to sire…"

Another blow.

"And you've always come around with your super-powers…"

And another blow.

"And your stupid stake…"

The next punch nearly knocked Connor senseless.


Connor's hand shot up, gripping tightly around Cage's neck, before he tossed him away. The young man quickly sprung to his feet, wiping the trickle of blood from his mouth, scowling menacingly. He hated it when he bled.

"I don't make you look stupid, Cage," Connor spat as he readied himself. "Your stupidity makes you look stupid…well, that and that lame-ass jacket you're wearing."

Cage let out an angry roar as he lunged at the boy, but Connor ducked under the vampire's grasp, punching him hard in the face, and then connecting with a crushing kick to the demon's kneecap. Judging from the sickening 'crack' sound, he knew that he had broken it. As Cage doubled over in pain, Connor followed up with a hard elbow to the face, then kicked him hard in the gut, then grabbed the vampire by the collar and sent him spinning away, slamming hard against the wall.

Meanwhile, the girls were having their hands full with their pair of vampires. By now, one of them had recovered and grabbed Dawn, hauling her away from his companion, tossing her carelessly to the ground.

Dawn back away, her warm palms stiffening at the cold, damp ground beneath her, eyes wide in fear as the chain gang vampire closed in on her, licking his chops like a cat toying with a mouse. Just as the vampire reached for her, she shot her leg out, kicking him square in the groin, doubling him over in pain. Thinking quickly, Dawn used her other leg to sweep his legs out from under him, knocking him down.

Molly and Vi tried to regain control of their vampire, but he tossed Molly backwards while he grabbed a startled Vi by her slender throat and slammed her so hard against the wall that the pretty Potential was seeing stars.

"End of the line, little girl," the vampire growled as he lowered his fangs to a gasping Vi's neck - SCHUCK!

The vampire pulled away suddenly, looking awed at the arrow tip protruding from his chest, an
instant before he burst into a cloud of dust.

Vi looked in surprise, clutching her throat, to see her savior.

"Told you I was a crack-shot," Molly smiled self-assuredly, her crossbow held firmly in her hands.

"Huh," was all Vi could muster.

Loud grunting sounds and Dawn’s high-pitched squeals directed their attention towards their de-facto leader, and the girls ran towards the Key. The petite brunette was having her hands full with the vampire, the sneering demon managing to get on hand on Dawn’s throat, when suddenly, Dawn scowled, elbowing the demon’s arm loose, then poking him in the eyes, blinding him for a moment.

Dawn then used the opening to pull out her small black knife from her pocket. The vampire lunged for her again, but Dawn tuck-and-rolled swiftly under the vampire, plunging the knife into the demon’s leg. Gotcha!

Molly and Vi looked on, impressed, before realizing that their standing about while Dawn was fighting for her life was probably likely to result in her losing of said life. With that, they bumberushed the vampire, tackling him hard to the ground.

"Grab his legs!" Molly shouted to Vi, while the demon flailed about in their grasp.

"I’m trying!" Vi ground out. "If you could just hold his arms down, maybe he’d stop trying to punch me long enough for me to do it!"

"Molly! Stake!" Dawn called out. Sparing a quick moment, Molly reached in her pocket and found her trusty stake, tossing it to Dawn. However, in that brief instant, the vampire batted Molly aside and pounced on Vi, who let out a startled cry. The vampire snarled as he leaned in for the kill. Completely ignoring Dawn.

That turned out to be a fatal mistake.

Dawn let out a small grunt as she raised the stake high above her head with both hands, before she plunged it into the vampire’s back, who shot up in pain before he exploded into a cloud of ashes.

Vi stared up at Dawn, thunderstruck. The Slayer’s sister, the one with no extraordinary powers save her incredible courage, had just saved her life.

"You okay?" Dawn asked, offering her a hand.

Vi took it, dusting herself off as she got to her feet. "I'm good. Thanks."

Molly, now standing, looked behind them at the battle between Connor and Cage. "Shouldn't we go lend Connor a hand?"

The trio watched as Connor skillfully began to dissect the vampire, ducking, dodging, striking, kicking, parrying, blocking, and punching so fluidly, so rapidly, it was almost like watching him dance.

"I think it'd almost be unfair," Dawn said as she raised her eyebrows in awe.

Cage landed hard on his back, wheezing and coughing, his blood-soaked teeth curled in a snarl. This had not gone well at all. He never got a shot at the Slayer, and this kid was kicking his butt all over the place…again. Luckily for him, he knew when to cut his losses.
"Screw this," Cage coughed, waving his hand dismissively. "You got lucky again, freak, this time. But next time, when the Slayer's not around to save your ass, you'll find me."

He scrambled up to retreat, when Connor's voice stopped him cold: "Hey, Cage!"

Stupidly, he turned around. "What?"

Connor's right hand stayed hidden for a moment -
"You forgot something."

…and then the stake came flying through the air…

…burying itself into Cage's chest. The vampire had only one second to say one last thing:
"Oh, son of a bi -"

…and then Cage disintegrated, all that remained of him scattered on the floor, the dust almost completely covering the stake that had ended his immortal life.

Connor stared at the remains of the vampire, nodding in grim satisfaction. Almost immediately, the others rushed over to him, eager to check on him.

"Connor, are you okay?" Dawn asked, anxiously.

"Fine," he briefly replied, dusting himself off.

"But you're bleeding," Dawn said, as she reached up and gently touched a cut on his lip, split from one of Cage's punches.

Though through her soft touch, Connor felt a strange sense of comfort ease through him, a small shiver up his spine - something in him, some dark, dreading thing, made him want to jump back.

"Leave it, I'm fine," Connor said, gruffer than he intended to, swatting her hand away.

Dawn stepped back slightly, feeling oddly hurt by Connor's sudden change in demeanor.

When he caught the wounded look in her big blue eyes, something in the boy tightened up and felt ashamed. He hadn't meant for it to come out like that, but he was simply not used to someone tending to his wounds after a battle. He had always mended himself. Looked after himself.

The only time Connor could remember otherwise was when 'Cordelia' had nursed him after the Beast's arrival, which had resulted in several of Connor's ribs being broken, the first time he had ever been hurt so badly by anything…physically, anyway.

"I…I'm sorry, I didn't mean…" Connor began, his sharp blue eyes filled with apology.

"Guys, not meaning to break up the fun-filled tension and all," Vi broke in, looking over her shoulder. "But, shouldn't we get a move on? Who knows how many more vampires or… whatever, are down here?"

Sighing, Dawn checked her watch. Already an hour had passed since they had left the Hyperion, and they still weren't where 'Cordelia' was. Time was rapidly becoming an issue.

"We'd better get a move on," the Key said, moving to the front of the group. "Who knows how much time we have before fake Cordy decides to go Norman Bates on some other girl?"
"By the way, Connor, that was amazing," Molly gushed at the boy. "I've never seen anyone fight like that before."

"No kidding," Vi nodded in agreement. "You went all 'Jackie Chan' on that vampire. That was wicked awesome!"

Connor couldn't help but to manage a faint grin. "Well, I do stuff like that a lot, but…the stake thing was kinda cool, huh?"

"Ah, Buffy does that all the time," Dawn shrugged, nonchalantly.

Connor frowned, slightly miffed that Dawn wasn't quite in such awe over his skill.

"Is your sister really as good as they said she is?" Connor wondered aloud. Ever since the vampires began their hysterical ramblings about the girl whom Connor fought in the hotel, he had become curious about her. Now was his chance to find out.

"Even more," Dawn replied, proudly. "She's the baddest Slayer who ever carried a stake."

"Well, she seemed pretty strong," Connor mused. "Still…I think I could take her."

Dawn snorted, regarding the boy strangely. "Nuh-uh! That fighting thing you did back there was cool and all, but Buffy would've been done with them and be halfway home to watch 'American Idol' in half the time."

"No, she couldn't," Connor said defensively.

Dawn rolled her eyes at the boy. "She sooo could."

"Could not."

"Could, too."

"Could, not," Connor said, but now with a grin.

Dawn caught his gaze and, despite herself, smiled mischievously. "Could, too."

"Could not."

"Could, too."

"Could not."

"Could, too."

And on and on they went as they walked down the sewers, neither of them noticing Molly and Vi exchanging knowing smiles and giggles between them.

Ah, to see one's selves, as others would see them…

Hyperion Hotel - Lobby

Now

"Alright, start talking and make it fast!" Buffy glowered menacingly at Skip, standing directly in
front of the red prism trapping him.

"I'd suggest you listen to the lady," Angel glared at the mercenary demon, standing to Buffy's right, just a pace or two away. "You wouldn't like to see her get cranky."

The entire roster for both groups had convened in the lobby within moments of Lorne's distress call to Angel's room. The Potentials were still getting settled in, and had been told to stay in their rooms until further notice; something most of them had no problems with, the nightmare of the Bringers still fresh in their minds.

But Gunn, Fred and Lorne were present, each sitting or standing alongside each other, Wesley and Darla shoulder to shoulder, along with Willow and Kennedy (who was still glowing from her late afternoon roll in the sack with the redhead), Spike and Andrew flanking Faith, Principal Wood just to the left of the dark-haired Slayer, Anya just behind Xander, and Giles standing just behind the two Chosen warriors.

An impressive collection of heroes amassed in one room. Intimidating, even to an arrogant smart-ass like Skip.

"You guys are just wasting your time," the silver demon snorted, feigning fearlessness. "Nothing I tell you, or told you already, is gonna make one lick of difference."

"Cut the doom and gloom, Metallo," Buffy snapped. "I want to hear everything you know. Right now."

"Points for the DC comic book reference," Andrew nodded, pleased.

Spike and Faith exchanged a small glance with each other, and the vampire nodded, smacking the blonde geek hard upside the head. "Shut up and pay attention, you git!" Spike kept his voice to a low growl.

"Geez! Just saying," Andrew murmured, rubbing the back of his head tenderly.

"What's taken over Cordy? The truth," Angel asked, his voice icy with demand.

"Gosh, what's with the rush, you guys?" Skip smirked knowingly. "It wouldn't happen to be 'cause those wacky, crazy kids of yours went off rushing out of the hotel looking like they were off to stop Armageddon itself, now, is it?"

Buffy's chest felt tightened at his words. "You saw them leave? Dawn and Connor?"

"Well, yeah," the demon casually replied. "That little monitor system over there on the desk has pretty good feed on the entire hotel." He glanced smugly at Lorne. "Saw the little sprout nail you a good one. Heh, definitely got a kick out of that."

Lorne's red eyes narrowed and he stood up, menacingly, but Fred stayed him with a soft look and shaking her head. Reluctantly, the green-skinned demon sat back down, shooting death glares at Skip.

"Funny you find pain so amusing," Buffy smiled sweetly. "Now, unless you find your own excruciating torment to be a laugh riot, my suggestion? Less evil banter, more intel."

"I'll ask again: what's taken over Cordy?" Angel said, his patience reaching its limits.

"Something beyond your comprehension," Skip sneered. "To give it voice...would be to rend your feeble brains to a quivering mass of..."
"Willow?" Angel snapped, effectively bored with Skip's posturing. "Infinite Agony."

The witch had a small, dark glimmer in her eyes that made Skip more than a little nervous. "Way ahead of you, Big Guy," she smirked as she raised her finger at Skip.

"OKAY!" Skip jumped back, staring in horror at Willow as if she had a loaded gun aimed at his face. Which, essentially, she did. "You got me, fine. It doesn't even have a name."

"Oh, come on - everything has to have a name," Xander snorted. "Even the First Evil has a name. The First, see? Come on, it doesn't have a cute cuddly nickname all the girls at the 'U of Evil' called it back in the old days?"

"Xander, do be quiet," Giles said reflexively.

"Well, if it doesn't have a name, then what the hell do you call it?" Gunn gruffly asked the demon.

"Just master, or...'hey','" Skip shrugged.

After a beat, Faith snorted. "Anyone ever tell you that you're really pathetic?"

Lorne winced. "Unspeakable horror. For real this time."

Angel began to sort this out, mentally retracing what had happened to Cordy over the summer. "No, it doesn't make sense. Cordy was made a higher being because she'd proved herself to the Powers by bearing their visions. This thing couldn't have -"

"Unless - it maneuvered her to inherit the visions in the first place," surmised Wesley, appearing to suddenly have an epiphany.

"Uh-oh. Better step on it. The rubes are catching up," Skip muttered wryly.

Giles began to analyze the situation. "Perhaps...it wasn't just her a-ascension."

"Oh, yeah," Skip said. "Better get to Mr. Peabody and the Way-Back Machine. Think back to when she first inherited the gift of the visions."

Angel swallowed hard as he remembered. "Doyle."

Buffy knew that name. She remembered a guy - nice-looking, Irish, kind of a weary look in his eyes - she'd met in Angel's office when she came to LA to see Angel four years ago, after the Thanksgiving from hell.

They had only spoken once or twice during that time, but she remembered him to be really nice. And she'd known even without seeing the pained glance in Angel's dark eyes that his death four years ago had touched Angel deeply, even to this day.

"Who's Doyle?" Faith asked, puzzled.

"One of the first members of Angel Investigations," Wesley explained, solemnly. "He was the one who originally received the visions, but he passed them on to Cordelia just before he died saving Angel's life."

"Oh, yeah," Spike tactlessly recalled. "That little poncy-lookin' Mick with the bad hair and crappy dress sense. I remember him."

Angel whirled on the younger vampire, his dark eyes flashing. "Never talk that way about Doyle
in my presence again, boy."

Spike was about to retort, when Buffy intervened. "Spike…don't make this any harder than it already is, okay?"

Spike scowled, but said nothing further.

Kennedy raised her eyebrows as she saw the two ensouled vampires stare each other down. "Whoa, check out the undead testosterone levels."

Robin took a moment to think about that. "The undead have testosterone levels?"

"Okay, getting back on track," Willow drew their attention. "What did this Doyle guy have to do with Cordelia's whole evil make-over?"

"Wasn't just dumb luck that that girl came into his life," Skip continued, turning his gaze to Angel. "See, the Big Cheese knew that your little friend was gonna be all noble and take one for the team. But if he'd have passed on the visions to you, well, that would've mucked up the whole plan."

"So Cordelia was placed there to inherit the visions in his place," Buffy realized.

"Right on the nose, blondie," Skip nodded. "In order for this thing to have gone down like it has, the visions had to be inherited by someone of the fairer sex. A member of the Y-chromosome club wasn't gonna cut it."

Angel frowned as he began to understand, with sickening realization, what Skip was trying to say. "Everything that's happened to Cordy in the past few years, all of it…was planned."

"You really think it stops with her, amigo?" Skip sneered, waving his hand around. "Do you have any concept of how many lines of destiny have to intersect in order for a thing like this to play out properly? How many events have to be nudged in just the right direction?"

His eyes ticked to Lorne. "Leaving Pylea."

Lorne's gaze narrowed, his thoughts traveling back to his native home world, Pylea, the day he'd left all those years ago. He remembered his wistful, yet relieved smile as he took one last look at his home, where his bearded mother stood glowering disapprovingly at him, his brother Numfar gyrating along to the ridiculous Dance of Joy, as he'd left home for what would be the (next to) last time before that bright spiralling portal suddenly opened up in the middle of the forest and sucked him out of the music-less Pylea, setting him down on Earth.

The place where he'd used his demon powers at the now-defunct nightclub Caritas to read auras and destinies, offer drinks and guide those who were lost onto their rightful path. A path that had led him directly into the lives of a heroic, but guilt-ridden vampire-with-a-soul with a storied, but dark past behind him and a great big destiny before him, a brave ex-Watcher, a feisty Seer, a brash young street thug/vampire killer, and a bashful physics genius/inventor.

Those who would lead him, the disgraced Krevlorneswath of the Deathwok Clan, into adventures and perils he'd only dared to dream of, or watch on rental from Blockbuster. Those who would become more his family than those in Pylea could ever be.

Then Skip turned to Gunn. "Your sister."

Gunn's scowl masked the flash of inner grief as he thought of his dear little sister, Alonna, screaming in terror, crying out desperately for him as she was dragged away in that van, being
bitten fiercely by those vampires. His only living link to his blood family ripped away from him, becoming even more final as he unwillingly flashed back to the stake in his hand, squishing, breaking through skin and bone, as he ended the un-life of his newly-sired sister, an experience that had left him feeling more empty and alone than he had felt since his parents were killed all those years ago.

Also by vampires.

Ironic how it was a vampire, with a soul, who'd helped to give the former leader of the vampire-hunting Venice Boulevard Crew a new family, a new place, and a new mission in his otherwise chaotic life.

Skip turned to Fred. "Opening the wrong book."

Fred's eyes widened in horror as she recalled that fateful night in that public library seven years ago, remembered innocently uttering strange words without vowels from an old book, one recommended to her by her trusted Professor Seidel.

Remembered that swirling vortex of light opening from out of nowhere in the middle of the black-and-white tiled floor, which - while liberating Lorne from his oppressive home - had sucked her away from her comfy life on Earth as an brilliant up-and-coming undergraduate physics student at UCLA, and into a five-year sentence of hard labor, torment, and near-insanity as a slave, a 'cow' in the strange alien world of Pylea.

Until Angel and his friends had rescued her and brought her back to LA, took her in, slowly helped her re-assimilate into the world and made her one of their own.

Skip swiveled towards Wesley. "Sleeping with the enemy."

Wesley's stern blue eyes reflected his astonishment. He ruefully remembered his lost Lilah, and their twisted tryst, the perverted kinks and love-hate sexual chemistry they had shared with each other.

Wes also remembered the oddly-placed, but beautiful little spark of joy in Lilah's eyes when he'd confirmed their relationship by his use of the R-word, after one of their many nights of passion. He had often wondered, with no loss of guilt, whether or not he'd helped to make her weaker. Softened her guard, lowered her defenses long enough for Lilah Morgan - the coldest, most ruthless lawyer in the nest of vipers that was Wolfram & Hart - to walk into the disasters that befell her, ultimately leading to her untimely death at the hands of 'Cordelia'.

Skip glanced at Darla. "Failing the Trials."

Darla's beautiful features tightened in surprise as her mind took her back to the Great Hall where the Trials had taken place. She could still see Angel, bruised, suffering, but fighting relentlessly… for her. For her life. Which was fading fast, thanks to Wolfram & Hart's resurrection of her human body in a terminally ill state.

Darla could still recall the deep breath, the sigh of relief, as Angel had emerged, alive and well, victorious. And she could vividly remember the look of loss, of grief, of utter dejection in her would-be savior's face as he'd furiously smashed everything in sight, after he'd discovered that for all his efforts, for all he'd risked, Darla's life could not be saved after all.

Skip's revelations had truly stunned them all. He smiled, well pleased with himself. "Gosh, I love a story with scope."

"So, what, you're saying that the Big Bad squatting inside Cordy has been playing puppet master
with Angel and his crew for the last four years?" Buffy raised an eyebrow. "That seems pretty unlikely to me. Nothing can just…twist fate."

Skip let out a harsh chuckle as he turned his eyes towards the Slayer. "Oh, is that right, Most Blonde One? Come on. You don't think that the Monkey Boy and the rest of his chimps are the only ones who got played like fiddles, do you?"

Giles stiffened. "What are you saying?" he asked, in his even, almost deadly quiet manner.

"Yeah, Bucket O'Rusty, what are you sayin'?" Spike called up to him, perturbed. This slow burn interrogation was really starting to piss him off. He'd much rather have let the demon out of his invisible cage and just beat the info out of his shiny chrome head any day.

**But no, that ponce Angel had to be all methodical,** Spike thought derisively. **Stupid git.**

"Oh, come ON, people!" Skip groaned, astounded by the short-sightedness of this human-demon mix. "All these years you've known each other, and not once did you question the oddity of the events that unfolded? How the outcomes of your lives, your biggest battles, your darkest moments have tipped the scales so that we're all here sitting cozy right now?"

Skip slid his eyes onto Willow. "Your first major spell."

Willow's eyes widened at the reference. The Orb of Thesulah. Junior year. The spell she'd used to re-ensoul Angel, the first time he'd reverted into Angelus back in Sunnydale.

She could still remember Cordelia's firm, reassuring grip on her trembling hands, the look of fear and concern on Oz's face as she'd weakly attempted, from a hospital bed, to perform the ancient gypsy spell left behind by Jenny Calendar's final act.

Willow still remembered the unearthly jolt of power she'd felt, only moments after nearly passing out from the strain on her injured body, that suddenly overtook her and allowed her to finish the spell, restoring Angel's soul once more. One of many successful spells the redhead would end up doing over the years on the way to becoming the deadliest Wicca in the Western Hemisphere, and one of the most dangerous and powerful magic practitioners on this plane of existence.

Skip turned to Giles. "Getting picked to be a certain Slayer's personal Watcher."

Giles barely repressed a gasp as he remembered the late Quentin Travers's passive face, as the man had calmly handed him that bulky manila envelope at the Watchers Council HQ in London all those years ago with two red emboldened words that had impacted his life, and the lives of others, in more ways than he could imagine.

Two words that would bring Rupert Giles, lifelong bachelor, reckless rebel, and the formerly infamous Ripper, into the lives of an extraordinary young Slayer he would love like a daughter, and an ever-changing group of brave children he would love as family and watch blossom into heroes as they saved the world on too many occasions to count: 'Assignment: Sunnydale.'

Skip then sneered openly at Anya. "Losing your amulet."

The beautiful ex-vengeance demon vividly recalled the Wish-verse Giles smashing her precious amulet all those years ago, which had left her, the reputed and feared 1,100-year old Anyanka, trapped in the body of an 18-year-old human girl.

And leaving the door open for adventures and experiences, some good, some bad, all amazing, that she could have barely conceived even in her wildest dreams, alongside a Slayer, a witch, a Watcher, a vampire, a teenager/Key and a brave, handsome young man named Xander Harris.
Skip turned to Faith. "Waking up from your coma."

Faith's jaw dropped as she remembered the night she'd awoken after eight months of darkness and nightmares, the result of Buffy's knife buried deep in her gut all those years ago that had put her in a coma she was never supposed to awaken from.

The dark-haired young woman could still call to mind the chills in her body, the jarring nightmares, the cold sweat dripping down her face, her heart hammering in her chest, the lightning crackling and thunder rolling outside her hospital window, a nightmarish greeting to her return from her own personal hell. A second chance given to her that would later allow the former rogue Slayer to redeem herself for the bloody sins of her own treacherous past.

Skip glanced at Spike. "Getting your soul back."

Spike's blue eyes scrunched in pain as flashes of the painful, nearly fatal Trials he'd endured in the heart of Dark Africa raced through his mind. Fists of fire slamming into him, burning him, searing him...scarabs, thousands of them, crawling out from the darkness of the enchanted cave, pouring into him, crawling, devouring, engulfing him whole.

All that had paled in comparison to the ungodly agony he'd felt when his prize was given to him, though: his soul, his human conscience...and the mind-shattering torment from the remorse he'd felt for his century of evil deeds as the sadistic William the Bloody.

Skip looked towards Robin. "Your mother."

Just like that, Robin Wood was four years old again. In his mind's eye he could see his mother, his beautiful, brave mother, caressing him with soft, sweet words of love and a tender embrace before running off into that New York City subway.

Running off to meet head-on with her soon-to-be murderer, Spike. Running off to die. And leave him alone in the world, the only memory of her carried on by her Watcher, Bernard Crowley, who would raise him and train him the same way he'd trained Nikki Wood, the ways of the Slayer - his mother's legacy - in the wake of her brutal death.

Skip's words caused waves of shock to reverberate through all the Sunnydale group, Scooby and non-Scooby alike, each of them turning to one another, stunned into absolute silence. The most important events of their lives were just...manipulated? Like pieces on a chessboard?

Skip saved the best shock, however, for the least likely member of the group.

Xander.

"With you, though, funny thing how it's actually a tie..." Skip drawled lazily, even arrogantly.

"What?" Xander choked out. "What...tie?"

"Dating Cordelia Chase...and the Big Lie."

Xander's mouth was agape in horror. "Wait, wait, wait...you're saying that Cordy and I dating in high school...that was planned?"

Skip snorted. "Oh, please. You honestly think that in her right mind, a girl like that would've wanted anything to do with a guy like you? Now that's really sad!"

Xander clenched his fists hard, that last comment irking him more than he'd thought possible.
Granted, even though his relationship with Cordelia had ended on very bad terms, he'd always thought that they'd had a connection back then. He remembered all too well the passionate make-out sessions in the closets of Sunnydale High School, the times they had held each other in comfortable silence, the sweet words only they alone, when no one else was around, had shared. Harris recalled his words to her years back, when their relationship had first become public knowledge:

'Maybe something in you...sees something special inside me. And vice-versa.'

Xander truly did believe that. That maybe something, somewhere, deep in the heart of the self-proclaimed 'Nastiest Girl in Sunnydale', had seen something worthy about Alexander Lavelle Harris...something that had made him want to be a better person. A better man.

That couldn't have been fake, Xander thought tentatively. Could it?

Buffy furrowed her brow in thought. "Wait, hold on a sec - big lie? What big lie?"

Skip smirked maliciously at her. "Oh, that's right. This chump-nut never told you, did he? Think back, blondie. Junior year of high school. Fight to the death with your ex-boyfriend over there...three words that were vital to be heard. 'Kick his ass.' Ring any bells?"

Buffy frowned, before her eyes widened in horror, her mind replaying a moment with Xander from one of the worst days of her entire life...the day she'd sent Angel, the man she loved, into the depths of Hell.

Willow...she told me to tell you...

Tell me what?

...kick his ass.

Buffy's disbelieving eyes slid towards Xander, who met her gaze, almost steadily, nonchalantly, at least for a moment - before averting his gaze toward the floor.

"What Willow said for you to tell me...the day I fought Angelus..." Buffy said, realization dawning on her. "That's not..."

"What I said? No, it wasn't," Willow said, frowning at Xander.

Fred looked at Angel curiously. "What are they talking about?"

Angel remained silent, looking on at the unfolding drama intently.

"No, it wasn't, was it, Red?" Skip chuckled. "You told the overevolved orang-utan over there to tell blondie about your little re-souling spell being ready to go on Angelus, so that she could get her boyfriend back. But that's not what Messenger Boy told her, was it? No, no. 'Kick his ass'."

Skip turned to face Buffy. "And, well, you did. All the way to Hell...and back again."

Xander looked back up at Buffy, his gaze dead serious; one of the rare moments he did that. "It's true. I did what I had to do, at the time."

"What? Lie to me?" Buffy asked, both incredulous and furious at his gall. "Betray my trust?"

"No," Angel said, stunning both of them. "He got you focused. Buffy...Xander did the right thing."
Xander could only stare at the ensouled vampire, agape in awe. Never in a million years would he have expected Angel, of all people, to say those words.

Buffy stared at him, completely shocked. "What? Angel, how can you say that? If Xander hadn't lied to me, if he had told me about Willow's spell -"

"Then you would've risked getting killed and having six billion people ending up in Hell," Angel cut in, his eyes solemn, his tone somewhat gentle, but losing none of its practicality. "Think about it, Buffy. If you had gone into the mansion that day thinking that there was any hope of bringing me back, even one chance in a billion, would you have fought as hard as you did?"

"Yes," Buffy said automatically, although her heart was wavering on that short affirmation.

Angel knowingly shook his head. "No, you wouldn't have. You would have held back. Tried to buy time. Gone softer on your attack. All Angelus would've needed is just one split second, one moment where you let your guard down, one moment where you left a hole in your defense, one tiny instant where you weren't at your very best…and you would've been dead."

"And sent the whole world to Hell in the process," Anya added.

"You're wrong," Buffy ground out, flooded with fresh pain from an old wound in her heart that had never truly healed.

"No. He's right," Darla threw in. "Believe me, I taught Angelus to always go for the jugular. Both metaphorically and literally. I taught him how to use any opening he could find, exploit any weakness, find any hole no matter how small, and to twist it, and bend it, and expand and manipulate it until it became an advantage. If you'd have known about the spell…he would have killed you that day. In effect, Xander's lie saved your life."

"And condemned Angel to suffer for a hundred years in a hell dimension!" Buffy retorted, the image of Angel's stunned face, sword protruding from his heart, his hand stretched out to her pleadingly as he was sent to Hell burning brightly in her memory. "Not to mention made me skip town for three months to deal with the fact that I'd killed the only person in the world that I…" She broke off, her emotions starting to get the better of her.

Buffy's eyes met Angel's, both of them awash in memories of the past. "I killed you."

"I came back, didn't I?" Angel said, gently. "I always do."

The small smile Buffy offered Angel spoke more than words could say.

"What about me?" Andrew wondered aloud. "I have to have fit in there somewhere!" He puffed up like a fish, trying to seem important. "I mean, I used to be an…evil genius."

Skip looked at the guy like he had two heads. "You? Actually, you weren't planned on at all. You just sorta Forrest Gump'ed your way into this story. Who the hell are you, again?"

"Um…Andrew Wells," the geek offered timidly. "So…nothing? I wasn't…manipulated into anything? Not Jonathan's murder, or joining with Warren and the Trio…summoning the flying monkeys to attack my high school, anything? I'm…not a player in this story?"

"Could've told you that myself, Spanky," Spike snorted. "Now siddown and shut yer gob, you're not letting the nice minion talk."

Deflated, Andrew slumped back down in his seat.
Buffy shook her head firmly. She refused to believe that her life - all the hell she'd been through, literally - had been prearranged by some asshole demon sitting around somewhere and laughing at her plight. "No...I don't believe you. We control our own fate, not the other way around. Proof being, there's a prophecy or twenty that I've stopped, time and again."

Skip laughed contemptuously at her, making the petite Slayer even madder.

"Please, Goldilocks, you? You couldn't even comprehend how many times your life script's been edited just so all this could all take place. You think it was sheer coincidence that you ended up moving to a town which contained the Hellmouth as its main tourist attraction? Or that Tall, Dark and Clueless over there," he pointed at Angel, "just happened to cross your path? Or how those monks sent you, of all people, the Key - one of the most powerful mystical forces in the known universe - in the form of your closest living blood kin?"

"Dawn," Buffy whispered, suddenly horror-struck.

"You think it was just a clumsy CPR attempt and cheap magic tricks that let Unrequited-Crush Boy and Puking-Out-Snakes Girl bring you back twice, from beyond the grave?"

"Hey!" Willow and Xander exclaimed simultaneously, offended.

Ignoring them, Skip went on. "You really believe it was all just dumb luck how you've met all the people you've met, befriended all the beings you've befriended, or made enemies of all the fiends you've fought time and again? Hey! Wake up, Little Miss Blonde Concepts, if it wasn't for the boss's actions - you'd have been a forgotten pile of bleached bones for the last six years. Just like that inevitable prophecy said, way back when."

"But, see, here's the part where I'm kinda getting lost," Faith scrunched up her eyebrows, pondering. "If the Big Bad With No Name was the one doing all this shit right from the start, then what part does the First have in any of this?"

All eyes shot to Faith in surprise at her astuteness.

"What?" Faith shrugged, a little peeved. "Contrary to popular opinion, there is gray matter behind this pretty face."

"Actually, that's a good question," Buffy mused, her eyes looking back to Skip for the answer. "Well?"

"Dunno," the mercenary demon shrugged. "Only said that it wanted, no, needed that thing to be born. But why the First Evil wanted it...he, it, whatever...was really keeping that on the down-low. Real hush-hush. Only told 'Cordy' what the bun in the oven was really all about."

"So...you're saying, that the First Evil is the real brains behind this whole thing," Angel said.

"Could be," Skip shrugged. "Or, it could be in cahoots with the Beastmaster. That whole bit, it's a little hazy. But, either way, one of those two has been making you puppets dance to their tune for the last few...centuries."

Gunn wasn't buying it. "No way. We make our own choices."

"Yeah, sure. A cheese sandwich here, when to floss there..." Skip feigned his agreement. "But the big stuff," he leered at Angel, "like two vampires squeezing out a kid?"

If Angel's heart could beat, it would have frozen at that moment. His eyes flew to Darla's as they simultaneously uttered one name: "Connor."
A light dawned in Wesley's eyes as he suddenly got it. "An impossible birth, to make one possible."

Skip nodded, "That's what the kid was designed for."

"What, to sleep with Mother Love?" Lorne skeptically wondered.

"Yeah…to create a vessel," Angel realized.

Skip snorted. "Whoa, look out, the monkey's thinking again."

After giving the demon a glare, a thought occurred to Buffy. "Being inside a human…that makes it vulnerable, doesn't it?"

"P-perhaps that's why it had to stay hidden," Giles said contemplatively. "It needed to create something stronger to, ah, pour itself into."

"And what better way to stay hidden from its closest threats than to pose as one of their own?" Anya elaborated. "So it used Cordelia's body as camouflage, until the right time where it could manifest itself into a more powerful shell. Something less…break-y."

Gunn frowned in confusion. "Wait, so the big nasty inside of Cordy is going to give birth…to itself?"

Skip smirked. "Circle of life. It's a beautiful thing."

"Drop the melodramatic, Simba," Spike snapped. "Just get to the part where you tell us how we stop the chit."

"Well, that's the easy part, Billy Idol," Skip shrugged. "All you gotta do is find Cordelia…and chop her head off."

The silence that filled the room was almost deafening. Looks of horror and disbelief passed through nearly all the faces of each of the members of both Sunnydale and LA groups. Especially those who had known Cordelia well.

This was something that they didn't plan or dream of hearing…that in order to save the world, Cordelia Chase, their long-time friend...

...would have to die.

"No," Buffy said in a small voice. "No, that can't be the only way…" Not again. I can't lose another friend. I can't lose anyone else I care about again.

Angel shook his head, refusing to believe what he just heard. He'd already lost too many people he cared about. He couldn't lose Cordy, too. Not after all they'd gone through. Not after what she had given up to fight side-by-side with him, with his friends…no, more like...family.

"Has to be another way," the Champion said quietly, his voice tight with fear.

"There's got to be!" Xander exclaimed, a cold shiver suddenly passing up his spine at the image.

Skip, taking no pity in their grief, delightedly elaborated. "Sure. Stab her in the heart, kidney…a couple of pokes in the lung, maybe she'll drown in her own blood -"

"A way that won't kill Cordy in the process!" Angel snapped, his patience with the callous demon
"Ha! Forget it, pal. It takes a whole lotta crammin' to get that much sweetness into a human," Skip sneered. "It's in every hair, every cell, every molecule of Cordelia's body, and it ain't letting go until it's got a brand new bag."

"What happens to Cordy, then?" Fred asked tentatively. She could scarcely believe that this was happening to brave, sweet Cordelia, her friend.

"Drained of her life force during labor. Those contractions are a real bitch," Skip said nonchalantly.

Xander paled at the demon's words. "It'll kill her?"

"Or, she'll end up a head of cabbage. Doesn't really matter either way, though, does it?"

In shock, Xander dropped back down to sit on the steps, horrified. No, no, no…

Gunn ran his hand across his face in disbelief. Fred looked close to tears. Willow's jaw dropped in utter dismay. Lorne turned away, visibly upset. Giles rubbed the bridge of his nose, shutting his eyes in sadness. Faith sat stunned, while even Spike's eyes widened, knocked for six by the news.

Buffy could feel the familiar pain of loss creeping up inside of her. Cordelia had never been a close friend, but she was a friend nonetheless. Someone close to her world. Like her mother was. And Tara. And Jenny. And Kendra. The thought of losing another friend to this endless madness made her throat constrict painfully.

But if it hurt like this for her, she could only imagine what it must have felt like for Angel. Cordelia was after all, his seer, perhaps his best friend. As she saw Angel's dark, yet soulful eyes cloud with grief as a forlorn look fell over his handsome visage - a look that spoke of deep, soul-shaking pain - Buffy knew all she needed to know about what was going on in the mind of one of the dearest people in her life.

In shock, Wesley dropped the Codex he held on the floor at the words. He'd known Cordelia since Sunnydale. He'd courted her, then befriended her, and argued time and time again with her. She was the little sister he'd never been blessed enough to have.

And now, it looked like they might lose her. Not like in Pylea, where she had been lost, then found. This time, it was for keeps. This time, she would remain lost. Forever. The thought made the hardened Englishman suddenly sick with horror at the thought.

The Codex remained lying there, landing open on a few pages that almost seemed to turn at will. In the wake of the news of Connor and Dawn's departure, Wesley, Darla and Giles had barely gotten started on the research needed to find an answer for Cordelia's condition.

Darla, a little wigged by the occurrence that no one else seemed to notice, curiously skimmed a few of the pages. For she, too, having been born over four hundred years ago, was also familiar with Latin. She kept reading on at the two open pages…and her eyes widened at what she read.

Skip gave a pointed look at both Angel and Buffy. "And as if that isn't enough, there's still the little problem of whether or not you can stop her before your idiot kids get there."

"Oh, God," Buffy muttered. "Dawn."

"And Connor," Angel added with a groan.
"Hate to break it to you," Skip chuckled sadistically. "Oh, who am I kidding? I love breaking it to you! But your little super-brats, if they busted out of here to make a run at Cordelia, and odds are, given they've inherited your lack of brains, they did…they're in big trouble, with a capital O-U-B-L-E."

Buffy and Angel exchanged mutual looks of concern. Now they were really worried. Given the Beastmaster's penchant for killing, sending an under-trained teenage girl, her under-prepared Potential Slayer friends, and an unpredictable, super-powered, possibly mentally unstable, hormonally rampaging boy against someone as clever and as deadly as 'Cordelia' was a guaranteed way for those kids to end up tragic headlines in the Los Angeles Times in the morning.

Faith looked at the two of them, gauging their reactions. "So…what do you guys want to do?"

Skip answered gleefully for them. "The only thing they can do. Kill her old friend from high school…" his eyes slid to Buffy, before finding Angel, "…and one of the few women he gives a damn about, to save those kids…and the world." He smirked cruelly at the two crestfallen warriors. "Times like this, really gotta suck being you."

"Maybe…but then again, maybe not," Darla said.

All eyes turned to her at once.

Wesley looked at her, suspicious. "Darla? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean..." the blonde said as she turned the book to him. "...that it looks like there might be more than one way to skin a parasite. And that this demon has very carefully avoided mentioning something we already knew - how there are two entities within Cordelia."

Skip glowered and Wesley frowned as he took the book, skimming a few pages of it. The others watched the younger ex-Watcher carefully, watched as his keen eyes narrowed while he read quickly through the pages of the mystical book…and then widen as he saw something.

"Wes?" Angel asked cautiously. "You find anything?"

"Pryce?" Giles asked, curiously. "What have you found?"

Wesley took a few moments before he looked back up at the group.

"Wesley?" Buffy asked, her nerves working up on ends. "Come on, the suspense is killing me…and Cordelia, and maybe about six billion other people, too."

Wesley looked at Darla, who only gave a faint nod, before he looked back up at them.

"There might be a way."

TBC...

Next chapter: As a plan comes together to save Cordelia's soul, Dawn and Connor make their way towards the Beastmaster's hideout. But will they live long enough to buy our heroes time to act? Or will their inexperience and the evil of 'Cordelia' prove their undoing?

How close are Oz, Lindsey and Whistler?

And what are the plans of the First Evil?
Stay tuned and find out!

Happy Reading and Please Review!

Bye now,

Jean-theGuardian
Offering

"There's no way!"

Molly was holding steadfast in her refusal as she eyed the sea of creatures swarming about in the shallow gap between them and the other sewer link that separated them from their final destination.

Rats.
Swarms of rats.
Giant, nasty-looking rats.

Come on, Molly", Dawn cajoled her. "We're almost there."

The British girl looked between her friends and the gaping hole that separated them from a ladder leading up a sewer line. One that Connor was steadfast that would lead them right to 'Cordelia'. Which, would have been great…except for the fact that the gap between Molly and the others, who had already crossed over, was all but filled with rats.

And of all the animals on this green earth, rats were the one creature that Molly detested and feared the most. Ever since she was five, when a rat crawled into her playhouse and scurried about her makeshift tea table, frightening her little friends screaming away. She could barely stand to be within five feet of one rat, much less dozens upon dozens of them.

"Uh…I…is there s-some sort of…alternate route?", Molly asked with much trepidation. "O-or some…other dark, creepy sewer that we've overlooked, perhaps?"

"No", Connor said simply.

"You're sure?", Molly asked again, wincing as she saw the rats crawling and wriggling about.

"Moll!", Dawn snapped. "We're running out of time! Cordelia is running out of time! Hurry up and get your tiny little English ass over here, now!"

The British girl scowled, annoyed. "Didn't have to get that personal, you know. I'm not tiny. I'm petite."

"Molly?", Vi whined, exasperated. "Just hurry up and come on!"

Taking a deep breath, Molly steeled herself, took two large steps backwards, and, with a silent prayer, got a running start towards the ledge. She squealed as she hung mid-air after her leap, which was not nearly enough to make the clearing on the other side, as he felt herself falling towards the swarm of rats below…

…Fortunately, Connor's supernatural speed allowed him to grab her just in the nick of time, pulling her to safety, and before she realized what was happening, her feet were on solid ground, standing just between Vi and Dawn.

"Great Moses!", was all a stunned Molly could say.

"Come on", Connor said, as he began to climb a ladder leading to the nearest manhole cover above them, without as much as a look back.

Molly stared up after him. "Intense, isn't he?"

"Gee, ya think?", Dawn muttered sarcastically.

The others followed his lead. Soon, they were up at the surface. A back alley route sandwiched between two factory-like buildings. The smell of garbage and sewage drain was quite powerful, and it took all of Dawn's will to keep her from gagging at the stench. Whoever said being a hero was easy work clearly hadn't read the entire brochure.

"Where are we?", she asked allowed.

Connor whipped around, frowning. "Keep quiet!", he whispered, furiously. "This is the place."

"Which is where again, exactly?", Dawn whispered back, placing her hands on her hips, annoyed.

"Downtown. Meatpacking district", he answered, before moving cautiously. "Come on. I know a way in from here, but we need to keep quiet or-"

Suddenly, he grew quiet. He ticked his gaze to the left of him, where a large metal door stood.

Wigged by his behavior, Dawn asked, "Connor? What is it?"

He turned his eyes back to them. "Someone's coming. We gotta move. Go!"

Not three seconds after he warned them, the large metal door swung open. For a moment, nothing was there.

And then, from the darkness of the doorway, out stepped a scowling 'Cordelia', one hand tucked on her pregnant stomach, the other hand hidden behind her back, clutching a meat cleaver.

In her paranoid state, she had thought she heard something outside. Could have been Angel, or the Slayer, or perhaps another virgin girl. In the last hour she had tried several times to lure some unsuspecting girl into the alleyway, but had failed at the last moment. She had tried to play the damsel-in-distress card, the pregnant-woman-in-distress card, or the weeping-woman-in-distress card. And she had come close to succeeding.

So close.

But to no avail. The girls she sought out were either accompanied by someone, ran off to get help, or were called back by someone at the last instant, leaving 'Cordelia' to forcibly retreat.

She suddenly winced, rubbing her free hand over her stomach. She felt the creature inside of her growing with every instant. She knew if she didn't find a virgin sacrifice quickly, then the First would have her head on a stick. But she couldn't risk such open exposure now, especially with such powerful enemies hunting her at every corner. She slowly closed the steel door, disappearing back inside the darkness…

…unaware that just above her, hanging on a fire escape ladder, stood Connor and three determined teenage girls, plotting her downfall.

"That was close", Vi noted, in awe of how fast Connor was able to grab them all and wisk them up the fire escape just as 'Cordelia' was coming out.
Connor frowned. "Too close. She's getting desperate. I could smell it."

"Then now's the time to trip her up", Dawn said. "While she's all screws loose."

"'Cordelia' doesn't make many mistakes", Connor warned. "So we have to make sure that we make none."

He looked up for a moment, up the ascending fire escape. "Come on, I know an entrance up on the roof. It should get us up somewhere we won't be detected, for now."

He was moving just as quickly as he was talking, forcing the girls to try to catch up. Dawn noticed that Connor had become rapidly more stone-faced as they drew nearer to 'Cordelia' with each passing minute. Part of her rationed that it was some sort of inherited Angel-trait, the white knight routine he'd play whenever he and Buffy drew closer to trouble, the need to protect her, so she read in Buffy's diary the nights she stayed out late slaying. But from the narrowing of his eyes, the tension in his otherwise stealthy stalk, she knew that there was more than meets the eye about this. Something told her that Connor was holding something back from her that involved 'Cordelia'. Something big, but she didn't know what.

Not yet.

Connor led them to a small shaft up on the rooftop. With a burst of inhuman strength, Connor pulled the bolted-shut lid right off the ground. "We should make it through this way. I'll go first, scout ahead."

Dawn was hesitant. "I don't know if that's such a good-"

But he already disappeared down the shaft.

"…Idea. But hey, what do I know? I'm no superkid, why should my opinion matter?", Dawn huffed.

"Maybe it's a…guy thing", Vi suggested.

"Or a super-guy thing", Molly ventured.

"Whatever", Dawn muttered. "Come on, Prancer and Vixen, Santa's going to need our help."

Dawn then slid down the shaft, followed by Molly. Vi took in a deep breath, as she stared uncertainly down the dark shaft.

"Ho-ho-ho", she sighed, and then she slipped down the shaft.

She resisted the urge to scream as she found herself propelling downwards rapidly through the metal-encased tunnel, like riding 'The Hulk' at Universal Studios, only minus the roller-coaster, and the safety rail, and the dozens of others people on the ride…and the brakes for that matter.

She let out a startled cry as she shot out of the shaft's end, only to find Connor waiting there, catching her swiftly to break her fall. Vi stared up at the handsome teenager, moony-eyed , as she was held in his arms.

"I gotcha", he said as he gently lowered her to the ground.

"Bet you say that to all the girls", Vi smiled teasingly.

Ever so eloquently, Connor replied, "Um, I…"
Dawn wasn't sure why, but she didn't like the way that was going. At all. "Hey, come on and focus, will you? Faux Cordy's lurking around here, and we have to find her. Stop hanging all over each other already, it's gross."

"I wasn't hanging off anything", Connor defensively replied.

"Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that", Dawn snarked.

"What, telling myself the truth?", Connor shot back.

"Shh! You guys, look!", Molly diverted their attention over to a railing.

Reluctantly, the two stopped sniping at each other long enough for them to see what Molly was talking about. There below, stalking about like a caged animal, was a dark-clad Cordelia, weapon-wielding and menacing.

"Is that her?", Vi asked.

Connor nodded, sullenly. "Yeah. It's her, alright."

Dawn gazed intently at the woman who just barely resembled the Cordelia that she remembered. Gone was the long, flowing raven hair, replaced by a short, wavy bob, which was quite becoming of the former May Queen. The same, however, could not be said for her choice in wardrobe, a rather gross-looking, in Dawn's eyes, black dress that resembled a prostitute's idea of a moo-moo. Her once-sleek figure was now quite heavily pregnant, although one wouldn't be able to guess from the way 'Cordelia' slinked about, almost as if she was stalking wounded prey. She could see a meat-cleaver held tightly in her grip, her body language almost screaming for an excuse to use it.

But what caught Dawn most were her eyes.

Dawn remembered that Cordy used to have such a fiery, lively spark in her hazel eyes, a look that she often remembered seeing the debutant-ish cyclical member of the Scooby Gang use to burn holes right through Xander whenever they were fighting. It was a little known fact that those same hazel orbs could also make one feel comforted, relaxed. Dawn knew this, however. In the summer that Buffy had ran off after the Angelus debacle, Dawn had been very alone. Her now-late mother grieved over Buffy's disappearance and the Scoobies had taken to defend the town while dealing with their leader's absence in their own ways. Mostly, except for the attentions of her mother, who often required more attention herself at the time, Dawn was all but forgotten, left for herself to deal with the desertion of her sister.

Needless to say, Dawn was flabbergasted when the first one to actually make time and tend to her, make time for just her, was neither her wonderful Xander, nor sweet Willow, nor the fatherly Giles or empathic Oz, but rather the least likely, the vain, often self-absorbed Cordelia Chase. In the weeks that followed, when Cordy wasn't out fighting alongside her fellow Scoobies, she was right alongside Dawn. She would actually take time out of her busy schedule of shopping, Bronze-ing, and even cancelled a few dates with Xander, much to both their chagrins, to spend time with the youngest Summers. She would braid the younger girl's hair, shop with her, watch rental movies, and talk about boys (mostly how to get them to do anything they wanted), or sometimes, just talk about what Dawn was feeling, the sorrow she felt at having lost her sister.

Cordy would even see Dawn off to bed, sometimes even staying late until she was certain Dawn was steadfast asleep. Her shiftless absentee sister, as it would be. And even though deep down, Dawn knew that none of this had...actually...happened, she could no shake the memories of Cordelia's surprising kindness. Such was the impression Cordelia left on Dawn that, for a little while, shortly after Buffy's return, she began singing praises of Cordelia constantly, much to
Buffy's dismay. When Buffy had died the second time two years ago, Cordelia was the first of the Fang Gang to embrace her upon their arrival at Buffy's wake, offering condolences and rocking the young girl as they cried together. Dawn never forgot her kindness. Which was why the look in those eyes sent a chill up Dawn's spine. No longer where those eyes filled with vibrancy and spirit, but with malice, suspicion, cruelty. Not warmth, but icy calculation. Not empathy and comfort, but something black, foul to the core. All it took was one look and Dawn knew that this thing, whatever it was masquerading in her friend's skin…was not the Cordelia she knew.

"Yeah", Dawn said quietly, somberly. "Sure it is."

"So, what now?", Vi whispered.

Molly drew out her crossbow, locking it and cocking the arrow. "I could get in a direct shot from here. No sweat."

"No!", Connor hissed, pushing the weapon down. "You don't shoot until your time comes. We wait for everything to be in position, then we act."

"I was just musing", Molly said, frowning. "I wasn't gonna really do it."

"Keep your shorts on, William Tell", Dawn said calmly as she eyed Cordelia's movements carefully. "You might get your shot yet."

Connor took a sweeping glance at the bottom surroundings, carefully perusing every inch of the factory below.

"There", he uttered simply.

"'There' where?", Dawn asked.

"Near the doors. By the right side", Connor motioned towards a large stock-pile of wooden crates, about 30 feet away from 'Cordelia'. "That looks like a good setup spot."

"Isn't that a little…close?", Vi asked apprehensively.

"That's the idea, Vi", Dawn replied. "I don't see any way they can get down there without being seen."

"There's a scaffold just up ahead", Connor said. "You two have to be as quiet as possible getting there. Stay low to the ground, and don't make a sound. Once you get there, climb down the ladder. There should be enough crates to avoid being seen. Once there, set up at whatever spot you feel is good enough to get in good aim or react quickly."

"Got it", Molly said, picking up her bag of weapons. "With this handy bag o' tricks, shouldn't be too hard to find a good shot."

"And guys, remember, if anything goes wrong, don't try to be heroes. The exit is just to the left. Run for help, and get to Angel's. They'll know what to do", Dawn instructed them.

"B-but…nothing's going to go wrong", Vi said, trying to cover her anxiety with cheery optimism. "We know exactly what we're doing and everything's going to come up roses. Sunshine and roses, even."

Molly looked at her, a wry smile on her pretty face. "Feel better?"

"No, but I think someone had to be 'Glass-Half-Full' Girl", Vi shrugged.
"Well, it beats 'We're-so-horribly-doomed', any day", Dawn smiled sardonically.

"Hurry, we don't have much time", Connor said sternly. "And don't act until you get the signal."

"What's the signal?", Molly asked.

"When something goes wrong", Connor vaguely replied.

"How do we know when something goes wrong?", Vi now inquired.

"I'm thinking if you see either of us screaming, dying, bleeding or getting something cut off, there's reason for concern", Dawn answered. "Now get going. And good luck, guys."

"You, too", Vi replied sincerely. She glanced at Molly. "Ready?"

"No, but I'm going, anyway", Molly said, turning back to Dawn and Connor.

"Stay safe."

"You, too", Dawn nodded.

And with that, the two young Potentials crept away, staying low to the ground of the scaffold, as they headed towards the crates below.

Both Dawn and Connor watched as they slowly made their way down the stairs, sighing with relief as they made it to the crates, apparently undetected.

That left Dawn and Connor.

Alone.

Dawn was suddenly self-conscious of the boy's presence. Not like she was some wallflower, but...well, just look at him! He was all tall, and cute, and handsome and all demon-fighty braveness. Well, okay, so cute and handsome were pretty much the same thing, but that was besides the point. A girl couldn't help but get all dreamy-eyed looking at him.

Connor's stoic gaze kept focused on Molly and Vi setting up, observing Cordelia's movements as well. He hadn't spoken since they left.

Dawn suddenly found herself at a loss for words. Which had roughly about the same probability as Giles computer -cataloging all his musty books like a normal, twenty-first century librarian. She couldn't help but to feel a little flustered, suddenly. Why was it so hard now to start talking to Connor? Okay, so she knew that there were more pressing issues to attend to, like, say, making sure that Molly and Vi didn't get frapped by evil doppelganger Cordy. But would it kill him to say two words? A syllable? Anything?

Dawn, fumbling for something to break the unnerving silence between them, blurted out the first thing that came to her mind.

"So", she chuckled. "Exciting, isn't it?"

Connor, incredulous, turned to look at her with a peculiar glance.

Her face flushed red, she looked at the ground. "Or not."

"Spell?", Angel asked, puzzled. "What kind of spell?"
Everyone was hanging on every word from Wesley.

"It appears…that there is a very powerful counter-spell that can be used", Wesley explained, as he began flipping through the next few pages of the Codex. "I've never seen anything quite like this before."

Now Willow's interest was piqued. "Really? Is it that powerful?"

"Well, yes", Wesley replied as he continued skimming the words written in the dead language of Latin. "And also very…unconventional."

"Let me see", Giles insisted as he made his way over to Wesley, leaning in to read what he was reading.

"Giles? What's it say?", Buffy asked, getting slightly annoyed that she wasn't on the 'in' at whatever the two former Watchers were reading.

"Good God." Giles's eyebrows flew up as he realized what Wesley was so in awe over.

"That's a good 'Good God', right?", Fred asked, hopefully.

"Heh, good 'Good God'", Willow chuckled dorkishly, until she realized that everyone was staring at her. "Um…sorry, silly Willow moment. Go on."

"Apparently…there is a-a spell here, designed for a being to actually be able to enter into a possessed body via the means of a telepathic link." He cleared his throat before continuing, "There are a few specifics within the next few pages, but a-apparently, it seems that by using three beings, one as the infiltrator, one as a conduit and the other as a recipient, one can actually reach into a possessed being's inner most mental facilities, and, within a certain, undetermined time frame, it is possible to retrieve the recipient's true self, their soul, from within the invading body's workings."

"Is there an English translation to that?", Xander shook his head, confused. "Not English-English. Regular English."

Giles looked up at Xander, his face deadpanned, before simplifying. "It means that we can use two other people to get Cordelia's soul back."

"Oh…well, that's great!", Xander said, optimistically. Then he realized that this was usually the part where the big Catch-22 was revealed. "It is great, right?"

"Huh? Oh, well, yes, of course", Giles nodded. "But there is a drawback."

Xander sighed. "And it begins."

"The spell itself is very radical", Giles explained. "The powers and forces needed to invoke the spell are…ancient. Highly potent. And, potentially, very dangerous."

"How much mojo are we talkin' here?", Kennedy asked, concerned. She knew that if it involved magick, odds were 2-to-1 that it would involve Willow.

"It…appears to be a very good deal of it", Wesley said, his eyes still trained on the book. "But I'm sure it's nothing that Willow couldn't handle."

Willow looked a little apprehensive as Wesley's calm gaze eyed her.

"Me?", she all but squeaked.
Although her confidence in the use of magicks was starting to slowly and steadily return to her, the little redhead was still quite unsure of her limits. Or rather, how far she could exceed the line between her true self and her evil, black-haired, blue-veiny self. The last thing this apocalypse needed was for one of the most powerful witches alive to plunge off the deep end again.

Buffy spoke up for her friend. "Whoa, whoa, back up a couple, Wes. If this spell is as strong as you say it is, then Willow might not be able to handle it."

Wesley eyed Buffy curiously. "Willow's skills with sorcery are renowned throughout the world. If anyone should be able to handle this, among us, it should be Willow."

"I hear that", Gunn said, beaming a smile at Willow. "From what I seen, Big Red can put a whuppin' on anybody with those skills. I heard she took on Evil Cordy and went toe-to-toe with her, no sweat."

"Yeah", Fred chirped up as she walked over and patted Willow on the back. "Willow can do anything."

Willow offered a faint smile at her friend's naive enthusiasm.

Giles cautiously stepped in. "Well, you see…Willow is, um, recovering from a very powerful…addiction to, um, m-magicks."

"Addiction? As in, fried egg, 'This-is-you-brain-on-drugs' addiction?", Lorne asked.

"Will went over the edge last summer", Xander explained. "Got hopped up on black magicks, people…died, and, long story short, she nearly made the world go 'ka-boom!', only without the cutey cartoon cloud and add in gruesome, horrible death."

"Oh", Fred blinked in astonishment. She never would have thought of Willow as the 'Bringer-of-Death' type, she was so sweet and good. But the tiny Texan knew that the redhead was also incredibly powerful.

"So, uh…what stopped you from making the world go 'kablooey!' ?", Fred asked, curious.

"Yellow crayons", she said with a knowing smile, directed towards Xander, who grinned back at his lifelong best friend at the memory. Off Fred's confused glance, Willow replied, "Long story."

Angel turned to Buffy, his dark eyes asking silently is what he heard was true. With a sad, but simple nod, Buffy confirmed what he was hearing.

"Did this involve the…'flaying' incident?", Wesley asked Willow, referring to their conversation the last time she was in L.A., restoring Angel's soul.

Willow nodded meekly, the word 'flaying' bringing back the horrifying memory of Tara's killer, Warren, and his last moments before his skin ripped completely off his body, his agony unbearable, his death instant.

At Willow's hands.

Though a few traces of sympathy passed through his eyes, the ex-Watcher quickly hardened them, putting the present issue to the forefront. "Unfortunately, we don't have time to wait about for another alternative. Willow has the most power out of any of us here. She might be our only hope to get Cordelia back."
Buffy shook her head. "No, I'm not risking Will over a spell you're not sure of how powerful it is, or even sure will work-"

"It will work", Wesley said, his voice taking a more steadfast stance. "We don't have a choice. It has to be Willow."

"Don't you dare tell me about what choices I can or can't make", Buffy said, her voice low like thunder, a dangerous threat lingering in her voice. "I want Cordy back as much as the rest of you, but I'm not jeopardizing one of my family on some spell you found brewing in some…old magick cookbook!"

"This 'cookbook', as you so disdainfully put it", Wesley countered, ", is one of the most potent sources of magick known to mankind. This is war, Buffy. And in a war, chances have to be taken to win the day. The hard decisions, sacrifices, have to be made, whether we like them or not."

"Not with my people!", Buffy snapped.

"With all people", Wesley retorted, his voice cold, hardened. "It doesn't make a difference whom they belong to."

"It does to me! If you're so amped about this spell, why don't you do it?", Buffy challenged, her green eyes glowing with a stroking fire. "Come on, I've heard about your skills with magick. I'm sure you remember that much from the Council."

"I would do it if I could", Wesley explained, patiently attempting to keep the snappishness out of his tone. "But if this spell does what it's supposed to, then I won't be of much use. It needs a powerful conduit. And Willow is far more powerful, even in a weakened state, than I could be if I had half of what she knows at my disposal."

"So you'll just…throw her to the wolves?", Buffy exclaimed, sputtering to try to find the right words. "What if that spell doesn't work? What if the side effects hurt her, or worse, what if they end up killing her? What if they change her back into the Big Nasty she was when she nearly deep-fried the world? Have you thought about that?"

"It won't come to that", Wesley firmly replied.

"You don't know that."

"Neither do you", Wesley returned, still determined. "And unless you can come up with a better plan-"

"Oh, right", Buffy laughed bitterly. "You're just the 'Big Plan Guy', aren't you, Wesley?"

Wesley's eyes narrowed at her tone, his body stiffening slightly, a defensive reflex. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that you just put anyone and everyone you can up for the slaughter", Buffy snapped. "You just…put everyone else up for grabs, you don't give a damn who gets hurt!"

"That's not true!", Fred protested indignantly.

As if she didn't hear her, Buffy went on. "You haven't changed at all, have you? It's just like back in Sunnydale, when the Mayor kidnapped Willow, and wanted to trade her for that box. You were just willing to let Willow take the hit so you could hold on to that stupid thing."

"Thousands of lives were in the balance, just like they are now", Wesley retorted. "Granted, I was different back then, but I did what I thought I had to, because you couldn't. It's what I do."
"Just like you thought you had to remove Angel's soul and bring back Mr. Happy-Go-Killing-Spree?", Buffy shot back, rage starting to slowly bubble over at his attitude. "Or better yet, just like you had to steal Angel's son, and lose him to the psycho who raised him in hell and made him hate his own father? Yeah, nice job there, Wes, because those ideas worked out great, didn't they?"

She regretted the words as soon as they came out of her mouth.

Even more so as she saw the hardened façade of coolness that Wesley bore crack, his face etched in shock, his eyes reflecting a long-brewing remorse as he briefly cast his icy blue eyes to the floor.

Wesley had long tortured himself over the latter decision. Granted, he realized now how hasty the former choice was to remove Angel's soul in the midst of the 'permanent midnight' catastrophe. He had never forgotten how Angelus systematically played upon his vulnerabilities, his issues with his now-late father, his grievous shortcomings, his attraction to Fred, his struggles for acceptance and credibility. Or how the monster bearing his friend's face hadn't hesitated for an instant to fire a loaded shotgun at Faith, or nearly strangle Fred from within his own cage. And the image of Angelus, blood-caked mouth and all, feeding from Lilah's limp, dead body was an image forever seared in his mind. But that he had ultimately dismissed, with what Angelus having discovered about the Beastmaster proving pivotal in their discovery of 'Cordelia's involvement.

The latter, however, was something he could find no excuse for. He remembered the brave front he used when Angelus had mocked him over the loss of Connor to Quor'toth: 'He survived.' But that was all it was, a front. The pain that he had caused an innocent child, to Angel and those around him, those Wesley once considered...those he was closest to, was shoved back into far corners of his heart, but not so far as to bury them completely. For he chose to live with his guilt, his pain. To atone for what had done. For despite his own anger, his hardness and bitterness that had all but consumed him these last few months, there was a part of himself that believed that he had deserved everything that had happened to him, that he deserved to pay. Deserved to suffer. Ironically, he had begun to understand but a piece of what Angel himself had to endure all the days of his immortal life. Wesley would only have to endure his suffering until the end of his mortal one.

At the look on his face, Darla instinctively moved to him, offering a gentle hand on his arm. But Wesley, lost in his own thoughts, barely even noticed.

In the midst of the uncomfortable silence that filled the hotel, Xander looked perplexed at all of this. "Um, Stupid Question Guy with permission to speak…what the hell is she talking about?"

Lorne gave him a cautious glance. "Long, tragic story, Slim. One that best not be rehashed here, or now. Or ever, actually."

Angel felt a part of him want to say something, speak up on behalf of his old friend. But another part, a bigger part, held back, and, God help him...was actually satisfied with Wesley's guilt. He had tried long and hard to move past that, mend a gradual bridge of trust back between them, but every time he saw Wesley, he would think of Connor, both as a small, tiny infant and as a confused, troubled teenager. Whatever was left in the middle was lost, something that he would never see. Because of what Holtz did. And part of that, however noble the intentions were, was Wesley's fault. Because of his betrayal, Angel lost his son's childhood. Connor lost his chance at a normal childhood. And a part of Angel could simply not trust Wesley again, nor forgive him for that. Perhaps the latter never would come.

Buffy stood in shock, amazed at the words that had flown from her mouth. She hadn't meant for it
to come out that way. She just wanted to make her point, look after her friend. She hadn't intended to lash out at Wesley for something that she knew wasn't totally his fault. Angel had told her about the false prophecy that Sahjahn had planted. Wesley was only trying to protect Angel's son, not hurt him. But he did. And she knew by the look on his face now that it was something he was still coping with.

Still paying for.

"Oh, God", she breathed, regretfully. "Wes, I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"Yes, you did", Wesley cut her off, the hardness returning to his eyes, the traces of raw human emotion vanishing almost at will, slipping behind a mask of emotionless detachment, hardness, logic. His second skin. "But, regardless of my previous...track record...I stand firmly by my belief. Willow is the key. Without her, we are lost." He paused. "Cordelia is lost."

At that, Willow's bright green eyes glinted with resolve. "Then give me everything I need. I'll do it."

Buffy turned to her best friend, concerned. "Will, I don't know-"

"Willow. No", Kennedy said harshly. She didn't like the idea at all.

"I'll be fine, don't worry", the witch assured her. "I'm about 95 percent sure I can handle it."

Anya wasn't so convinced. "And, what, 5 percent sure that you'll go evil brunette and start flaying people?"

"I won't", Willow replied, firmly.

"We don't know that! You don't know that!", Kennedy exclaimed.

"She's right, Will", Xander said, standing up. "You're still recovering, we don't want you to regress back. The last thing we need is 'Dark Phoenix'-you to make a return visit. There might not be any coming back from that."

"Well, actually, Dark Phoenix's powers are more sun-based", Andrew started to go into geek mode. "In X-Men edition 258, Professor Xavier discovered that she was a more photosynthetic-derivating being, whereas Willow-"

"I swear to God if you don't zip it, Andrew, I'm going to shove edition 258 so far up your 90-pound ass, you'll be sneezing word bubbles for the next week and a half!", Buffy snapped, her patience running thin with the goofy nerd.

Andrew gulped, sitting back down. "Got it. Shutting up now."

"Look, you guys, I'll be fine", Willow insisted. "I-I know you're all worried, but I'm getting stronger now, really. I mean, hey, who teleported everybody 200 miles out here?"

"Well, yeah, sure, but it took a lot outta you, Red", Faith pointed out, not exactly crazy about the idea, herself. "You're not in shape yet. You sure you're up for this?"

"I guess I'll have to be", was her reply.

"But this spell could be dangerous", Buffy argued. "It's too risky."

"She's right, Willow", Angel said, his eyes focused on Willow. "You're not just Buffy's friend,
you're my friend, too. I'm not risking anyone else I care about on something we're not sure will work...even if it is to help Cordy."

"That's exactly why I have to do it", Willow insisted. "Because it's Cordy."

"As strange as it is to admit it, I'll have to go with Dead Boy on this one", Xander sighed. "Will, it's bad enough we may have lost Cordy, we can't lose you, too-"

"Okay, just shut up and listen to me, okay?", Willow said, her usually soft voice suddenly tight with determination. "Xander, think about it. This is Cordelia. The girl we grew up with in kindergarten, the same girl we founded the 'We-Hate-Cordelia-Chase-Fan-Club' over when we were 7, the same girl who risked her neck, even gave up her social life to help us out in junior and senior year of high school, even when she didn't have to, even when she knew it would probably get her killed." Her eyes grew wistful. "The same girl we both hurt that night in the factory..."

Xander, despite himself, flinched at the memory of that fateful night, when Oz and a horror-struck Cordy found Willow and Xander in each other's arms in Spike's lair. He could still remember the look of horror, and pain on her face, of betrayal. And the terror he felt when she fell, impaled herself on that spike, how the light in her tear-stung eyes faded, as she passed out that night, seemingly dying...He shook the thoughts from his head, focusing back on Willow.

"We owe her this, Xander", Willow said, adamantly. "I owe her this. And I know that we didn't all end on good terms, but Xan..." she faltered slightly. "It's...Cordy."

Considering her words, Xander gave it one moment...and nodded. "If you think you can handle it...do it."

"Thanks", she smiled at him with soulful green eyes.

Angel watched in amazement. He had known that the Scoobies were traditionally protective of their own but he hadn't anticipated the fierceness and loyalty that they were showing for Cordelia. That Willow, recovering addict from dark magicks, would throw her own personal well being aside to help her old friend, their friend, that Xander, the poster boy for steadfast stubbornness, would actually consent to this plan, knowing the risks to his best friend, to everyone else around her, casting aside his old grudges, his reservations...it brought a warm reassurance to Angel. He wasn't alone. He had help. He had friends. Friends who cared about Cordy as much as his family did. And friends who would do anything to save her.

"Um, hate to break up the warm-and-fuzzies, but what if she's wrong?", Spike chimed in. "What if Red looses it and starts goin' Susan Atkins on the lot of us?"

Willow turned her gaze directly towards Wesley. "Then I'm trusting you to do what...needs to be done."

Wesley stared at the little redhead, the veiled implication not lost on him, before nodding slowly. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that", the Watcher replied.

"Does it really matter?", Skip snorted. "You people have no idea what's taken over Cordelia. You think some 'Speak-and-Spell' magick trick is gonna make a difference?"

Faith regarded the demon curiously. "Funny, Mr. Roboto, but if I didn't know better, I'd say you're startin' to sweat some serious nuts over there."

Skip glared at Faith, to which Faith responded with her trademark cocky grin.

"Oh, please", Skip scoffed. "Are you people actually serious? There's no way! Nothing has the
kind of power you need to save your friend. Heck, the only thing that would contain even a remote possibility of juicing that kind of power would be in the Bysilline Codex! And that book is long go-

The demon's words hung unfinished as Wesley and Giles, coolly regarding the demon, flipped the book's cover over so the demon could see the blood red book with the golden stag emblazoned on the cover.

And the demon's sentence turned into a dismayed, "Aw, crud."

"Great", said a suddenly chipper Spike. "So, we got our spell. That means all we got to do is get Red over there to do the 'bippety' and the 'boppety', then 'boo' the Nameless Wonder out of Cordelia, mission accomplished, world saved, and we're out of this miserable town, right?"

Giles eyed the vampire warily before continuing. "I'm afraid it's not that simple, Spike."

Spike smirked wryly. "No, of course not. Silly me for thinkin' it. Wherever there's the pouf, there's bound to be a hidden clause or two. Of course, given your little Gypsy soul problem, you'd know about complications, wouldn't you, Broody Pants?"

Angel glared contemptuously at the younger vampire, fighting every instinct to reach for the stake tucked into his pocket. "I imagine you would, too, given that you cause most of them wherever you go, Spike."

"Now I know you two aren't starting your little 'My-Fangs-Are Bigger-Than-Your-Fangs' pissing contest when Cordy's life, not to mention my sister's and Connor's, are in the balance!", Buffy warned.

Both vampires warily glanced at the blonde Slayer, hands on hips, her beautiful face hardened into a cold glare. The reluctantly backed off, but shot each other dagger-like glares as they did.

"So, what's the holdup?", Xander anxiously said. "We have Willow do the spell, Cordy comes, Big Bad goes, hurrah for us, right?"

"I'm afraid it's a little more…difficult than that", Darla said, swiftly avoiding using the word 'complication' for fear of igniting Round Two of the 'Angel v.s. Spike' series. "In order to perform the spell, we're going to actually need Cordelia, or whatever that thing is walking around like her, to be present."

"So, we find your friend, drag her here and do the spell", Wood shrugged. "I don't see the problem."

"Except for the part where she's hiding in a city with a good 6 million people and tons of buildings, sewers, and other spots that she can hide in", Gunn chimed in. "Nice suggestion, bro, but not gonna be easy."

"Plus", Faith added. "Not meaning to be the bearer of doom and gloom, that's Spare Parts Boy's job", her eyes ticked to Skip. "But if 'Cordy' is really that hard on about hatching her nest egg, what's to say that she won't kill herself before we have the chance to take it away for her, taking the real Cordelia with her?"

"It won't come to that", Xander said emphatically.

"Oh, no?", Anya challenged, her eyebrows raised. "Think about it. This thing had no qualms about killing thousands of people just to get to well into her third trimester. Raging hormones aside, what's to stop her from turning that homicidal energy into suicidal if we come in and go all
'Operation Sting' on her?"

"Anya's right", Buffy said. "So we can't let it come to that. We have to find her, and fast. Odds are, the sooner we find 'Cordelia', the sooner we find Connor and my soon-to-be-grounded-forever sister."

Angel whirled to Skip. "How do we find her?"

Skip stayed silent for a moment, hesitating. "They're getting close…"

"How?", Angel repeated tersely.

Skip shrugged, careless. "Well, I'd go with a Bu'shundi ritual but you're going to need a sacred Hutamin paw for that, and-"

"Got it!", Lorne piqued up as he leapt to his feet and made his way to the office area.

Skip was in total disbelief. "What?"

Lorne explained, "Cordy— the real Cordy— kept one in her desk drawer."

He walked over to Cordelia's desk and began rooting through the drawers. Lucky him that Cordelia was too busy being outside (and evil) to notice, or else he would've been in a mess of trouble.

Skip scoffed. "Probably a knock-off. It's not some trinket you throw in a desk draw-"

But his smug expression turned to one of shock and dismay when Lorne pulled up the Hutamin paw, a tiny furry hand with claws, from the drawers.

Lorne allowed himself a brief chuckle. "She thought it was a back scratcher."

Buffy, Willow and Xander shared a look between them, small smiles thinking back to when they knew her in Sunnydale High. Typical Cordy, was the thought they shared between themselves. Funny how the more a person changes, or was heard to change, the more they remained the same. In some ways, given the circumstances, that was a comforting thought.

Angel, having smiled briefly in relief, turned to Wesley and Giles. "Get started. Lorne, give them a hand. Willow-"

"—will also lend her hands. On it, Big Guy", Willow breezily smiled.

"Darla?", Wesley turned a questioning, and almost hopeful, gaze to the blonde ex-vampire.

"Of course", Darla smiled and nodded. "I'll be glad to help."

Buffy frowned as she folded her arms across her chest, appearing reluctant. "I dunno…you guys sure you can trust her?"

"She was, ah, actually quite helpful in our last round of research", Giles offered. "Perhaps it would behoove us to have her presence near."

"And she is quite human, I can assure you", Wesley said, his voice working to keep the strain out. He was getting weary over Buffy's concerns against Darla.

Sighing, Buffy relented. "Fine. Just go, see if you can finish your game of 'Where's Cordy?' quickly as you can."
"No problem, Buff. Besides, I remember when I was 9, I used to be really good at that game", Willow chuckled, before adding. "Oh, wait...that was 'Where's Waldo?', I forgot."

Lorne smiled. "Well, come on, Berryliscious, let's see if we can find the needle in the L.A. haystack."

And with that, the group began their way back into Wesley's study.

Buffy nodded. She looked up at Angel. "Good. Then we should saddle up, get a rescue team together."

"Great minds", he smirked.

"Guess so", she smiled back at him. "Spike, you and Faith keep an eye on the Tin Can Man over there. I want muscle here in case he gets loose."

"Always up for a little violence", Faith practically purred.

"Same here", Gunn smiled down at Faith. "I'll stick around, too, help babysit Rust-Face. Fred?"

"Sure, why not?", Fred shrugged. "S'not like he's goin anywhere, anyways." Gunn was a little off-put by her non-chalant behavior, but opted wisely to say nothing.

"What can I do?", Wood asked.

"Stay here with the rest of the gang", Buffy said. "If you can, round up the girls, take them somewhere they can, I dunno, train or something. But with quick access exits."

"You should use the downstairs hall on the left", Angel jumped in. "Plenty of side doors, should lead them right out in case trouble happens."

"I'm on it", Wood replied casually.

"Me, too", Kennedy jumped up, turning a smug glance at Buffy. "I'm always up for training the others."

Buffy fought back the urge to snap at Kennedy, who was so obviously using this as a way to undermine Buffy's authority. But the Slayer had other issues to attend to that were far more critical than a pretentious Slayer-wannabe trying to stick it to her.

Buffy nodded. "Good. Andrew?"

Andrew looked up at her with wide, hopeful eyes that he may be entrusted with some sacred, important duty.

"Kitchen", she instructed. "Cook...something." She was mostly hoping to keep him busy and occupied so as to get him out of the team's hair.

"Oh", he said, deflated. "I...can do that." He looked at Angel. "Got any Flan?"

Angel looked at the boy strangely, before murmuring quietly, "Top left kitchen cabinet. Behind the brown sugar."

"Thanks", Andrew smiled excitedly before hurrying off to the kitchen.

Off Buffy's odd glance, Angel shrugged. "What? I like...Flan."
"Could this get any weirder?", Xander deadpanned.

"We better get started", Buffy said, shaking the image of a Flan-eating Angel out of her head. She had enough craziness to deal with already.

"Wait a tick, love", Spike protested. "I oughta be in on this whole search-and-rescue, shouldn' I? And I'm already familiar with L'il Bit's and the Pouf's kid's scents. Vamp senses would help track the bird faster."

"That's why I'm here", Angel said brusquely. "You're better off staying here in case Skip busts loose."

"Maybe you'd be better off here, Peaches", Spike tartly retorted. "This is your bloody house."

"But I know L.A.'s sub routes by heart. You don't. You're staying", Angel reminded him, his voice patronizing, but firm. Commanding.

"You think I'm gonna let you tell me what to do?", Spike shot back, refusing to back down. "This ain't like old times, I'm not one of your flunkies you can just order about, you ponce!"

"Who you callin' a flunkie, Popcorn Head?", Gunn growled.

"Was I even talkin' to you?", Spike scowled at Gunn.

A glowering Gunn was up and in the slightly smaller Spike's face. "You're talkin' to me now, and unless you want to be spendin' quality time in the inside of a dustpan, you'll be apologizing to me now."

"Charles…", Fred tentatively tried to keep the peace, placing a hand on her ex's bicept.

"Little uppity, ain'cha, mate?", Spike smugly taunted. "Angel, haven't you housebroken 'im yet?"

"Hey, hey, hey, come on", Faith said cautiously as she inched closer to the two men. "Let's be all civilized here-"

"Wanna say that again, Snagglefang?", Gunn challenged, his rage flaring as he bumped his chest hard into Spike, who growled before he balled his fist and sent it flying.

His fist stopped short of Gunn's face as Buffy's cast-iron grip held fast.

"Spike", she started tersely. "This isn't up for discussion. You're staying here with Faith and the others. And you're going to play nice with everyone else! Is that understood?"

Spike's hurt gaze looked between Buffy and Angel, before he scowled, shaking loose his fist from her grip. "Oh, I see how it is", he said. "You leave me here watchin' the Metal Mouth while you go off makin' time with your Dark Prince of Ponces, then? Give him all the credit for being the big strappin' hero while I'm stuck here being an over glorified babysitter?"

"I need you here", Buffy responded, her voice slightly gentler. "You're one of the strongest we have and you might be the only one who can protect the others in case Skip gets out. I'm counting on you."

Although her words mollified him slightly, one look at Angel standing just behind his darling Buffy and Spike felt the jealousy clench his muscles.

"Fine. I'll stay", he sighed loudly. "If he gets out, I'll just visualize Angel's face on his body, then."
"Good. Pretend. That'd be the closest you'd ever come to beating me up, Spike", Angel sniped.

Spike seethed. "Listen, you-"

"Hey." Faith came up and tapped Spike on the shoulder. "Come on, Bloody. Just chill and sit with me while we watch Steel Toe over there. We can trade stories, swap cigs…it'll be fun."

Spike thought about it for a moment, and then nodded, suddenly the prospect of guarding Skip in the hotel sounding quite appealing. "Well, then, hope you got a full carton on ya, luv", Spike sighed, managing a faint grin at her. "I'm suddenly got the urge to light a few out like a chimney."

"You know me", Faith grinned mischievously. "I'm always fully stacked."

"Don't have to tell me twice", Spike waggled one of his eyebrows, drawing a small chuckle from Faith.

Buffy looked uncomfortably at the interaction between the blonde-haired vampire and the dark-haired Slayer. She leaned into Angel, and whispered, "Am I the only one here who's extremely wigged out here?"

"Oh, good, I thought I was the only one for a minute", Angel said in a hushed tone.

"I want to come", Xander called out abruptly.

His outburst stunned all of them. Buffy was shaking her head. "Xander, I don't-"

"Buff, hear me out", Xander cut her off. This was something he had to say. "Look, I…I know Cordy. Grew up with her. And okay, granted, maybe we don't exactly have the best personal history together, I still know her. There's still the chance that somewhere in there, that same 5-year old girl who chased me around the kindergarten swings trying to kiss me, that same girl I spent time trading insults, and jibes, and…eventually spit. The point is…she's in there somewhere. You guys don't know that side of her, 'cause you didn't grow up with her. I did. I was able to reach Willow back when she went all apocalyptic, remember? Who knows…maybe I can…"

"Get sliced and diced like a piece of Mozzarella cheese?", Anya blurted out incredulously. "Xander, whatever's in her now, make no mistake about it. She's not the girl you dated, and cheated on, and who dumped you…she's evil. Pure, unadulterated. Evil. What can you do?"

Xander's eyes flashed for a moment as he turned back to his ex-fiancée. "Ahn! Not being helpful."

Anya glared back, her arms folded petulantly across her chest, her tone dripping with sarcasm and, hinting, a little bit of jealousy. "No. Just being practical. One of those things you claimed to love about me."

Buffy laid a hand on Xander's shoulder, meeting his eyes sympathetically. "It's very sweet, Xander. But I can't risk putting you or anyone else in danger. Maybe…maybe you're right, maybe the real Cordy is in there somewhere…but no one's been able to reach her. For now, we're just going to have to assume that she's gone. For now, anyways."

Xander opened his mouth to protest, but Buffy held up her hand, gently. "We'll get her back. I promise."

Sighing, the young man hesitantly nodded. He had trusted Buffy for years, and her word was almost golden. If she said she was going to get back Cordelia, then he knew that not even Hell itself would be able to stand in her way.
"Okey-dokey", Xander whistled. "I, uh…I guess I'll just go help the future Slayers Corps of America get settled in."

"Good", Buffy nodded. She looked back at Angel, trying hard to keep the softness out of her business-like stare. "Conference? Plan out our strategy?"

"Sure", Angel nodded in agreement, before turning back to the rest of the group. "The rest of you, you know your assignments", he briefly informed them. "Let's get started."

And with that, they departed into Angel's private study together.

Skip, suddenly extremely nervous, began to excitedly call out to the departing heroes, "Uh, wait! Did I say Bu-shundi? I meant...Ru-shundi. It's-it's a whole different…"

But he saw that no one was buying it. And as he turned to see Spike smirking wickedly at him, Faith glaring at him coldly, Gunn burning a hole through him, arms folded across his chest, Fred staring icily, Wood regarding him oddly with one raised eyebrow, Kennedy scowling at him, Xander letting out a distasteful 'tch' and Anya shaking her head in disgust, he could only think of one word to sum up his current state of conditions.

"Crap."

Molly sat coiled in a corner, only a faint shaft of light entering from a hole no bigger than her fist. Hidden well from sight, Molly had chosen this spot for its obscurity from site, its proximity to 'Cordelia', and the closeness to the exit. She was the portrait of concentration. Eyes locked on her target. Crouched on one knee, holding steady. Crossbow firmly in hand.

And wincing as she glanced over to her rather jumpy partner-in-crime.

"Would you please stop biting your fingernails? That's disgusting", Molly quietly scolded Vi, without so much as looking up.

"I don't understand how you can be so calm at a time like this", Vi whispered. "She's standing right there, not a few feet away, with a meat cleaver, and you've gone all 'Focus Girl' on me."

"Hush, will you? We'll be fine", Molly said, her level eyes keeping trained on 'Cordelia', her fingers steadily holding the crossbow. "Just make sure you're ready to go if you have to."

"You mean…if you miss", Vi snarked. She couldn't help it. She knew that Molly took a great deal of pride in her bowmanship.

Molly shot her an icy glare. "I. Don't. Miss."

"O-kay", Vi sing-songed, just to get under her skin. Sometimes, it was just too easy.

The British girl sighed impatiently. "I think I preferred you when you were feasting away on your cuticles."

"Oh, come on, Moll, humor me", Vi cajoled her. "Besides, for all we know these might be our last moments on Earth together."

"Don't talk like that", Molly sternly said. "We'll be fine. Everything is going to work."

"Sure", Vi said, unconvinced. "Because it's not like we haven't done this before, right?"
"Dawn and Connor will handle it", she reassured her. "I'm certain they have everything under control."

"Molly, they're just as new at this as we are", Vi countered. "For all we know they're probably getting carved up into little bity pieces right now."

"Vi, just stop getting your knickers in a twist", Molly argued. "Dawn's got a…decent plan so far. You have to take stock in the fact that Buffy, a Slayer, is her sister. And Connor's quite powerful. They know what they're doing."

"Looks like you got quite a bit of faith in those two", Vi observed.

"They've let us this far", Molly said, turning to glance at her friend. "And they've kept us safe. I'm sure that whatever happens from now, they'll be ready for it."

"Are you sure you're ready for this?", Connor asked her, one more time, his own nerves starting to jump.

Dawn nodded. "Uh-huh." Though she was quite more afraid than her looks would betray.

"I'll protect you, I swear", Connor said gently. "I won't let her hurt you."

Their eyes met, and Dawn felt a bit more calm. She didn't know why, but she trusted him…and somehow she knew that he wouldn't let anything happen to her.

"Okay", she said softly.

Nodding, Connor tugged on the ropes binding her wrists. "Keep your head down", he instructed.

He pulled her down the hallway, into the meat-packing building's center floor. Dawn made a good show of struggling and whimpering as she was led down into the room.

She peeked through her long hair, kept down to the floor, to see Connor stop about a good six feet in front of a figure dressed in black.

"How DARE you show your face around here again, you little bastard!", she recognized Cordelia's voice hiss. She winced at the venom laced in her voice, the hatred.

"I…made a mistake…", Connor began, his voice slightly wavering. "You were right…about everything…my mother's a liar…she hates me, you, our baby…she wants to kill it. But I won't let her. I won't let anyone. I'll make it up to you, Cordy, I promise."

"Really?", 'Cordelia' snorted. "And what makes you think I'll just take you back in, boy? Why shouldn't I just kill you right where you stand?"

At that, he shoved Dawn hard to the ground between them, the girl letting loose a frightened cry as she hit the floor, face-first.

Connor flashed an evil sneer. "Because I've brought an offering."

'Cordelia's' shock melted away into a cold, sinister smile.

To Be Continued…

Next chapter: Time's ticking away as Cordelia's life hangs in the balance. Can our heroes stave off
the peril long enough to survive? Will Buffy and Angel arrive in time? As they grow closer to LA, how will Linsdey, Oz, and Whistler's arrival shake things up?

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BTW, Lindsey fans/Oz Fans / Whistler fans, sorry, I was gonna add them in this chapter, but I thought that their scene would make more sense later on. But next chapter, guaranteed, Lindsey, Oz and Whistler will be there! Do not despair!

See ya,

Jean-theGuardian
"Yeah, I understand you're upset, Dev", Oz talked into his cell phone as he was speeding down the empty interstate highway.

"No, no, I'm not ditching on you guys", he explained. "Well, okay, I sort of am, but I'm not, you see? No, look…something just came up…there are some things more important than the band, Devon…like personal stuff, okay? Look…okay, I'm sorry I didn't call…No, I don't know when I'll get back…I'll try to make it back by next week, but…Yes, I get that the record exec's gonna be upset…Dude, just relax, okay?…Okay, okay, Dev, you're breaking up, yeah, signal's getting pretty bad…might have to-"

And with that, Oz shut his cell phone closed.

"So, how'd he take it?", Whistler non-chalantly asked.

"Well, considering that this could be the break of a lifetime for him next week, and the band's missing their lead guitar, I'd say he's got a fairly good reason to want to take a fountain pen to my chest and do his best Joe Pesci in 'Goodfellas' impersonation", Oz calmly replied.

"Ooh, sorry 'bout that, kid", Whistler winced.

The young werewolf sighed. "He'll get over it."

The half-demon ventured, "Unless you want to turn back around-"

"No", Oz's mellow voice suddenly sharpened, his eyes steeling themselves in a flash. "It's L.A. or bust, if it's Willow that needs help."

"Good attitude to have, kid", Whistler nodded approvingly.

"Specially since we're not about to turn around for nothin' or nobody", Lindsey said from the back, cocking the barrel of one of his shotguns. "Which hopefully, means there'll be no more little hitchhiking stops on the way. Right?" His eyes leveled a calm, yet deadly serious stare at Whistler.

"First and last, Mac D", Whistler said, holding up his right hand in an unusual shape of a Boy Scout salute. "Scout's honor. Like Teen Wolf over here said, it's L.A. or bust."

Lindsay grimaced in annoyance. "Okay, let's get a few things straight, Munchkin Man", he icily replied. "First off, don't ever call me that again. I'm not a giant red-haired clown with big red shoes. Second, you got the hand signal all wrong, dumbass. I should know, seeing as I was once a Scout myself. And third, we've been traveling for about three hours now, and you still haven't told us jack-squat about what exactly we're going up against here. Except for the part where the most powerful evil force known to mankind is to blame, the vampire who made a mantle piece out of my right hand is in over his head, and somehow, Darla's involved. Now, are you gonna make with the debriefing, or am I going to have to squeeze you until those beady little eyes pop out of your tiny little skull?"

Whistler took a moment to regard him. "Gee, really feeling that warm, friendly hospitality all you Midwest folk are so world-famous for."

Lindsey looked as if he was about to lunge for the half-demon, when Oz swiftly intervened.

"Uh, why don't you start telling us what this is all about, Whistler? Before Lindsey makes like a
bubble and bursts?"

Whistler sighed. "Okay, here's the deal..." He broke off for a minute, then chuckled as he turned back to Lindsey. "You were really a Boy Scout?"

"Whistler", Lindsey's voice strained out of his mouth.

"You've all heard about the wave of wickedness going down in La-La Land, right?"

Oz nodded. "Heard on the news. Rain of fire, sun disappearing..."

"Yeah, yeah, we've been over this", Lindsey snapped. "But what's the source? And what does Darla have to do with-"

"Hey, hold your hat, Tex, I'm getting' there", Whistler calmly responded. "Okay, so all this is going down, and, of course, our heroes at Angel Investigations answer the call. Trouble is, they're way in over their heads and get their asses whipped faster than a rookie club fighter on 'Fight Night' at MSG. Same time, we go a few miles up north to a sleepy little slice of suburban Americana known as 'The Hellmouth.'"

"Sunnydale", Oz instantly replied.

Whistler nodded. "Correct. Turns out that the Slayer, Miss Buffy Summers by name, and her pals are in a similar situation, only the main opponent is the one and only First Evil. Pretty much the ultimate end-all, be-all supervillain. The source."

"'Source'? Source of what?", Oz asked.

"Evil", Lindsey replied. "I've got a copy of the files at Wolfram & Hart right here." He read aloud, "The First Evil, origin unknown. Appeared just before the dawn of time, claimed responsibility for the very foundation of the concept known as 'evil'. It's last known appearance was Sunnydale, circa Christmas Eve, 1998. Tormented Angel to the point of near-suicide. Motives unknown, seen as potentially valuable ally, but remains classified as Level 5 threat to operations."

"On a scale of...?", Whistler motioned for him to continue.

"Five", Lindsey replied, not turning his eyes away from the files.

"Threat?" Oz scrunched his eyebrows. "Now, wait, from what I've heard Angel say about Wolfram & Hart, you guys were pretty much in the business of evil. So, if this thing's the source of evil, then shouldn't you guys be, I dunno, teeing off at a golf course, or power-lunching or whatever?"

In spite of his impassive glances between his road partners and the files, Lindsey felt irked at Oz's association of Wolfram and Hart and himself. He hoped to have left that part of his past behind him for good when he sped off to Clarity two years ago. He hoped to have washed himself clean of that blood-soaked chapter of his life. Yet even now, when he was rushing off to fight an apocalypse, possibly to his own doom, he could still not shake the specter of the evil law firm from his life.

"That was ideally the case", Lindsey answered. "But from the firm's initial dealings with it, over three millennia ago, the First was...uncooperative."

"Exactly how uncooperative are we talking here?", Oz asked.

Lindsey thumbed through the pages of the file. "It sent the firm's first emissaries to it back, with
their hearts in hand. Literally. The next few were sent back, strangled by their own entrails. The last one sent to negotiate actually came back alive, but with his eyes melted in his sockets, mumbling something about 'fading lights', 'walls closing' or 'balls of fire', or some drooling indecipherable rant."

"Hmm", Oz noted. "And I heard Donald Trump could play mean hardball."

"Of course, Wolfram & Hart aren't the type of people who take 'no' for an answer", Whistler smirked.

"Right. So, an all-out war erupted between both sides as a result of the First's actions, a war that lasted for over a thousand years", Lindsey continued. "But a costly stalemate forced the Senior Partners and emissaries of the First to work out a formal cease-fire and draw up a non-aggression agreement. This was about 2000 years ago, the signing actually coinciding with the birth of Christ. Since then, an uneasy truce has been held between both parties. Mostly, though, since a lot of the agreement managed to limit the First's actions on this plane, the Senior Partners have been able to turn the majority of their attentions to other dealings."

"So, the First was actually strong enough to force Wolfram & Hart into a stalemate situation", Oz reflected, impressed.

"The First Evil's resources are nearly endless", Lindsey explained. "Same with Wolfram & Hart. Matched up head-to-head, the power difference is very nominal. But the First's power has increased on its own in the last few centuries, though not nearly enough to attract the concern of the Senior Partners."

"What the files won't tell you", Whistler chimed in, "is that the Powers that Be have been monitoring the situation from a distance. Or that the First has, in secret, been constantly looking for a way to break the accord. Or that, through a carefully played-out chain of events stretching from the cosmos to the Higher Planes to Earth itself, not only did the First find a way to breach the agreement, but also a way how to increase its power beyond all of its expectations, or that of any of its foes, for that matter."

"Wait a second", Oz scratched his head, puzzled. "Why would the most powerful evil entity in the world have to look for a way to break an agreement? It's the First Evil. Couldn't it have just...I dunno, ripped up the contract or whatever?"

"When Wolfram & Hart works a contract, it's never a typical signing", Lindsey responded. "All sorts of legality clauses, fine print, ancient magicks, older than the birth of language, and a legion of very powerful demonic shamans were involved with this pact. It was literally a 'binding' agreement, both in the legal and mystical sense, between both parties. Neither side wanted to take the chance that the other would back out on their word. But the Senior Partners' main concern was making sure that the First's forces were held in check on this plane of reality. The consequences for either side backing out of the agreement, once signed, would be catastrophic."

"And the magick was powerful enough to force the First to find an alternate route of getting the power it needed to overrun Earth's plane", Whistler said. "And sure enough, it found one."

"But Wolfram & Hart have been paying up-to-the-minute detailed attention to the First's moves since the agreement", Lindsey argued. "There's no way that the First could've pulled something off on this plane without the Senior Partners having known of it."

If anyone would know about that, it would be Lindsey McDonald. Among his many talents, he was also one of the leading authorities, maybe the leading authority, on the Senior Partners themselves. Upon entry in Wolfram & Hart, Lindsey dedicated years of his life to studying
anything & everything about the law firm. Few beings on this plane of reality had more knowledge of the firm, first-hand or otherwise, than he.

"Think about it, MacDonald", Whistler smirked knowingly. "Who said that the First's moves had to be just limited to this plane of reality?"

Oz realized what Whistler was implying. "I'm guessing that it took to shopping way out of town for its goods."

"Try outta this cosmos, Ozzy", Whistler said. "In order to get the drop on us, it had to go up top. Way up top. So high up that nobody, not even the Senior Partners could see it coming."

"The Higher Planes", Lindsey realized, eyes widening in realization. "That's where it went."

"Well, that's where it looked", Whistler corrected. "Remember, the First, for all of its power, can't just float into the Higher Planes like grease through a fat guy's arteries. Those planes are owned by the Powers That Be, who, let's face it, are way up on the food chain in terms of power. But what's to say that it couldn't send something up there to pinch-hit, so to speak? Something that would completely obey its bidding, yet something that was so seemingly insignificant that it would just slip past the Powers' radar?"

Oz's eyes lit up in understanding, quickly processing what Whistler had said. For all of his silence and laid-back approach to life, Oz's intellect was quite amazing, almost on par with even Willow's renowned brain power.

"That's why you're here", Oz said. "The First used someone...or something...to infiltrate the Higher Planes on its behalf, and that violated your bosses'...boundaries, your property lines, whatever, so the Powers want to strike back at it."

"Oh, there's a lot more at stake than that", Whistler replied. "If the First is allowed to get what it wants, the big guys won't be the only ones whose lawn gets stepped on. Every reality, every planet, hell, every single-celled speck of nothing may be up for grabs here. And as good as Angel and Buffy are, even combined, they may not be enough to stop it this time."

"So, how do we come in?", Lindsey asked. "Aside from waiting for a full moon, making annoying comments and legal advise from an ex-lawyer-turned-grocery-store-clerk, what makes you think we can make any amount of difference other than being first in line to take a fatal wound or two for the team?"

"Look, trust me", Whistler said. "Some of it is on a need-to-know basis, but trust me when I say this. You guys have your own parts to play in this drama. That's why the Powers sent me to get you, that's why we've got to make it to L.A. in one piece."

"How soon do we have to make it there?", Lindsey asked, his eyes still fixed on Whistler.

"As soon as possible", Whistler answered.

Lindsey wasn't satisfied with the answer. "Which is?"

Whistler took a look at his watch. "About another three hours."

At that, Oz shot him a wary glance. Lindsey, whose temper was on ends ever since their journey began, snapped.

"THREE HOURS?", he shouted, furious. "We're not even halfway down Oregon yet, and you expect us to make it there in three hours? What kind of stupid, idiotic-"
"Relax", Oz spoke up as he reached upwards and flipped several toggle switches just above him. He reached over on the car console, lifting away a small metallic tab, which revealed a thumb-sized red button.

"What are you doing?" Lindsey asked, suspiciously.

Oz gave him a brief look back. "Remember when I told you that I knew a guy who gave me this car?"

"Yeah?", the ex-lawyer replied.

"Well", Oz continued, turning his eyes back to the road. "Let's just say that he had some very deep connections in the U.S. military. This was a going-away present from him to me. A government military armored personnel carrier prototype. It combined simple civilian camouflage with steel-reinforced armor plating, state-of-the-art tracking and navigational systems, automated combat defense mechanisms…and something really cool."

Whistler raised an eyebrow. "No kidding."

Oz motioned to the button. "This button activates a high-speed velocity booster system. A new kind of speed system that the U.S. military's been experimenting with. Supposedly, it can make this van do its best 'Warp 5' imitation. We're talking sound barrier-breaking fast. It should be able to get us to L.A. in about two-thirds the time it would take other vehicles from this distance."

"Have you tried it before?", Whistler asked.

"Haven't gotten around to it", Oz shrugged. "But there's a ninety-five percent chance of success rating to it, at least, that's what the guy told me."

"And the other five percent?", Lindsey asked, skeptically.

Oz looked at him, his voice deadpanned. "We blow up."

Well, isn't that special? Lindsey stared at him, his eyes staring in disbelief. "You know, I actually liked you up until this point."

Whistler, despite the situation, couldn't help but to laugh. "Come on, Mac", he looked at Lindsey. "Can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs."

At that, Lindsey sighed, defeated. True, he wasn't thrilled of being a guinea pig in a crash test simulation. Especially when that test could end with his being blown into the next lifetime. But, he was in no position to look for other alternatives. They were six hours out from their destination, time was of the essence, and there were people who needed them.

Darla needed him.

And for her, he would move mountains…

Or, possibly, suffer fatal 3rd degree wounds.

The young man grumbled. "Yeah, well…at least if we blow up, I'll die with the knowledge that Whistler went first."

"Stop it, McDonald, you're making me blush", Whistler quipped, an amused expression on his face.
Oz sighed, glancing up at his good luck charm. Hanging up by the rear view mirror, dangling by a string, was a Pez Scooby Doo dispenser. He briefly allowed himself a smile as he thought of the amazing young woman who gave him that trinket. At the very least, if that five percent did kick in, the last thing in his thoughts would be his Willow, her green eyes sparkling with warmth at him.

"Guys", he said, as his finger hovered over the red button. "If you haven’t buckled your seat belts, or said your Hail Mary's, I suggest you do it now. Things are about to get pretty…trippy."

As Lindsey held his breath and Whistler mumbled a few silent Rosary’s to himself, Oz had only one last thought before his hand descended on the red button.

Oh, the things we do for love.

About 20 minutes earlier…

Dawn was yet again mentally smacking herself for her speaking gaffe.

"Exciting, isn’t it? Oh, yeah, real smooth, Dawn. Very not retarded she inwardly groaned. But then again, it's not exactly like Connor's being all Joe-here's-what-I'm-thinking.

She gazed back and forth between the sight of Cordelia, popping in and out of the rooms, and Connor, who keenly watched her every move. At the moment, the only thing on Connor's mind, from Dawn's perspective, was Cordelia. Not like that was such a bad thing, considering that they were there to save her, and, well, to kick her ass. Or, at least, kick her evil, hatchet-crazy, sluttish-dressing, world-conquering doppelganger's ass.

But, come on, would it kill him to say at least one sentence to her? Two words? A syllable? A grunt?

Anything?

Grumbling to herself, Dawn reached in her pocket for an Oreo cookie, wrapped in the boxed 6-piece package. She couldn't help herself. She was a junk food fiend. Buffy was always on her case about eating healthy and what-not, but come on, who could really resist the mouth-watering, crunchy cookie goodness that was the Oreo cookie?

As if on cue, a light bulb went up in her brain.

"Cookie?", she whispered to Connor, as she offered her half of her own Oreo. Staring at her for a moment, perhaps in fascination, perhaps in annoyance, Connor shrugged, taking the cookie half.

"Mmm. Good", he nodded, as he took a bite-full of his half. "You like these, too?"

"Well, duh", Dawn grinned. "Two halves of chocolaty crunchy cookies melded by a center of creamy white stuff? Who could resist?"

"These were one of the first things I ate in this dimension", Connor mused, thinking back to those confusing first days in L.A. Some parts were good, but overall, it was an experience he preferred to forget. However, there was one experience that, thinking back on it, made him chuckle. "I…remember that the first time I ate an Oreo was from this…vending machine."

"Uh-huh", Dawn nodded, but not quite understanding what Connor found so amusing about
"But", he chuckled some more. "It was the first time I ever saw one of those, right? I mean, up until I came here, all the food I ever had, I’ve had to catch and kill, not take out of a container. So, I just thought by pressing the buttons that I’d just get the food out. So I pressed the button. Nothing happened. I kept pressing some more buttons, and I kept pressing and pressing, but nothing happened. So, finally, I get so mad that I just…pick up the stupid thing right off the hinges and just trash the thing."

Dawn’s eyes widened, and she almost laughed incredulously. "You didn’t…"

"Oh, I did", Connor smiled. "And then, I’m all proud of what I did, so I come inside with all the junk food I could possibly carry and I come inside with a big, stupid smile on my face, and I’m all, ‘Look, dad, I found food inside a big metal box!’"

Dawn had to muffle her giggle; it was all she could do from laughing hysterically. "Oh, my God", she breathed. "Oh…oh, that’s classic! Angel must’ve looked at you like you had two heads."

In an instant, the smile faded from his face, replaced by a slightly more bitter expression.

Dawn could tell immediately that she struck a nerve. "Um, Connor, are you all right?"

"My fa…Angel wasn’t there when it happened", he said. "The man who raised me was. The only other man I call ‘father’." 

Dawn hesitated. "What was his name?"

Connor closed his eyes, swallowing hard before he spoke. "His name was Holtz."


"Holtz", she repeated softly. "Was…was he the one who…?"

"Took me to Quor’toth?", Connor finished for her. "Yeah. The same."

"He kidnapped you", she realized. "He took you away from Angel."

"He tried to save me!", he quickly responded, defensively. Then, realizing what he was saying, he replied more quietly. "What he did was…wrong. But I understand why he did it. He was hurt. My father… killed his family. Long ago. His wife. His daughter. His infant son. All of them."

Dawn’s eyes widened in surprise at Connor’s revelation. "You mean Angelus did, right?"

"Does it matter?", Connor asked, a scowl returning to his face. "Whether or not is was with a soul or without one…it doesn’t make them any less dead. Holtz was lost. Nothing left to live for. At least with me, he had the chance to live his dream. Have a family. Or something close to it. I can’t hate him for that…not completely, at least."

Dawn looked down awkwardly, unsure of what to say.

"Wow…and here I thought I had father issues", she faintly smiled.

At that, Connor turned to her. He didn’t like talking about himself much, especially since most of
his life, from his vantage point, sucked. "And you? What's your family like? I've already met your sister…and her fist."

Dawn chuckled slightly. It was good to see that even after all the glowering and the brooding, Connor did indeed have a sense of humor.

"Well, come on", Connor managed to smile. "What's your family like? Mother? Father?"

Dawn's eyes lowered slightly. Her smile faded into a sadder glance. "My mother…she was the best. But she was very sick and she…died two years ago. My sister came home and found Mom dead on our couch. Life hasn't been the same since."

"What was she like?"

A smile came to the young girl's lips. "She was…warm and sweet. She had this…smile that could make everything you would worry about just go away. She never judged anyone; she could always see the good in something bad. And when she held you…it's like there was no place in the world that was safer than her arms."

Connor smiled wistfully. He suddenly found himself picturing his own mother. Even though he barely knew her, there was something so soothing, so calming about Darla. How could he help to do anything but love her?

"And your father?"

Dawn's smile faded and a bitter, hard look crossed her pretty face. "Let's just say he wasn't anything like her…or your dad."

She struck a little too close to home. "Is that such a bad thing?", he asked, that harsh glare resurfacing on his face once again. "At least your father wasn't a murderer."

"And at least yours is still in your life", Dawn shot back. "I haven't seen my father since I was 9. He missed every birthday, every report card, and every single second of my life in between. He didn't even come to visit us when Mom died. He had his secretary send us flowers."

Connor was taken aback by that. Dawn seemed like the kind of girl he pictured growing up with a mom and a dad and siblings, like those postcards he had often seen in the windows of those Hallmark stores in L.A. He never could have imagined that her father would have been so cold as to have completely cut off ties with his own children, his own family, let alone someone as wonderful as Dawn. Granted, his own dad may not have been what he wanted out of a parent, but at the very least, there was a part of Connor that registered the fact that in spite of everything that had happened between them, Angel did seem to care for him. Perhaps, even love him.

"That's…that's awful", Connor managed to say.

Dawn sighed, taking a moment before turning her blue eyes back in Connor's direction. "Look, I can't pretend to understand everything about what happened between you and Angel, so I'm not gonna. But the fact that he's still there in your life, it says a lot. It's more than you'll know. So, my advise to you? Get to know him. The real him, not whatever you've drawn up from other people. Take this from a girl whose lost practically her entire family. Once they're gone…they're gone."

For Dawn Summers, that was a statement that held its weight in stone. In spite of how Buffy
would always try to protect her, to shield her from the harshness of the world, even the Slayer could not stop Dawn's world from collapsing around her. Her mother, her father, Tara, even Buffy herself, for a little while...all were gone. Either dead, or uncaring, or too overwhelmed to find time to be there for her. It wasn't hard to guess her worst fear: being alone.

Connor took that advice into thought. It could happen, he supposed. Granted, he knew that Angel would never grow old, never die the normal death that humans would endure. But he was only as immortal as one piece of wood through the heart, or a few seconds of sunlight or a lucky slice to the head from whatever Creature-Of-The-Week he seemed to always be tracking down. Just because he could be around forever didn't mean that he would

Both teens looked down awkwardly, unsure of what to say next.

"What...what's Quaker Oats like, anyway?", Dawn asked.

Connor forced down a smile that threatened to come from her mispronunciation of his birth world. "Quor'toth", he replied, before somberly describing his former home, "is like...well, picture this world. Only the sky's always the same. It's both bright red, like the fires of hell, and pitch black, like the bowels of nothing. There are things there; demons that make vampires seem like plush toys. The very air you breathe is thick, full of ash, and noxious gases. There's no sun. There's no ocean. No stars. No clouds. No light. No hope.

"Every turn you make, there's something there, waiting for you. Waiting for food. And when you sleep, there's always something you hear moving. Something screaming. Something eating. And every moment that passes, you wonder if it's your last." He looked away from her.

"Quor'toth...is hell."

Dawn was speechless, her heart breaking after hearing his story. She couldn't even begin to imagine that such a place to exist, let alone being forced to grow up in such a horrible place. And to think that poor Connor had to grow up in a world like that...

"Oh, God." She shook her head, stunned. "Connor..."

"Wanna hear the twisted part of it?", Connor bitterly laughed, though he could feel his eyes start to slightly mist. "Sometimes, when I lie awake at night...I...I sometimes wonder if I really belong in this place. In this world. I mean, son of two vampires, right? Maybe I can't fit in this world...because I wasn't meant to. Darkness is the only thing I've ever known, my whole life. Maybe the darkness is where someone...some...thing...like me really belongs. Maybe the darkness is the only place I can feel like home because...that's where...freaks...like me...really belong." Cage's taunting words still rung in his mind. Still cut him to the bone. Because, deep in his heart, there was a part of Connor that knew that it was true.

He was a freak. Always had been, always would be.

Acting as if by natural feeling, Dawn reached out and took his hand.

"Hey", she said gently. "You wanna talk 'freak'? I'm a make-believe girl made up of glowing green energy. My 90-pound sister can bench press, like, a thousand pounds over her head, and my friends are a lesbian Jewish Wicca, a neutered vampire, an unemployed Watcher who used to be called 'Ripper', a millennium-old, money-hungry, ex-man-killing demon, and a guy who once dated a giant preying mantis. Not to mention, Vi's got weird fashion sense, Amanda's a band geek and Molly's...well, British. So, trust me when I say, I know 'freak'." Her eyes
softened as she held Connor's gaze. "You're not a freak, Connor. You're just…unique."

" 'Unique'." Connor snorted bitterly. "Another way of saying 'different.' Saying…freak."

Dawn shook her head. "No. Connor, that's not what I…" She sighed. How could she make him understand? "You're…okay, take the Oreo cookie, right? On the outside, it's different. All the other cookies would look at it and say, 'weird'." She paused, considering the scenario. "That is, if cookies could, you know, talk, which would be gross because then you'd be eating, like, animals instead of baked dough products."

Connor frowned. "So, you're saying I'm an animal?"

"No!", Dawn blurted out quickly. "God, no."

"Then I'm like a cookie?" His confusion was evident by the bewildered look on his face.

"This sounded so much better in my head", Dawn groaned. "Look, an Oreo is all…layers and stuff, right? Weird, kind of crusty looking on the outside. But on the inside, viola! Gooey, creamy center that no one can resist." She smiled softly at him. "And, well, that's kind of like you."

Off the surprised look on his face to perfectly match his blush, Dawn realized how that sentence may have sounded, and felt her face redden with embarrassment.

"Um, uh…what I mean is…" she stammered as she fumbled for the right words. "Okay, so you're the son of two undead creatures-of-the-night. So, you grew up in a place that makes South Central look like Beverly Hills. So you've got all that super-strength, and super-speed, and super…everything. But cut that all away and dig beneath the layers and what's left?"

She reached with her free hand, placing it over Connor's chest, just above where she could feel the 'thump-thump', 'thump-thump' of his heart beating against the warmth of his chest.

Dawn took his hand with hers, placing it just above her own chest. The boy could only stare, mesmerized, as he felt the beating of her heart against his hand. And at that moment, nothing ever felt more beautiful, felt more right than to feel that warm sensation melting against the coolness of his touch.

"See that? Not so different." She tightened her grip on his hand. "You're just like me."

"Like you?", he echoed, his voice just above a whisper.

Dawn grasped his other hand. "Like me. We're the same, Connor." Her round blue eyes met his, unable to pull away from the draw of his icy blue eyes. "We're the same."

Without realizing it, their heads began to draw closer, their eyes lost in one another's gaze, their lips close enough to feel the breath from one another. Dawn felt her breath catch as she tilted her head upwards to him, while Connor could hear his own heartbeat pounding as he closed his eyes, pulling closer to her…closer…closer…

WHAM!

They jumped back as if lightning struck. They turned their heads to the floor below, where 'Cordelia' had re-entered the room, her eyes suspiciously scanning the balcony.
Dawn almost yelped in fright, but Connor, moving swiftly, seized her, muffling her mouth with his hand as he pulled her down, his body covering hers as the darkness hid them from sight.

His enhanced senses could hear her heart pounding wildly, smell the scent of fear seeping from every pore in her being. The two teens watched as 'Cordelia' slowly, predatorily scanned the tops.

"Be quiet", he instructed Dawn, his eyes focused on 'Cordelia', wary of her every move.

Dawn could only nod, her small frame feeling almost crushed by the way Connor threw his weight on top of her so suddenly.

They held their breaths as 'Cordelia' stalked with painstaking sluggishness, taking a few moments extra to quell her suspicions...

…and then, satisfied, turned around and left the room.

Sighing in relief, Connor removed his hand from Dawn's mouth. "That was close."

"Yeah", Dawn whispered. Her eyes, however, rested on Connor. "But this is closer."

Connor's eyes turned back to her, staring in embarrassment. Only now did he realize the intimate closeness of their situation, as their eyes were locked, her chest heaving up and down gently against his frame, the warmth of their bodies melding into each other.

"Connor?", Dawn whispered raspily.

"Yeah?", the boy answered back, his breath quickening.

"You're crushing my ribs", Dawn said, her voice slightly straining.

Connor's face reddened. He quickly backed up and off her body, suddenly glad that he could get out of that situation before Dawn could notice the growing…embarrassment of the situation.

"Sorry", he apologized. "Didn't mean to be so rough."

"S'okay", she said, rubbing her tender ribcage. "Looks like fake Cordy's getting a bit antsy, huh?"

"That's the problem", he frowned. "I know her. As soon as things get too hectic, she'll go running off to wherever she thinks is safest. That means we're running on borrowed time."

"Then we have to act now", Dawn replied. "We can't risk her running away. If she gets lost, in L.A., we'll never find her in time."

"But what can we do?", Connor asked. "We can't risk a full-on attack. Too much could go wrong. I can't put your lives at stake."

Dawn scrunched her eyebrows in thought, looking around, trying to think of something that would give them a hand. Her wandering eyes caught a rat scrambling across the other side of the factory. She watched with morbid curiosity as the rat slowly inched its way to where a piece of cheese was sitting idly...on top of a rat trap.

'Gross' was her immediate reaction.

SNAP!
And then the light bulb lit up in her brain.

"Bait!", she nearly exclaimed.

Connor looked at her. His face was one big question mark.

"She wants a sacrifice, right?", Dawn elaborated. "Young, virginal, female…that's me right down to the bone."

Connor's eyes widened in shock. "What?"

Dawn let out an impatient sigh. Somehow, she figured he would react like this. What was the big deal, anyway? They needed a plan, and she came up with one. It's not as if they had time to draw blueprints or whatever. "It's the only way. Look, you'll go up to her, use me as a sacrifice, only a fake sacrifice, and when her guard's down-"

"Dawn, you're crazy!", Connor hissed. "If we get that close to 'Cordelia', there's no guarantee that I can keep you safe. You could get hurt. Or worse."

"Connor, listen to me", Dawn said. "We've gotten this far. And we are not leaving this building without Cordy. We may be the only chance left at getting her back."

"This isn't a good idea", he shook his head. 'I can feel it.' That he could, all right. His instincts were well-honed in Quor'toth. And they were flaring with warning right now. This plan…it just didn't feel right.

She placed a hand on his arm. "I trust you, Connor. I know you'll keep me safe if things get too rough."

He grasped her hand tightly. "No matter what happens, I'll protect you. I won't let her hurt you."

Noticing the third instance of close contact between them in the last 5 minutes, the two teens abruptly, almost shyly, pulled apart.

"A-and besides, we've got Molly and Vi in position to do some major damage", Dawn pointed out, gathering her bearings. "We'll be done in no time. No pain, no gain, right?"

Dawn lay on the floor, shaken from the unexpected force behind Connor's hard throw.

Even though she was much tougher than her frail-looking body would give to suspect, still, being shoved to the ground by a preternaturally strong teenage boy could smart like the Dickens.

Above her, she heard 'Cordelia' gasp in delight.

"Oh, Connor!", she smiled, breaking slightly away, but clutching his forearms as she did. "Don't you see? This changes everything. Now", she said, her voice morphing back into that sweet, tender quality Connor was all-too familiar with. "Now, we can have our baby…and you can have the family that you've always wanted. You'll get to be a father, and I'll get to mother your child. Our child. Together." She reached up and tenderly stroked the side of his face, her touch soft and gentle.

Had this been about a day earlier, Connor would've melted underneath that touch, his will dissolving underneath that warm hazel-eyed gaze. But Connor was a day wiser now. He saw the
wolf in sheep's clothing, and was determined not to let himself slip under her spell so easily this time. Especially since it was Dawn's life that depended on his decisions.

No, this time, it would be 'Cordelia' that would have the wool pulled over her eyes.

"Together", he repeated, swallowing. "Right."

"Let me have a look at her", Cordelia said as she reached out for Dawn, who was now panicked that once her face was seen, their cover would be blown.

"No!", Connor forcefully said.

A startled 'Cordelia' jumped back, her eyes regarding Connor with surprise, and some suspicion.

Realizing his mistake, Connor quickly replied, "Um…I mean…you've been through a lot. A-and…we should get that ritual started again, shouldn't we? Who knows how long it might be before my father finds us?"

At that prospect, 'Cordelia' shot him a worried, cautious glance. "Were you followed?"

"No, we were clean", Connor reassured her.

'Cordelia' breathed a sigh of relief. "Good boy." Her hands reached up and tenderly cupped his face, her hazel eyes softly gazing at him. "You're right. I need time to re-prepare the ritual."

"Then get everything ready", Connor said, returning his gaze to Dawn, who still faced the floor. "I'll stand watch."

"I trust you'll keep everything…under control?", 'Cordelia' inquired, her gaze measuring him evenly.

"I'll keep things safe", he responded calmly.

Nodding, the temptress whirled on her heels and strode back into the factory's main floor, preparing the ritual for her 'child's' conception.

Once his super-sensitive hearing detected that she was out of earshot, he bent down to check on Dawn.

"Are you all right?", he whispered, concern draping his face.

"I guess", she nodded, before slightly wincing. "Although butt bruises feels imminent in the morning."

"Sorry", Connor flushed. "I…I just wanted to make it look real."

"Yeah, well, my shiny new bruises should be a good testament to that", Dawn snorted, not noticing how Connor flinched when she mentioned her bruises. She peered up at him, whispering. "Think she bought it?"

Connor nodded. "She's buying it. I can tell."

Dawn tilted her head to the right to see 'Cordy' sitting in the other room, candles lit around her, swaying back and forth, her eyes shut as she silently chanted some archaic language Dawn couldn't understand.

"What's she doing?" she asked Connor, perplexed at her behavior.
Connor remembered full well what happened, or what almost happened, to Anna after 'Cordelia' finished her bizarre ritual. The last thing he wanted to do was to frighten Dawn. He could be frightened enough for the both of them.

"Preparing the ritual", he answered, recalling the last time his 'mate' acted this inexplicably. "Once she's done, she'll come back in here and…” he hesitated, for once, choosing his words carefully. "…ready the sacrifice."

He chose his words carefully so as not to scare Dawn. He remembered full well what happened, or what almost happened, to Anna when 'Cordelia' finished her bizarre ritual.

But Dawn was no fool. She knew exactly what Connor meant. After all, this wasn't the first time some evil force wanted to spill her blood before.

Dawn swallowed. "Meaning me."

Connor looked away, not wanting to answer that.

"How long does that take?", Dawn asked as she swallowed down a lump of fear in her throat.

After a beat, Connor answered. "About 10, maybe 15 minutes."

Dawn Summers remembered that feeling all too well; that inescapable sensation of panic, of helplessness, of knowing that her fate was completely out of her hands, that her life was nothing more than a chess piece waiting to be knocked down. She could easily close her eyes and hear her heart pounding, her knees shaking like fluttering leaves on a blustery fall night, the silent prayers muttered under her breath, the tears of terror sliding down her cheeks. Glory's maniacal laughter ringing in her ears, her lips curled into a pitiless sneer, her eyes gleaming with wicked intent, as her drone-like, sycophantic minions readied her for the blood-letting ritual that would have returned Glory to her former home…at the cost of Dawn's life. Not to mention the lives of every existing creature in all the realities. And how it would have if not for Buffy's last minute heroics.

"You okay?"

Her eyes darted back to Connor, and in that moment, she was reminded that, unlike with Glory, she was not alone. Connor was here, as were Molly and Vi. And she knew, she had to believe, that they would do everything in their power to keep her safe when the time came.

"F-Fine", she stammered slightly, trying to form an optimistic smile, one which was not the most convincing, before she summoned up a small ounce of composure that had yet to escape her.

"Um…you think you can stall her?"

He glanced back and forth from Dawn to the focused, chanting 'Cordelia'. "I think I can buy us some time."

"Like a day, maybe?", Dawn asked, hopefully.

Connor chuckled dryly, then managed a grim nod. "Well, maybe a few more minutes. In the meantime, just keep calm, and make sure you're ready to move."

"Oh, I'll be ready alright", Dawn nodded, checking the bonds.

Without realizing it, Connor's hand glided slowly to her face. It was a simple action, tucking back a stray lock of auburn hair and tucking it behind Dawn's ear. But the contact alone was enough to draw her attention, drawing her eyes to his. Suddenly self conscious of his proximity (and of how
cute he looked even in dim lights), her cheeks reddened. Connor's breathing became shallow as his eyes swept reverently over her face. Twin sets of blue eyes met in a gaze so deep and penetrating that, for a moment, it was as if they were staring into each other's souls. They were drawing closer again, and his nose filled with her scent, like liquid candy, sweet and intoxicating, her lips tingling in anticipation, their faces only separated by a sliver of air...

"Connor!" called out 'Cordelia' from the other room. "Could you help me in here?"

The moment broke around them, much to their dismay. Connor, grimacing in sour displeasure, called back, "Just a minute!"

Dawn swallowed back a smile from her lips at the priceless expression on Connor's face. "You'd better go", she weakly offered.

"I'm sorry", Connor muttered, casting his eyes back to her, a shy smile fighting to appear on his face.

Now Dawn did smile. "Don't be."

Faith was bored.

And when she got bored, she usually tended to fall back on one of his more infamous habits: bugging the crap out of others.

And she was only too happy to begin her ritual on an entrapped Skip.

"Sweet! Ten points", Faith smirked as her penny ricocheted off of Skip's mystical cell, causing the energies surrounding the demon to violently sizzle and angrily crackle.

"Hey! Knock it off!", snapped the metallic minion. "Some of us are trying to think, here!"

"Gee, wouldn't want to disturb the whole 3 seconds it takes you to do that, now, would we?", Faith replied, a Cheshire Cat grin forming on her blood red lips.

Skip grew more irritated by the minute. "You know, pissing off angry demons can be hazardous to your health. Especially a demon that doesn't plan on being stuck in this little play-pen for much longer."

"Said the minion-in-question to a Slayer", Faith snorted. "I've taken out bigger and tougher than you in my day, Nickel Face. You wanna tango? My dance card's wide open. Until then? Make like an oyster…and clam up."

She flicked another penny off his cell, sending violent sparks to vibrate all around the infuriated minion.

"Ten bucks says I can piss him off so bad those little red veins start popping in his eyes again", she laughed as she turned to Spike.

However, the blonde vampire seemed distant. Quiet.

Faith cocked her head, observing his odd behavior. "Right after I start taking off my top and performing a live strip tease with Willow."

Spike broke out of his distant fog, facing his companion with wide (and suddenly very attentive) blue eyes.
"Works every time", Faith smirked.

Spike sighed, running a hand through his platinum blonde hair. "Sorry 'bout that, pet. Guess I was just…"

"A million miles away?" the dark-haired Slayer finished for him. "Better focus some of that energy while we've got Spanky over there locked in his little cell."

"Yeah, and what a riveting assignment this is turning out to be", Spike groused, folding his arms across his chest. "Watching Aluminum Boy toss us a snark or two while he's just standing there like a bloody scarecrow" his knuckles growing whiter as he spoke. "…meanwhile, the Nibbet and the mini-Pouf are skating 'round L.A. playing 'superhero' while we got two unspeakable Big Bads looming on the horizon and the Apocalypse is right around the bend!"

"And the fact that Buffy asked you to be a benchwarmer completely overrides that fact that she chose her ex-squeeze toy to be the go-to guy in this sitch, right?", she smiled, knowingly.

Spike turns and scowls at Faith, but she stares back unafraid, smirking even, as those gorgeous brown eyes questioned him like the headlights of an interrogation room.

"It's not like that", he said, but too quickly to believe. Too quickly to believe it himself.

Faith's smirk never left, her right eyebrow cocked slightly. "Sure it isn't."

"You are in dangerous waters, Slayer", Spike warned.

"What can I say?", Faith chided. "Never been much for the Kiddie Pool."

"Alright…", Spike sighed, trying to choose his words carefully. "Maybe…there was…see, the thing with Buffy-"

"Hey", she held up her hand. "Preaching to the choir. I get were you're coming from."

Spike raised an eyebrow. "Do you?"

"Well, yeah", Faith shrugged, with an understanding gaze. "I kinda went through a phase like that with Angel."

Now Spike sat up, fully attentive. Surely, she didn't mean what he thought she did. "You mean… you and Angel-?"

"There was no me and Angel", Faith corrected, sighing. "I kinda wished it sometimes, don't get me wrong. I mean, you stew in an all-female correctional facility for 3 years and your only friend happens to be this tall, dark, sensitive and ridiculously handsome dude who, on top of that, is the only being on God's Green to think you're even worth two anythings? How could you not have a crush?"

Spike met her eyes, dead-panned. "Somehow, I think I'd manage."

Faith chuckled, swatting his arm. "You know what I mean, smart-ass."

"And again, here we go back to your peculiar obsession with my ass", Spike smirked. "Well, not peculiar. I mean, it is one fine looking ass, if I do say so myself."

"Yeah, whatever", Faith chuckled as she rolled her eyes. Though, she did admit, if only to herself, that he was right. "Getting back to the point", she continued, "I'm just saying I understand that
whole 'unrequited love' deal."

Spike could barely believe what he heard. "Wait, wait…unrequited-"

"Yeah, it took me a while to get over the whole 'Buffy-Angel' dynamic", she sighed, wistfully. "I mean, hey, never exactly been the poster girl for healthy and long-lasting relationships, but…they're good for each other, you know? I could get how it'd be hard to get over the Buffy crush-age. She's like cat-nip to guys…short, skinny, blonde, snippy cat-nip, but catnip no less, and~"

"It was more than that." Spike stared at her, his next words conveying their meaning. "A lot more."

Faith's eyes widened as she let out a surprised laugh. "No…don't even tell me Little Miss Tightly Wound's been getting her naughty on!"

Spike sighed, ruefully. "Not of late."

"Bad ending?"

Spike's mouth formed a grim line. "Least on my part it was."

"Man!", Faith slapped her knee, laughing. "What is with that girl and boinking the undead?"

"Hey!", Spike gave her a stern look, but added a wicked grin. "Don't knock what you haven't tried."

"Oh, yes, and God knows what I'm missing", Faith retorted, her eyes feigning pensive thought. "The romantic feeling of cold, clammy flesh on mine, the sensual sensation of my fingers on those freaky, rock-solid, ridged face wrinkles, and of course, the ever-pleasurable knowledge that a snack for said vampire lover is only one bad hickey away."

Spike's faced soured as he glared at Faith. "Never heard Buffy complain about it", he grumbled. A question formed on Faith's lips. "Does Angel know…?"

"About me and his 'one-true' doin' the horizontal tango?", he smirked. "Don't know, don't much give a piss."

"So…what?", Faith inquired, trying to be as subtle as possible. "Are you…like still making a play for her or…?"

The question lingered in the vampire's mind. It was a question that he'd been pondering for some time, now. He put himself through unimaginable hell for her, all for her, so that he could be worthy, in her eyes…so he could be the kind of man that she deserved. And that was quite the tall order, because Buffy Summers deserved better than the best. She deserved…perfection.

Yet, Buffy hadn't touched him since he had his soul restored to him. He'd been too busy being insane, then under the thrall of the First, then kidnapped and tortured…too much had happened in the middle of this mess for him and Buffy to have a real heart-to-heart on where they stood. About his new soul, what it meant, what it meant, for him, for her, for them…if there was even a 'them' to be talked about. But the question was never far from his thoughts.

"Maybe. Dunno, really." Spike sighed. "Don't suppose there's much stoppin' me, now, is there?"

Faith snorted. "Sure…except for the six-foot-tall, broad-shouldered, super-strong, slightly possessive guy who knows, like, a hundred fighting styles in the same room with her."
Spike smile falls, a dark glower morphing on his face. "I'm not afraid of Angel."

Faith wasn't buying it. "Even though he could probably tie you into a pretzel knot before he makes an ashtray into your new permanent residence?"

He felt himself bristle a little. He was William the Bloody, damn it! His name was feared around the world, had been for over a century. His name was synonymous with painful death and destruction. The thought, the mere notion that someone else thought that he could play second fiddle to an ape like Angel…

"You don't think I could take him?"

"I don't think anyone could take him", she waved her hand, dismissing the notion. "Not if he was really trying to beat you."

Now it was Spike's turn to snort. "You've obviously never seen me get down and dirty, luv."

"Who knows?", she flashed a smile that at best, could be considered flirty, at worst, outright lascivious. "If a girl plays her cards right…"

Spike's surprised look at her comment turned to a soft, yet incredulous laugh. He didn't know why, or what, but there was some strange energy, some connection, some…spark between them that refused to be ignored. It wasn't burning white hot like the passion he shared with Dru, or the fire that Buffy ignited in his heart…but it was real. Warm, humming, glowing in anticipation.

Faith surprised herself a little. True, she was never exactly a wallflower, but she hadn't taken it upon herself to blatantly flirt in a good long while. She knew she never really had to, the way she looked. Guys came to her, and she picked them at her own choosing. And yet, she found herself openly flirting with a stranger whom she barely knew and a vampire, no less (albeit a handsome one). That was more than a little unnerving to Faith…

…but not exactly unwelcome, either.

Shifting gears, she directed her view to the two champions across the hall. "So, uh…got any bets on what our fearless leaders are planning?"

Spike shook his head. He'd never put it past Buffy to come up with a plan. After the hell she's endured for the last seven years, it'd been drilled solidly into her head to have a plan. He knew better than most that beneath that schoolgirl smile and the bouncy blonde 'do was the mind of one of the greatest warriors he'd ever faced. And Spike had faced many. And, begrudged as he would be to admit it, Angel was always the strategist out of the Scourge of Europe; always thinking, always planning, always two steps ahead of everyone. He wielded a feared and powerful reputation as either the heroic Angel or the murderous Angelus for one reason: soul or no soul, he always had a plan.

Still, far be it from him to give credit to anything his Pouf-y Grandsire was ever involved in. Especially anything that involved both him and Buffy. "What makes you think they even got a plan?"

"Because, man", Faith gave him a strange look, before gazing back, almost reverently, at the two people whose opinion mattered most to her. "Guys like Angel and Buffy? They're made for moments like this. Hell, they were practically born for this. It's what they do. It's who they are. Knowing them…smart money says from point A to Z", she paused, a smile on her lips, "…They know exactly what to do."
"What do we do?", Buffy asked, dismayed, leaning back against the desk of his study.

Angel, standing steadily across from her in the doorway, shook his head. "I wish I knew."

The two warriors were in deep thought for much time following their retreat in Angel's study.

"I…I just can't believe that Dawn would do this", Buffy shook her head, angrily. "How could she be so stupid?"

"I'm sure she'll be fine, for the moment, anyways", Angel offered her some comforting, if not unrealistic words. "I mean, she did grow up in Sunnydale, which can be a dangerous place at night. And-and she does have Connor with her". He trailed off, upset. "Although I'm definitely going to give him a piece of my mind when he gets back. He should've known better."

Buffy frowned. "So, my kid sister's wandering around in one of the biggest cities in the world, looking for an evil being, in the body of our friend, who's pretty fond of the mayhem and murder bit, and your most comforting offering is that she's accompanied by street smarts from Hellmouth Central and a hormonally-charged teenage kid with major Oedipal complex and violence issues?"

Angel sheepishly shrugged. "Well, I…I guess I'm just saying it could be worse."

"Sure", Buffy said, dryly. "She could be meeting some nice drug dealers on the way. Although drugs might be a logical explanation as to why she chose to run off on this little suicide-capade."

"The others are working on a way to locate Cordy", Angel said, calmly. "I'm sure they'll come up with something soon. Between Giles, Wesley and Willow, they should be done faster than we know it."

"And then what?", Buffy asked him. Off his questioning look, she replied, "Angel, I think it's a given that we find Cordy. But then what happens?"

"We save her, get our kids home, take the demon out of Cordy, save the world, then ground them 'till their Social Security kicks in", Angel replied. "Which, in Connor's case, will be a long time, considering he doesn't have any Social Security. Or birth records, for that matter."

Suppressing a smile, Buffy pressed on. "I mean, what if things get too crazy when we find her? In spite of this tremendous brain-freeze, Dawn is a smart girl. By now, she's probably found 'Cordy'. Which means she and Connor could be in big trouble."

"I'm not following", Angel replied, confused.

She smirked. "Well, being quick was never one of your strong points."

"Buffy", he sighed her name softly, prompting her to continue.

"Sorry", she said, getting back to the point. "The thing is…let's say it comes down to a choice. Say in one hand, we have Cordy's life. And, say, in the other hand, we have Connor's. And Dawn's. I think we both know from experience that we can't have our cake and eat it, too." She broke off, staring far off into a distant memory. "Sometimes, things happen. Things we can't control. Things we can't stop no matter how much we…and even though we don't want to make that choice…we have to. For the greater good."

Angel knew what she was referring to, as his brown eyes met her sad green ones. He slowly took several steps towards her, closing the gap between them.

"You never should've been forced to make that decision."
For all the harsh and painful memories that Angel held, few were ever more heartbreaking than when Buffy, faced with the choice of saving her beloved or saving the world, was forced into making that gut-wrenching sacrifice of stabbing him through his heart with a sword, watching the only man she ever loved being swallowed whole into Hell, so that the world could see another sunrise. Even through all of his torment and the nightmarish centuries he spent in that horrific place, he never held any grudge against Buffy. For he knew she did what she had to do, to protect her family and friends, to protect what she was chosen to protect. He only loved her more for it, trusted her even more than he ever had, for when it came down to it, she proved that she would be able to grant him the best peace of mind that she could: that in his absence, she could protect others from himself. From the monster within him.

From Angelus.

She sighed wistfully, staring up into his eyes. "I wish I never had to. Every day. But what's done is done. We can't change it, no matter how much we want to."

Angel knew where this was going. "Look, Buffy-

"And that's exactly my point", she continued, undeterred. "We have no idea what we can expect when we find them. There might be a chance to save them all, but if Metal Face is right…there might not be anything we can do to help Cordy."

Angel wasn't having any of that. He hadn't come this far to lose Cordelia. After what happened to Doyle all those years ago, he made a promise to himself that he wouldn't lose anyone else, if he could help it. He had to reassure Buffy that this would work.

"Look, Willow and the others will find a cure for Cordy. They're probably putting the finishing touches on something right now-"

"Angel", Buffy cut him off. "Look, I…I understand, Cordy's your best friend. God knows how hard it was for when Willow went bad, but…" she paused, taking a deep breath before her eyes met his. "I think it's time we think worst-case scenario."

He abruptly rose, walking away from her. His voice was soft-spoken, but with an edge hard enough to cut through diamonds. "Don't."

She shook her head, sadly. "I have to"

He whirled on her, his dark eyes flashing. "You're asking me to kill Cordelia?"

"No", she replied, her voice soft, but firm. "I'm asking you to be strong. To be able to make the right decision if we're forced to."

His voice was almost pleading. "Buffy, I don't think I can-"

"You have to" she insisted. God, she hated this, hated herself for even thinking about something like this, but it had to be done. Someone had to be the strong one. "Or else Dawn & Connor are dead."

Angel had to make his share of tortured decisions in his much-too-long life. Leaving Buffy, accepting his infant son's loss, cutting off his friends when he waged war on Wolfram & Hart…he knew that this would be yet another one of those times, another time when he would have to lose yet another piece of his already fractured soul.

But to even consider doing this to Cordy…she had been there from the start. In every form, in
every shape that his embattled crew had taken since the night he arrived in the City of…for the
first time in this city, Cordelia Chase has always been there. He watched her evolve from that
vain, brash, carefree schoolgirl he knew all those years ago into a capable, confident, even
sensitive (at times) young woman. Through his toughest moments, his most painful times, she was
his rock. Her steadfast loyalty was one of the few things that kept him going in the face of the
omnipresent darkness he fought every night. To abandon her now, when she needed him most to
be the champion she believed him to be, to just turn his back on one of the most important people
in his life…

He could barely speak as he met Buffy's eyes. "I can't."

_Someone has to be the strong one._ Summoning every ounce of courage, the little blonde Slayer
took a deep breath and met Angel's pained face. "Then I will."

His eyes bored into her so hard, it took every fiber of courage she had not to flinch; it was as if he
was staring into her very soul. "Do you _really_ think you have enough in you to have innocent
blood on your hands?"

_No_, she silently admitted, _I don't_. She would never even consider taking a human life, led alone
the life of a friend, but too much was at stake for her to make this decision as Buffy. She had to
make this decision as the Chosen One, the Slayer.

"Whatever that thing is, It's far from innocent. It's _killed_ people—"

"But _Cordy's_ innocent in all of this!" Angel snapped. "That _thing_ is what's been the cause of
everything that's happened."

"I _know_", Buffy bit out, before taking a calm breath of air. Losing her temper would not help this
situation. She knew he wasn't going to give in to this without a fight. It was part of what she loved
about him. But time was running short; she had to press on. "I know…but it doesn't matter. We're
running low on time, lives are at stake, and whatever that thing's giving birth to, I doubt it's the
Ally McBeal dancing baby." She paused, frowning. "Although that _would_ be a portent to an
apocalypse, now that I think about it."

"This _isn't_ a joke, Buffy!"

"No, it's _not_ a joke. I get how serious this is!", she shot back, bristling. "God, Angel, you think I
want this? Do you see me putting up party streamers at the prospect of having to kill one of my
friends?"

"No, but…" he trailed off, eyes averting to the floor. "You don't understand."

"Then _make_ me!" Buffy stepped closer to him, her questioning eyes scanning for the answers on
Angel's face. "Make me understand…look, Angel, I know this from experience, it's never easy to
come to this point with one of your closest friends, but—"

"She's more than that."

Her eyes went wide as she recoiled backwards, letting the meaning of those words sink in.

"More than that." She repeated those words, "Exactly…how _much_ more?"

Off the look in her eyes, Angel muttered a curse under his breath…or lack-ther eof. Through the
telling of his life in the last 3 years, he hadn't mentioned to Buffy about the unusual dynamic that
had formed between himself and Cordy; a bond that mistook for a time, a _brief_ time, as romance.
He knew he had some more explaining to do with Buffy (a conversation that he was not in the
least looking forward to) but he, too, knew that time was running out, and far too quickly to
discuss the strange and complicated saga of 'Angel-Cordelia'.

"This isn't the time for that", he said quietly.

"The time for what?", her voice…she had to fight to keep it from hissing out of her, a wave of
jealousy washing over her, though she had no real idea why.

"Look…this isn't about what I feel", he said, his stony eyes locking with Buffy's yet again. "It's
about what I do…this is about saving someone's soul."

Those words…so similar to what he told her the night she came to L.A. years ago to make Faith
pay for her recent romp through Sunnydale, in Buffy's body, no less. She was still too young, too
hurt from the way things ended between them, to understand what he was doing in L.A., when he
should have been by her side, when she needed him so badly.

But over time, she had come to understand what he meant, understand Angel's significance to that
city, and to the world. He wasn't just saving lives, he changed them. For the better. Even in
Sunnydale, either from Willow or in hushed whispers 'round the demon bars, she'd heard tales
from the growing legend of the vampire-with-a-soul, the Champion. The things he'd done, the
lives he'd saved, the demons he and his crew had slain…it only reaffirmed what Buffy knew all
along about Angel: that given a second chance at life, he could make amends. And do good.

So she squelched the temptation to snap out at him, say something petty about him hiding behind
'the mission' in order to avoid answering her question, reminding herself that this wasn't the time to
be focusing on her romantic life; this wasn't the time to be Buffy. Summoning the Slayer within
her, she focused back on what mattered: the mission.

"Yes, it is." She nodded, her gaze almost hypnotic to him, communicating her message with a
force that words could not. "And right now…it's about saving two of them. A planet full,
actually."

The door suddenly swung open. "Hey, guys", Xander said, the shortness in his breath tipping
them off that he'd been in a hurry to get there. "Willow sent me. I think they've got a lock on
Cordy."

Buffy nodded. "Thanks, Xand. Tell them we'll be there in a minute."

A brief nod and a click of the door later, Xander was gone.

"Look…Angel, I can't force you to make this decision, but…" he followed Buffy's gaze out into
the hallway, where their friends and allies were. "There are a lot of people counting on us to do
the right thing. I can make the suggestion, but whether or not we do it…it's your choice."

Angel felt dread trickling down his spine. As much as it pained him, he knew Buffy was right.
Too many lives were at risk, his son and her sister's among them, to delay on a decision he knew
he had to make. But could he really bring it upon himself to end the life of one of the two most
important women in his life? His best friend?

He honestly didn't know, but with time ticking away, he was sure of one thing…

Things were not looking good for Cordy. Not in the least.

'Vanu'esh katahn darh'im vajra'ha'esh.'
'Vanu'esh katahn darh'im vajra'ha'esh.'

'Cordelia' swayed back and forth as she performed the archaic magicks that would prepare the ritual for the birth.

This was working out better than she had hoped. And it was a good thing, too, since 'the Boss' had issued that deadly ultimatum. Unfortunately, there hadn't been too many virgins that had popped up since her last failures. She was rapidly beginning to lose hope that she could perform the ritual at all…until Connor's miraculous appearance.

However, in spite of the hurriedness of the situation, she could not shake the uneasy feeling in her stomach, the nagging feeling that just wouldn't go away. She certainly didn't mind having a sacrifice ready, of course. One dead virgin was just as good as the next. Still, something about Connor's behavior was throwing her off. Not that he was ever the portrait of calm and serenity, but that fact of the matter was, she wasn't stupid. How could she not be keeping a close eye on him, especially after what happened earlier with Darla the Friendly Ghost's appearance? How could she not question the timing of the events? Connor's sudden change of heart, after his captivating performance of the 'good son' with Darla earlier that evening…and what was the deal with him not wanting to show her the face of the girl?

She didn't have much time on her hands, but there were questions that needed to have answers.

She opened her eyes to find Connor, restlessly pacing back and forth, not a few feet from her. His eyes kept darting back and forth between herself and the stock room where the girl was being held. It was too strange that he could be so fixated on the girl, especially since he seemed so willing to get on with the ritual just earlier. Why would he be so concerned about her fate when he seemed so on-board with her? Why would he care?

"Connor", she called out to him, snapping his attention back to her. "Hand me the Prio-Motu entrails."

His expression was stoic as he reached over and passed her a jar containing the demon organs. She watched him carefully, even as she reached into the jar, grabbing the vile-smelling organs and placing them into a jar mixed with herbs, salts, and other concoctions, beginning to grind and mix them with a pestle.

"Why so nervous?", she asked, forcing her voice to sound casual to mask the suspicion and concern she felt.

Connor looked up, caught off guard by her question. "What?...Nervous? Me? What makes you think that?", he forced a chuckle, looking away from her.

'Cordelia' fixed a probing gaze on him. "You've just seemed kinda…different?"

"I'm....I guess I'm just...excited about our baby, you know? Our baby?"

"I was beginning to think you were a lost cause..."she said, scowling at the memory of why. "Especially after what happened after Mommy popped in for a little 'bitch-to-son' chat."

His knuckles grew white at the mention of his mother in such a disdainful manner. An action that was not unnoticed by 'Cordelia'. But he knew he had to keep his composure. He was guessing that this Cordelia imposter had no idea that the captive in the other room was really the Slayer's sister. Or that this was really a sting operation to nab her. At least, that's what he was banking on.

Drawing in a calm breath, he replied, "She...she wasn't...she wasn't what I thought she was."
'Cordelia' kept her watchful gaze on him, even as she mixed the ingredients. "What'd you think she was?"

"Understanding." He forced down the smile threatening to tug at his lips. "Caring."

"And I wasn't?", she asked, slightly annoyed.

Connor took a deep breath, and then met her eyes. "You were." *Not!* "I…I was just…confused, is all."

Her eyebrow cocked upwards, still not convinced. "Seem to be doing that a lot these days" She decided to switch tactics. "So…tell me about the girl."

Connor stiffened for a moment as Dawn's pretty face flashed in his mind, but managed to steel himself for the answer. Her safety was in his hands and he had no intention of letting her down. Besides, it certainly wasn't the first time he'd ever lied before. "What about her?"

The thing was, however, 'Cordelia' knew that. The kid had managed to lie to those closest to him for three whole months while Angel, his own father, had unwillingly taken up deep sea diving, thanks to Connor. This was a game, a staring contest, a game of mental poker. And she had no intention of cracking. "Well, for starters, where'd you find her?"

"In an alley", he replied, quick, but not too quickly.

"*What* alley?", she cut in, almost as quickly.

Resisting the urge to let his eyes dart around, Connor feigned a careless shrug. "I don't know, a few blocks off from the hotel."

She was not satisfied. "When?"

He was getting irritated. Fast. "A little while ago…what's with all the questions? I got you a girl, didn't I?"

'Cordelia' looked taken aback. Keyword, 'looked'. One of the more handy skills she had picked up from forcing her way into the real Cordelia Chase's body was her convincing acting skills. "What, I can't be curious about the welfare of my own child? Why are you getting so defensive?"

"Why can't you just trust me?", he asked defensively.

"Because you haven't exactly had my back on everything, lately, have you?", she asked, the question as loaded as a Red Sox fan at a Boston pub during the '04 World Series run.

Irritated, he snapped, "Well, if that's the way you feel, maybe I should just go…and take the girl with me."

Her scowl was so black she could have blocked out the sun with it…again. "Don't. You. Dare."

Connor forced down a smile. He knew he just won the contest. "Just kidding." He reached out and brushed back a lock of hair from her face. "You shouldn't get so mad…that's not healthy for the baby."

"And we wouldn't want that now, would we?" 'Cordelia' smiled, yet stared at him, almost daring him to say otherwise. Daring him to blink in this little staring contest they've been having.

Connor's face was unreadable, but his words were gentle, a contrast to the uneasy feeling in his
"No. We wouldn't."

Fred and Gunn sat on the stairs of the lobby, directly across from the study where Buffy & Angel were talking, waiting for Lorne's spell to finish.

"What do you think they'll do?", Fred asked, watching fretfully.

Gunn replied stoically. "What they have to, like their kind always does."

"What kind is that?", Fred asked.

"Heroes, babe", Gunn replied, his eyes gazing at the two warriors with a hint of admiration in his eyes. "Champions. It's what they do. It's why they're here. For times like these."

Fred wanted desperately to find some comfort in his words, but based in everything she had seen so far, even her steadfast, often blind faith was now being shaken. If everything she heard from Skip was right, then did anything they could do even count for anything? Would there be a point? Would there be a meaning for fighting back?

With a sigh, the sprightly Texan gave voice to her fears. "Will it make a difference? If we really are just pieces being moved around a board…"

"Then we'll kick it over and start a new game", Gunn replied, his voice gaining strength, confidence. "Look, monochrome can yap all he wants about no-name's cosmic plan but here's a little something I picked up rubbin' mojos these past couple of years: the final score can't be rigged.

"I don't care how many players you grease, that last shot always comes up a question mark. But here's the thing—you never know when you're taking it. It could be when you're duking it out with the Legion of Doom or just crossing the street deciding where to have brunch. So you just treat it all like it was up to you, the world in the balance", he broke off, smiling faintly. "…'cause you never know when it is."

Charles Gunn was never much into the philosophy of destiny. He never liked the idea of not being in control of his own life, his own fate. When the odds told him that he would be fated to die before he saw the age of 20 in his brewing street war with the vampires of L.A., he steeled himself and fought back with everything he had. And he beat those odds. He lost friends and even his sister along the way, but he survived, even when everyone told him he couldn't, even when he doubted himself at times that he could or should have survived.

But Gunn never stopped believing. He was a fighter his whole life, the choice or lack thereof that he was given. He continued to survive, so that he could fight to ensure that no one else would ever have to go through what he did: to lose his family, his mother, father and sister to the unseen evils that lurked in the darkness. And he wasn't about to stop fighting, or believing, when the world was now hanging in the balance.

Especially when it came to his faith in the man that had brought he and his friends this far, the man that time and again he knew to defy the odds himself.

Though he would never admit it, for he was too proud and stubborn to do so, Angel was one of the strongest men that he knew. And not because of the steel-bending super-strength that came with being a 200 year-plus creature-of-the-night. It was Angel's unrelenting determination, his resolve, his will to win that made him so unlike anyone or anything that Gunn had ever witnessed.

After seeing Angel do the things he had done in the two years he spent fighting alongside him,
seeing the people whose lives he saved, whose souls he touched with his compassion and mercy, seeing him struggle through the personal grief, loss and torment that faced him at every turn and still walk away, still standing and stronger, he felt as though nothing could ever be strong enough to truly break him.

He wasn't about to lose faith in that kind of man. That kind of being.

Angel deserved more than that.

As far as Charles Gunn was concerned, Angel had earned that faith.

Fred Burkle resisted the urge to sigh like some moony-eyed teenager. It had been a long time, forever, it seemed like, since she'd seen Charl…er, Gunn, smile like that. Granted he seldom was for smiling, usually opting for the no-nonsense, menacing scowl that came with the territory of being the Muscle of Angel Investigations. But the few times when Fred did see him smile… honestly, the man had one of the most beautiful smiles she had ever seen.

"You been practicing that?", she smiled warmly.

Gunn, shaking off his thoughts, allowed himself to laugh. "Little bit."

Their private chat was interrupted when Lorne entered, holding a map, followed by Wesley, Willow, Giles, Xander and Darla.

"Hug your neighbor, kiddies", Lorne sang jubilantly. "We got it!"

Skip snorted. "You're all puppets."

Wesley pointed the smoking claw at him, his eyes flashing cold warning. "Shut up."

"Well, where is the bird?", Spike asked.

Willow glanced down at the map. "Well, according to the scorch marks, downtown."

"Gee, that narrows down to only a few hundred places she could be", Xander groaned as he scanned the map anxiously.

"Is your little hocus-pocus specific on where fake Cordelia and her spawn-in-the-oven are staked out?", Faith wondered.

"This appears to be the meatpacking district, if I'm not mistaken", Giles replied.

"It's a factory. That much I remember", Darla answered, before turning to Wesley. "How close is that from here?"

"About 10 minutes from here by car, a half-hour by foot", Wesley answered.

"Good work."

Angel's voice had startled them, as he and Buffy made their way back into the lobby. Their faces
Angel's voice had startled them, as he and Buffy made their way back into the lobby. Their faces were etched into masks of impassiveness, their outward demeanor a reflection of levity and calm. But their eyes, if one could look hard enough, bore traces of sadness, or regret, for whatever action that they were about to embark upon.

Upon walking in, Angel took the map from Lorne, and then headed for the weapons cabinet. Buffy barely acknowledged the group with a sad nod before she joined Angel over by the cabinet, arming herself carefully.

Gunn instinctively took this as his signal. "Let's load up", he sighed as he moved to join them.

Angel's voice stopped him cold.

"No, you're not coming. Any of you."

Willow was surprised. "You're going after her alone?"

Buffy glanced to Angel, their eyes locked in silent understanding. With a sad nod, the Slayer turned back to her best friend. "We don't have a choice, Will."

"You sure that's a good idea, Sunshine?", Lorne asked, concerned. "I mean, the last time we tried going after her, we got our collective butts kicked."

"Yeah", Faith added. "Maybe it wouldn't hurt to bring a little back up-"

"No", Angel abruptly answered. "Buffy and I have to handle this ourselves."

"And you two are…decided on this matter?", Giles asked.

"Look, whatever's taken over Cordy…it's still her inside. She's still our friend", Angel explained, though it pained him to talk about it. As his eyes ticked from Buffy back to his friends, he swallowed hard before he continued. "We won't let you carry that."

"We can't", Buffy added softly. Her eyes met the stunned and saddened gazes of her friends. The undertone made it quite clear what they had decided upon.

"But there could be another way", Darla insisted. "What about the spell? What about-"

"What about your son, Darla?", Buffy interrupted, her voice slightly edged, but softening upon remembering that Darla was Connor's mother. "What about my sister? Or her friends? Or everyone on Earth? Put yourself in our position. What would you do?"

Darla wanted to argue, felt her newfound instinct to defend innocent life flare, but could not. It was her son, after all. She had just found him again, after she never thought that she would get another chance to. She lost him once; she didn't think she could bear to lose him twice.

Buffy sighed. How to make them understand…"Look, Plan A isn't 'us-running-off-to-lop-off-Cordy's-head'. If we can save her, then we will. We'll do whatever it takes. But all of you know that sometimes…things happen. Plans change. And if we can't help her, if it comes down to that thing inside her and the people we love, the people we've been sworn to protect…then we need you to understand what we're prepared to do."

The blonde Slayer thickly swallowed. "What we may have to do."

Skip sighed, bored with the ongoing drama. "Anybody got a hanky?"

Ignoring the demon, Spike grimly spoke up. "So…that's it, then."
Fred could barely believe this was happening. This wasn't right. It wasn't supposed to be like this. "They're really going to do it. They're going to kill Cordelia."

Wesley nodded, gravely. "They may not have a choice."

Xander gritted his teeth. "There's always a choice."

Buffy glanced unhappily at Xander, shaking her head. "Not always, Xander. Not always."

"Buffy, come on!" Xander said, his voice now pleading. "I mean…you're not really going to do this, are you? I mean, it's…it's Cordy!" His voice quivered, fighting the urge to break. He repeated it softly. "It's Cordy."

"I know." Buffy met his desperate gaze, pursing her lips together, her face showing her sorrow. Her voice was barely a whisper. "I know."

Angel took a broadsword and headed for the door. He turned back to Buffy. "We have to go."

Nodding solemnly, she grabbed her crossbow and headed after him, joining him side-by-side on top of the stairs as they retreated to the door, both warriors moving as one.

"Angel, wait!" Fred cried out one more time to appeal to her friend's common sense.

He turns to Fred and sadly shook his head, dashing any hopes Fred had of an 11th-hour change of heart.

"I'm sorry," Angel murmured quietly.

Then, without so much as a glance, both Champion and Slayer stalked out of the Hyperion Hotel, leaving the others shocked into silence in the wake of their departure.

Skip couldn't help himself. "Yep. That'll go well", he smiled cheerfully.

Dawn watched the door with growing dread as she shifted her hands restlessly. The ropes binding her wrists together weren't inescapable, but they were pretty itchy. And as time grew closer to the ritual, she realized only now that perhaps she could have drawn up their 'big plan' with a little more…detail. But then again, everything happened so fast that there wasn't exactly time to draw up blueprints. Hell, she'd even settle for Andrew's 'Big Board' at the moment.

The thing about Dawn, though, was that she was never as unprepared or reckless as her friends may have thought her to be. Case in point, she had a Plan B…safely tucked underneath the right sleeve of her long-sleeve shirt.

A small vial, given to her courtesy of one Willow Rosenberg.

It was a little something she received as a gift, a guilt-trip gift, after Willow returned from England, fresh from the Wiccan Coven. The little red-headed witch, flooded with guilt from her near-world-ending actions last Spring, presented Dawn with a little peace offering. A small glass vial, filled with a mysterious yellow gas.

Remember, Dawnie, she remembered Willow's words to her. This is only to be used in case of a real emergency It-it's kind of got a universal use to it, but…think of it as a little something to, you know…light your way.

Dawn smiled, thankful that the Western Hemisphere's most powerful sorceress suffered from one
of the worst guilt trips ever. Because, boy, did this ever qualify as an emergency.

Her thoughts where interrupted when she caught sight of Connor in the doorway. She almost yelped in surprise, the boy having made no sound as he entered.

Connor swallowed. "Come on…it's time."

Dawn nodded, then held out her hands. Just as Connor laid his hands on the ropes, she whispered, "Remember what we talked about. Make it look real."

With a simple nod, Connor forcibly yanked hard on the ropes as he began to drag Dawn to the other room. The great show she made of squealing and struggling would look convincing enough for anyone.

Anyone, that is, but 'Cordelia'.

She stood there, watching Connor bring the girl into the room, another lamb offered for the slaughter. The key to this ritual, and her ticket to getting a very angry First Evil off her back, was only a few feet – and one good swing of a meat cleaver- away for her…

So why did something still tell her that something smelled more rotten than the putrid stench of dead meat that permeated this hell hole? And why did she have the sinking feeling it had to do with the girl?

A smile crept up on her face. "Connor…could you hand me that vial over there?"

"Vial?", Connor frowned, turning his head towards the dimly-lit circle of candles and supplies a few feet from them. "I don't see any—"

In a flash, 'Cordelia' moved with lightning speed and roughly grabbed Dawn's face. Startled, the youngest Summers let out a yelp as her wide blue eyes met the eerily sharp gaze of the impostor.

"Dawn?", 'Cordelia' exclaimed, before her shock turned to anger. "Dawn Summers?"

Connor whirled around in surprise. She moved surprisingly fast for a heavily pregnant woman. And faster than he was prepared for.

"'Cordy'. Hi", Dawn greeted in reply, her voice dripping sarcasm. "Gotta tell ya-I hate the outfit."

"You.", The pregnant woman's eyes whipped wildly to Connor, realization flashing through furious hazel eyes. "You little…you brought her here? Now? Do you know who she is?"

Connor backpedaled, somewhat. "What? No, I-"

She advanced on him, snarling every word. "Her sister, her meddling, goody-two-shoes, bleach-blonde glory-hog sister, is the Slayer! If you brought her here, then you'll lead them right to us!"

Connor drew up his full height, not flinching from her verbal onslaught. "You said it had to be a virgin! I looked everywhere, and this was the best I could do, alright? There's your girl, so what's the problem?"

She laughed bitterly. "Girl? You half-wit, she's no girl, she's…"

The Key, she recalled, as the real Cordelia's memories began flipping through her mind's eye. She pulled up the story that Willow told Angel's gang, about Dawn's true nature, and the awesome power locked away inside the girl.
More specifically, in her blood.

'Cordelia' gasped as the realization hit her. "The Key's blood…"

At that moment, a worried Dawn and a suddenly ecstatic 'Cordelia' were thinking the same thing: If Dawn's blood held the power to open dimensional pathways through space and time…one could only imagine what it could do for the power of the 'baby' inside 'Cordelia'.

Meanwhile, in the corner of stacked boxes not 10 feet from where they stood, Vi and Molly tried to make out the situation. They heard the shouts, read their body movements, yet could not fully understand what was happening.

But their instincts were telling them, screaming at them, that something was terribly wrong.

Even more so as Connor's body blocked Molly's view on 'Cordelia'…but not on Dawn.

Vi couldn't understand. "What's he doing? Molly? What's he doing?"

Molly shook her head, perplexed. "I don't know. I don't know!"

"Take the shot, Molly!", Vi urged her frantically. "You have perfect aim. Take the shot…now!"

"I…I can't", Molly hesitated. "He's blocking my view to 'Cordelia'. I can't lock in without risking hitting Dawn!"

As 'Cordelia' slowly advanced on her, the dim light catching off the meat cleaver, Dawn scuttled backwards, subtly moving her hand towards the vial under her sleeve. Connor, already tense from the start, slowly started to advance on his 'mate', knowing that his supernatural speed could have him intercept 'Cordelia' in half a heartbeat, his inherited strength could knock her out with a single, effortless blow…

Suddenly, 'Cordelia' turned to him, flashing a chilling smile. He took a step backwards, a little surprised by her movement…then stunned as she handed him the handle of the lethal weapon in her hands.

"Why don't you do the honors?"

His eyes met Dawn's stunned gaze, turning to the weapon offered him. "What?"

"Hey, you earned it, tiger." She winked, as she sauntered forward, placing the handle of the blade into his steely grip. She slowly maneuvered her way behind him, leaning towards his ear. "I mean, the power in this girl's blood? You've come through in ways I couldn't even begin to think of."

"But remember, nice and fast. After all" she turned back to Dawn, flashing a sneer dripping with malice, "her sister would just die if she thought the little darling suffered…wouldn't she?"

Dawn scowled back at the temptress. "Gee…you're just a walking, talking, homicidal Care-Bear, huh?"

'Cordelia' nudged him towards Dawn, then stepped backwards to get a better view.

Now was as good a time as any, Dawn figured. She looked up to Connor, who had her weapon in hand, and a completely unsuspecting 'Cordelia' in the wings.
"Now", she mouthed silently to him, encouraging him to make his move.

But he stood there, eyeing the blade in his hands, questioningly.

"Connor, what are you waiting for?", she whispered, confused. Why wasn't he moving?

His eyes looked eerily calm as he stared back at her, his expression unreadable.

Her fear began to rapidly build, confusion setting in. "Connor, what are you doing?"

She could see him turn the blade's edge away, ready for use, as his trembling hand started raising skywards.

A wave of icy fear washed over her as she saw the blade rise over her head. "What are you doing?"

And as she saw the watchful, eager gaze of 'Cordelia', the look of apprehension, of indecision in his eyes, her blue eyes widened in fear as her frightened voice could only meekly utter one word.

"…Connor?"

To Be continued…

A.N. – BOY, how's that for a cliffhanger, huh, kiddies? Fear not, I'm working on the next chapter as we speak. I swear, sooner or later, this story will be completed. R&R - l8ter!

Jean-theGuardian

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!